THE MISTRESS-MAID RELATIONSHIP: A CINDERELLA STORY

ALLISON HENRY

> "I had been taught to clean by my mother, a compulsive housekeeper who employed water so hot you needed rubber gloves to get into it and in such Niagaralike quantities that most microbes were probably crushed by the force of it before the soap suds had a chance to rupture their cell walls."
>
> —Barbara Ehrenreich

In "Maid to Order: The Politics of Other Women's Work," Barbara Ehrenreich examines the social consequences of maid service in America through a seemingly feminist lens. She begins her essay with an account of the second-wave feminism that caused male and female responsibility within the domestic sphere to be reassessed. The "radical, post-Friedan cohort of feminists" considered the question, 'Who does the housework?' to really mean, 'Who has the *power* to make their spouse do the housework?' (Ehrenreich 61). These women believed that excusing the male from domestic responsibility was a "formula for reproducing male domination from one generation to the next" (61). In order to relieve this tension, couples hired household maids who were restorers of "tranquility as well as order to the home" (62). Ehrenreich views this outsourcing of upper-class relationship issues as enabling the creation of a servant class. Over the course of the essay, she moves away from discussing the conflict of gender presented in housework and ceases to mention men as part of the equation. Ehrenreich instead focuses on a class issue—one in which the *female* homeowner is the villain, laying the foundation for generations of negligent children, and the female maid is the underdog that earns our sympathy and nostalgic appreciation for the hard physical labor that was once the responsibility of our mothers.

In her description of the household in which a maid would work, Ehrenreich always presents the homeowner as a female, describing her "Joan & David-clad feet and electrolyzed calves" and complete unawareness "of your existence" (59). The role of the male in the maid relationship is entirely ignored, and instead we are presented with a female versus female power struggle. Her descriptions ask us to envision a woman comparable to Cinderella's stepmother. She writes, "Look up and you may find this person staring at you, arms folded, in anticipation of an overlooked stain" in order to describe the maid experience from the point of view of a maid scrubbing the floor (59). These narrative tactics divide women into two groups: the employers and the employed. It polarizes women along lines of class and makes it difficult to see what makes her argument particularly feminist.

Ehrenreich views the "mistress-maid relationship" as a contrarian female relationship that acts as a microcosm of social inequality (64). She writes that housework "defines a human relationship and, when unequally divided among social groups, reinforces preexisting inequalities" (70). This statement reflects her earlier description of one-sided household responsibility as the "formula for reproducing male domination" (61); here, she is suggesting that hiring a maid validates the mindset that views lower class people as lesser people. This parallels her argument from before, but this time she uses it to condemn inequality between two different classes of women.

By dramatizing the female homeowner and placing more concern on the woman that is subjected to working for her, Ehrenreich makes it clear that there is nothing positive about the mistress-maid relationship (64). However, she does not give a clear solution to the problem. Instead, she digresses to tell stories of her own mother's cleaning expertise and consequential lack of need when it came to outside help. There is a bold sense of pride in the way that she describes the "Niagaralike quantities" of water needed to "rupture [the] cell walls" of dirt and bacteria on countertops and floors (67). Ehrenreich disdains the helpless homemaker and praises the indestructible mother of the past who took seriously the job of thoroughly cleaning her own home. The American ideals of self-reliance and work ethic are wrapped in an old-fashioned image of the mother that contradicts modern feminists' ideas about a woman's role. Ehrenreich presents the ideal of a woman whose home is her domain, where only she knows the best methods of making it appear the way it ought to be presented. The break in her discussion of maid services seems out of place, and it makes the reader wonder why she chose to bring up her mother at all.

The role of the mother is an important one in Ehrenreich's argument, because it is the only reason that we have for caring about the maid dynamic other than the injustice of one woman cleaning up another woman's mess. She recalls that "once 'parenting' meant instructing the children in necessary chores," but now chores have a "virtual existence," because a maid takes care of them while no one is watching (70). She places emphasis on the role of the mother as a teacher of morals, because "a servant economy breeds callousness and solipsism in the served" (70). How did Cinderella's stepsisters turn out after being waited on during their developmental years? Ehrenreich would view their story as a cautionary tale: if a woman teaches her child that he or she is not responsible for cleaning up a mess, then she is giving that child a reason to feel superior. Whereas feminists of the past were trying to abolish male superiority complexes, Ehrenreich is trying to abolish any sense of class-based entitlement at all: in men, women, and children alike.

While this is an admirable goal, it is not one that advances the feminist agenda. In fact, the tone of admiration that Ehrenreich takes for "real work in the old-fashioned sense of labor" brazenly contradicts her agenda (70). She closes the essay nostalgically commending this kind of physical work, which leaves the reader believing that her

solution to hiring a maid is to revert to the very gender roles that Friedan and others were trying to eradicate. It dismantles her credibility as a feminist and reveals a greater passion for exposing issues of class. Ehrenreich presents, in the character of the female homeowner, a villain as caricatured as those of Disney films. The homeowner is privileged, pampered, and polished; she surveys every move you make in order to ensure that the work she will take credit for is up to par with her standards; she may occasionally try to form a connection with you, but will "quickly redraw the lines once [you are] perceived as overstepping" (64). Worst of all, she teaches her children that they can leave things for someone else to pick up, neglecting the maternal responsibility for teaching respect and morals. Whether working independently or for a maid corporation, the maid cannot escape the relationship between herself and her female employer, whom Ehrenreich neglects to explore beyond simply classifying her as a woman indifferent to her maid's human dignity. By highlighting the disparities between classes of women, she makes a divisive argument that is more supportive of a female worker than for women as a collective unit.

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THE UNARTICULATED IDENTITY

ANNALISE PERRICONE

In her essay "Speaking in Tongues," Zadie Smith explores the distinction between those who possess and exercise a single voice and those who utilize a multiplicity of voices. Indeed, Smith introduces herself with a voice that she acquired via her posh education at Cambridge and vocation in the literary world. However, she feels that she gained this voice at the expense of the voice from her childhood spent in the working-class London district of Willesden:

> Hello. This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought *this* was the voice of lettered people . . . This voice I picked up along the way is no longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown whenever I choose—now it is my only voice, whether I want it or not. I regret it; I should have kept both voices alive in my mouth (Smith).

While Smith introduces herself as single-voiced, she paradoxically regrets and even condemns this as a limitation of her identity. In addition, throughout her essay, Smith celebrates others who possess multiple voices. Yet, rather than also establish herself as a possessor of numerous voices and thus as an expert, Smith shockingly deprives herself of this authority. This forces the reader to contend with a paradox: Why, as readers, should we maintain our faith in her credibility as a writer enough to continue reading her essay?

Smith denounces her own voice-adaptation with the use of mocking diction, a rhetorical choice that captures the circumstances surrounding the sacrifice of her original speaking voice. Her choice of words ("picked it up") implies that this chicer voice was not fundamental to her identity, but was cavalierly acquired, like a persistent bad habit, in her attempt to fit in among her peers. Furthermore, she admits to her almost comical naivety in believing at the time that "this was the voice of lettered people," a voice she defines no more specifically than by its singularity and exclusivity. She condemns this as "a case of bald social climbing," her acquired taste for these bourgeois things so obviously and perhaps embarrassingly a means for social inclusion in the "univocal . . . [Cambridge] pond" and literary world "puddle" (2). Surely Smith did not one day wake up enamored of the expensive flavor of port and the length of Samuel Richardson's unabridged novel. Instead she perhaps forced herself to acquire a palate for such pretentious things as a means of entry into a world that apparently coveted such tastes. In addition, the almost excessive use of "I"—occurring nine times

in this opening passage—implies that her identity was informed by a series of personal choices that were nonetheless contingent upon the social pressure generated by her peers.

Despite the mocking tone with which Smith treats her tale of voice sacrifice, the experience of social pressure is universally applicable. Perhaps empathetically, the reader even begins to consider the voice or voices they have lost to prevent being ostracized. However, in the act of telling us about her background, Smith adds, if not another voice, another layer to her identity, perhaps challenging the reader to suspect that there is more to her than the supposedly singular, polished voice with which she writes.

In her personal introduction at the beginning of her essay (that I quote above), Smith presents her voice somewhat superficially. She begins the essay with the word "hello," a rather generic salutation that divulges little of Smith's character. That is until her next sentence implies that the reader should have absorbed every detail of her identity from "this voice" that said "hello." Smith then continues to define her voice simply by her pronunciation: as an "English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place."[1] Smith describes what people first hear in her voice but gives nothing more than this most superficial classification. Furthermore, Smith categorizes her voice as "English," as if there is only one accent and one identity to define some fifty million people. The most that the reader can absorb from this introduction is the properness of the grammar, suggesting the education she proceeds to describe. Thus, in this introduction, Smith mimics what people hear superficially upon first meeting her; she is imitating the way others receive and categorize her. The unwritten challenge to the reader is to not catalog her, but to continue to get to know her through her essay. For surely there must be more to this voice and this identity than just correct pronunciation of the Queen's English.

Although Smith claims that she herself is merely single-voiced, she nonetheless extols others who have been successful in maintaining a multiplicity of voices despite any social pressures they might have encountered. In seeming contrast to herself, Smith praises those writers—particularly George Bernard Shaw, President Obama, and Shakespeare—for their ability to absorb and utilize so many different voices. Smith believes that multiplicity of voice is even a power when fully embraced by the individual. In Shakespeare's plays "he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim." Smith's choice of omitting the indefinite article before each adjective further emphasizes Shakespeare's universality. He is no woman or man in particular, but instead omnipotent, creating characters who themselves speak in a multitude of voices and possess countless identities. Smith argues that such versatility of voice is the ultimate freedom, freedom from a "single identity [which] would be an obvious diminishment." Perhaps as a writer, Smith feels that she has limited her ability to share her experiences when she sought to take on the singular voice ascribed to the literary elite. Indeed, Shakespeare's ability to assume the identities

of so many different people gives him the power to relate to a majority of people who "have complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives."

However, Smith herself arguably has multiple narratives as a black woman from a working-class background trying to gain entry to the exclusively posh communities of Cambridge and the literary world, and her subsequent life in the United States. Given this history, is it possible that Smith has, as she says, only one voice? Perhaps on the shallowest level Smith's use of language would suggest that she is, as she says, able to communicate with only one voice, that of the posh, literary elite. Yet, as we read her essay and encounter the multitude of examples she provides—of all classes, vocations, genders, and nationalities, from Eliza Doolittle and President Obama to Shakespeare and Thomas Macaulay—we come to realize that Smith is in fact possessed of a veritable symphony of voices. She is as comfortable referencing American culture as she is referencing her native British culture and she passes between both with incredible ease. Her ease with such material is the result of her multitude of experiences as a British-born woman, in the posh literary world, and in the United States. Thus, the reader must conclude that Smith is not, as she initially identifies, "single-voiced," but in fact multi-voiced. Although she tempts the reader to categorize her, the variety of evidence she uses in her essay ensures that any such attempt fails. This multiplicity renders her essay more interesting and accessible to a greater number of people.

The tension in Smith's essay is that she tells us one thing—that she is single voiced—yet demonstrates another—that she has multiple voices—throughout her essay. With this rhetorical strategy, Smith forces the reader to be more conscious of the societal predilection for categorizing people so as to lackadaisically understand them. Unsurprisingly, such cataloguing provides nothing but the most superficial and even flawed understanding of a person. For example, if the reader is not aware of Smith's rhetorical strategy they run the risk of leaving her essay with the embarrassing conviction that she is, just as she introduces herself, single-voiced. However, if the reader is more perceptive and questioning of the lacuna in Smith's argument, then they see the multi-textured fabric of her identity. Thus the reader has not conformed to the societal obsession with classifying people. Perhaps this more conscientious reader will proceed through life neither superficially categorizing others, nor allowing others to superficially categorize them. Smith's essay, and in particular her rhetorical strategy, compels the reader to become more aware of the great variety of stories and conflicting identities that render us human.

NOTE

1. Perhaps "this English voice" also refers to how she is received as an English-born woman living in the United States.

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FINDING ANSWERS IN THE AMBIGUITY OF "THE LAND ETHIC"

HAYLEY SHACKLEFORD

In his essay "The Land Ethic," from *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold confronts the weaknesses in the common approach to conserving the environment. His proposed solution is no less than the development of an entire new branch of ethics to guide humanity's relationship with the natural world. It is a big idea. Leopold carefully explains every aspect of his reasoning to us, from a brief history of ethics, to what it means to live in a community with the land, to why it is necessary to do so. But in the end, when we are waiting for him to break down his moral code explicitly, he vaguely concludes: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224–225). We may come to the end of the essay in total agreement with Leopold but still not understand what we should do. What specific things should we do differently if our actions are to be ethically just? The confusion is further complicated by Leopold's claim that "the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood" (205). If we cannot understand our environment, how can we know what behavior will preserve its integrity?

Leopold often emphasizes in "The Land Ethic" how hard it is to understand the workings of nature and our role in them. He describes the land—the plants, animals, water, and soil of our world—as "the community clock" (205), a mechanism, or an "energy circuit" (217). Putting it in these terms highlights the land's delicate, interdependent organization. The biotic community, he writes, "is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure" (215). Like a clock, each tiny piece performs a vital function. Tinkering with a clock is a job that can only be done effectively by a skilled and experienced craftsman. But, as Leopold points out, humans have tinkered with the land to the effect of radical changes to its structure. The clumsy changes man makes to his environment "have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen" (218). Since we only see the cause and effect of our actions in hindsight, we cannot know with confidence that the actions we take toward the land today will turn out to be ethically right or wrong. Leopold warns us: "Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land or of economic land-use" (225). When we don't understand what we do, we're at risk of destroying the integrity of the biotic community. We may even destroy ourselves. It is this fearsome uncertainty that creates our need for more concrete instructions from Leopold, but he cannot give us a list of rules because of that same uncertainty. Leopold doesn't know how to fix the biotic

clock. Without a deep understanding of its mechanics, any rules he might lay out could just as easily result in disaster. But then what kind of ethic can we have?

Ultimately Leopold is asking us, since we cannot know how to live in perfect harmony within the environment, to try to limit our effect on it. It is there in the word "conservation" itself: conserve the land. Don't let it go to waste; keep it from changing. Leopold understands that change inevitably occurs within the energy circuit, "but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life" (216). He sees a balance that happens with gradual, natural change, and this is one of the system's strengths. He acknowledges that degree of flexibility in the structure as he writes: "When a change occurs in one part of the circuit, many other parts must adjust themselves to it" (216). The trouble with our role in this perfectly engineered machine is that we are increasingly able to make enormous changes to the circuit very quickly. In Leopold's time, the process was beginning to accelerate. The Industrial Revolution and World Wars brought humanity into the modern era. Leopold saw that man was now able "to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope" (217). Looking at where we are now, sixty-four years later, that potential has increased exponentially. How much more complex and unknowable, then, are the ultimate consequences of our modern way of life on the land? Is Leopold asking us to abandon it all and return to the wilderness?

No, he is calling for a philosophical shift rather than specific actions. Early in the essay, Leopold mentions the Mosaic Decalogue, better known as The Ten Commandments (202), and the Golden Rule (203) as examples of ethics. Both ethics guide our relationships with individuals and society, but there is a distinction between them that illuminates what Leopold's land ethic is intended to be. The Ten Commandments is exactly what its name suggests: a declaration of ten specific moral rules that are literally set in stone. The Golden Rule, on the other hand, is a single guiding principle of reciprocity: treat other people the way you would like to be treated. While the Ten Commandments ask only to be obeyed, the Golden Rule requires active reflection. To know how to treat others, we must think about feelings and consequences and give true consideration and respect to another human being. There is no point-by-point instruction set handed down by a higher authority. Instead, it is a deeply personal attitude and way of thinking that can shift and evolve with different situations.

Leopold intends for his land ethic to be developed in that same spirit. Throughout the essay, he stresses that, "The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as an emotional process" (225), and it "reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land" (221). In contrast, he complains that the conservation efforts of his day are little more than a formula: "obey the law, vote right, join some organizations, and practice what conservation is profitable on your own land; the government will do the rest" (207). For Leopold, such a formula is too simple to be effective. Meaningful progress is accomplished in a different way:

> No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial. (209–210)

Leopold wants to change humanity's soul right down to its foundations. Rather than having his essay give us a "trivial" list of "easy" steps we can take to conserve the environment, he wants to inspire us to take the land community into our hearts, the same way we try to take the human community into our hearts. Leopold believes the land deserves the same considerate treatment we give to our loved ones: "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to the land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value" (223). We humans often do not understand each other and can easily hurt one another, but we try to bridge that gap in understanding with thoughtfulness. When a conflict arises, we reflect on it, try to see what went wrong, and use its lessons in our future interactions. What we should not do is use or manipulate each other unthinkingly. We can apply these same principles to the land community. There are things about the land that we don't fully comprehend, and that ignorance can result in negative consequences. But with the attitude of the land ethic, those situations can become teachable moments that yield deeper insight and better ways of living. Human history is already full of such moments we can study. Leopold asks: "Is history taught in this spirit? It will be, once the concept of land as a community really penetrates our intellectual life" (207).

So even once we understand why Leopold's land ethic is so vague, another question remains: has it penetrated our intellectual life? Does the essay succeed in communicating Leopold's subtle concepts? It's easy to assume that the best way to convey an idea is to say it directly and clearly, but Leopold works in a different way. We end "The Land Ethic" with questions still stuck in our heads. How do we make the land ethic a reality? How do we know that our actions won't create ecological disasters? These questions are seeds of thought that Leopold planted. So we keep thinking about them and, as we do, the seeds grow in our minds. That is what Leopold would call "the stirrings of an ecological conscience" (221). And that was what Leopold wanted: not to give us easy answers or tell us what to do, but to inspire generations of conservationists to think deeply about our relationship with the land.

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GEEK MYTHOLOGY: NOSTALGIA IN FOUR COLORS

RYAN HAMPTON

The cover of Marvel Comics' *The West Coast Avengers* #11 depicts Iron Man, an armored and helmeted superhero, locked in heated battle with Shockwave, an armored and helmeted supervillain. Both their arms are raised, the fingers of Iron Man's right hand intertwined with Shockwave's left hand in a power struggle to hold the other close. Iron Man's left hand is clenched into a fist about to hammer Shockwave's silver face shield, while Shockwave's right hand is extended in a karate chop formation about to strike Iron Man's back. In the middle distance, Hawkeye, a nebulous hero clad in a purple costume and armed with bow and arrow, and Mockingbird, an acrobatic ingénue armed with an extendable steel staff, are fending off Razorfist, who has large razors for hands, and Zaran, a self-proclaimed weapons master. In the background, a crowd of frightened onlookers recedes into the distance.

As an adolescent, this cover spoke to me in a way that it does not now. I had never purchased a comic book before, but something about the characters and their struggles prompted me to buy it, take it home, and devour its contents. I hold no emotional ties to the comic itself (the cover image and the story inside were long forgotten until rereading the issue very recently), except that it was the entry point for years of comic book collecting that eventually waned and died with the advent of adulthood and the speculator boom and crash of the mid-1990s. Since it is my contention that Marvel superhero comics were not only founded on nostalgia but are perpetuated by nostalgia, it is worth exploring the nostalgic devices Marvel uses to manipulate the comic book reader and how the reader is affected in the present and future.

Although the West Coast Avengers series was not considered the pinnacle of the Marvel canon, it is still not difficult to find its adherents. In his recent review on BoingBoing.net, Andy Ihnatko, a *Chicago Sun-Times* contributor, writes that "the first 42 or so issues of [The West Coast Avengers] was . . . 'A COMIC BOOK COMIC BOOK!'" and that it is the reason "why it's one of [his] favorite series ever." He goes on to explain:

> I try so very hard not to turn into one of those old farts who claim that the comics they read when they were kids are universally better than today's comics. Time is fraudulently kind. We remember the stuff we really liked, and we forget the stuff that was mediocre and unmemorable.

However much he tries to resist, Ihnatko is nostalgic for the comics of his youth and longs for a return to that time. This longing, as Svetlana Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, lies in Ihnatko's "desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or

collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (XV). He is not alone in this feeling. The comic book industry and its collectors are so rooted in nostalgia that they have created a collector culture to celebrate and venerate the past with conventions, fanzines, web sites, and price guides, building what Boym calls "a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (XIV), and all of which look back to regard the greatness of what once was and may never be again. Pertinent here are Boym's two types of nostalgia: reflective nostalgia, which focuses on the longing for the missing time or object, and restorative nostalgia, which focuses on reconstructing the past in the present. The comic book collector, however, assumes both types, for he is both reflective—longing for the past, even if he has no direct memory of it—and restorative—using the present product as a means to gain access to the past, even if only a recycled version of it.

While Boym asserts that nostalgia is a "historical emotion" (XVI), Paul Grainge stresses in "Nostalgia and Style in Retro America" that it is a "cultural style, a consumable mode as much as it can be said to be an experienced mood" (27). This places what Boym interprets as a personal feeling in direct contrast to Grainge's commercial, almost clinical, interpretation. Despite the dichotomy of their theories, both converge in their thinking of revisiting the past, but in wholly differing ways. What Boym calls restorative, Grainge calls recycling, but they are not as similar as they sound. Grainge's idea of recycling is a "replaying and recontextualizing [of] reruns in programming formats aimed at particular demographic segments" (31) and becomes a sort of byproduct of Boym's restorative nostalgia in that it brings the past into the present, albeit with a considerable difference: the recycled past is untainted and made available almost exactly as it was originally presented, while the restored past (e.g., the Sistine Chapel) is refurbished and represented as a "return 'back to Michelangelo,' to the original brightness of the frescoes" (Boym 45). Both elements, however, are relevant to Marvel Comics, a company that has been restoring and recycling its product since the early 1960s.

Indeed, Grainge might as well be referring directly to Marvel Comics when he says, "in commercial terms, [nostalgia] . . . can designate anything which has been culturally recycled and/or appeals to a market where pastness is a value . . . or use an idea of the past to position themselves within particular niche markets" (30), for there may be no better example of a niche market than the superhero comic book. This recycling of "pastness" has been in play since Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the modern superhero comic book for Marvel Comics with *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1962, with one of its characters—The Human Torch—being revived from the 1930s, a period known as the Golden Age of comics (a nostalgic term if there ever was one), and another—Mr. Fantastic—being reminiscent in both power and appearance to Plastic Man, also a character from the Golden Age. Throughout the 1960s, Lee and Kirby recycled and popularized Captain America and his nemesis Red Skull from the Golden Age, and

created many new heroes, some of which held striking resemblances to past characters from long forgotten titles and others inspired by characters from Greek and Norse mythology. That this time, which has become known as the Silver Age, is held in such high esteem by collectors has not been lost on the editors, writers, and artists that came later. Even as they create new characters and stories, the original characters and stories remain the bedrock of the industry, so much so that Marvel Comics instituted a style known as the "Marvel method" where artists must adhere to the writing and artistic styles of Lee and Kirby, thus creating a product where the present maintains the appearance of the past. While the "Marvel method" might not be exactly what Grainge defines as recycling, it does reinforce Boym's assertion that "nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective" (XVI), where, in this case, the past is being commodified and idealized in the mind of the present reader, for whom the Marvel style is being recycled and the Marvel characters are being restored.

So how do these nostalgic devices affect Marvel's readers? After decades of being told of the greatness of the Golden and Silver Ages, the reader adopts what, in Present Pasts, Andreas Huyssen calls "imagined memories" (17), which create nostalgia for a time, place, or object that the witness has never directly experienced. But to the comic book reader, this nostalgia for the lost object brings with it a hope or belief that the present can be just as magical as the past that they have missed. By providing the aura of the past, which Boym defines as "a mist of nostalgia that does not allow for possession of the object of desire" (45), and "recontextualizing" its characters for "particular demographic segments" (Grainge 31), Marvel influences the reader's emotions in such a way that keeps them hungry for Marvel product in the present and into the future. As long as Marvel Comics is recycling the same characters and story structures, the present replica brings with it a longing for the past while also acting as a signifier that today and tomorrow are, or can be, just as good as yesterday, and so the Golden Age can be restored.

But what comes with all of this recycling and restoration is the loss of progress, because to obsess over the past is to lose sight of the present. For example, in his book *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe claims that writer Steve Englehart "was fired from *The West Coast Avengers* (for refusing to include Iron Man in the title)" and that his editor "was instituting a 'plan to end innovation across the line'" (314). In other words, nostalgia sells comic books, so stick with the characters (in this case Iron Man) that readers have been emotionally attached to for decades, and always choose formulaic tradition (that is, nostalgia) over artistic innovation (that is, progress), two concepts that are always at odds "like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos" (Boym, XVI). So even if the publisher aims to move the Marvel line sideways instead of forward, it still appears to be moving to the consumer.

However, once progress is lost, the future is soon to follow. Huyssen tells us that we spend so much time reflecting on the past that we sacrifice our future. He says, "if all of the past can be made over, aren't we just creating our own illusions of the past

while getting stuck in an ever-shrinking present?" (21). If the past has taught Marvel Comics anything, it is that comic books increase in value over time, specifically the first issues of a series, and that many collectors will purchase any title with a #1 on the cover, regardless of whether they have any intention of reading it. Using that knowledge in the early 1990s, Marvel Comics began looking at the future with an eye toward lining its pockets and expanding its present. Glutting the market with multiple versions of the first issue of a new series, each version containing the same story inside but with a different cover, Marvel was "underscor[ing] nostalgia's fundamental insatiability" (Boym, XVII). Once again, they were selling the same familiar characters, but this time calling the comics 'instant collectibles,' while knowing that consumers would buy many copies of each version as an investment for the future. According to Howe, with the release of *X-Men* #1 on August 16, 1991, "every week a different cover was shipped to stores, building up to a fifth version, a $3.95 bonanza with a foldout of the previous four covers" and "when the smoke cleared, nearly 8 million copies had been sold—roughly 17 copies for every regular comic book reader" (333). By doing so, Marvel was preying on the collector's nostalgia for the characters of the past and present while also prompting them to speculate on the nostalgia of the future collector (from which they hoped to make a profit).

Although Marvel itself initially profited considerably from this speculator ambition, the company spent many years recovering from the consumer's loss of respect, even filing for bankruptcy by the end of the 1990s. And so, while Marvel's use of the past may have briefly extended its present, it did so in sacrifice of its future. Marvel's failure was relying entirely on the past, a past that Boym tells us "has become much more unpredictable than the future" (XIV), as an indicator of present and future trends.

Throughout its history, collectors have been considered active participants in Marvel's culture of nostalgia, commenting and reflecting on the storylines and receiving feedback from the creators and editors via letter columns and fanzines, but with Marvel's recent forays into newer and/or more popular mediums, that status has been relegated to one of passivity, preventing collectors from fully engaging with the product as they once had. Specifically, over the last decade Marvel has been repackaging and selling its product through the film industry. The movies (e.g., *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, etc.), which recycle the same characters and tell the same stories that were originally told nearly fifty years ago, have been successful at the box office. While the stories may be new to some of the audience, the vast majority of ticket buyers have experienced them in various forms for years, even decades, and go to the theater with the expectation that the past can be reignited and made new again. Although the movie format brings with it a sense of progress, what the audience sees is familiar, and what is missing on the screen (and in the recycled comics) is the emotion and inspiration behind the original creations of their youth. Perhaps these feelings are the lost objects that they have been trying to regain all along. Although it

is the emotions that they long for, it is the commodified object that they continue to be given.

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WHY STRAIGHT MEN SHOULD ACT GAY

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Last October, gay magazine *Out* ran a spotlight on Minnesota Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, who had recently written a scathing letter to politician Emmett Burns criticizing him for his anti-gay platform. According to *Out*, Kluwe's letter was published on the popular sports website Deadspin and has since gone viral, sparking tremendous controversy and debate in the worlds of sports and politics, as well as in general news outlets. Kluwe's advocacy of gay rights was clearly unusual, otherwise it would not have garnered the public attention that it did. A gesture of support for gay rights is not itself newsworthy, at least not in this day and age; what made this one unusual was the fact that it came from an NFL athlete. The NFL has traditionally not been particularly hospitable to the gay rights movement, possibly because professional sports leagues have always been seen to be bastions of heterosexual masculinity. As a straight man, I've noticed that my fellow straight men seem to be an underrepresented demographic in the American political arena for gay rights. Even more underrepresented are pro athletes, who are culturally perceived to be in the business of being a straight man. When a straight male sports hero like Chris Kluwe comes blazing out of the gate swinging hard for gay rights, the world sits up, pays attention, and asks its newspapers and magazines to write about him.

If the ongoing war for gay rights in this country is to be won, straight men who support civil equality for America's gay citizens need to turn sentiment into action, just as Kluwe did. While there may be many possible reasons why straight men are remaining complacent in a movement that has thus far been mostly defined by the efforts of women and gay men, that complacency needs to end, because there's a vital role in the struggle for gay rights that only we can play. Elucidating that role requires taking a deeper look at homophobia and some of the reasons why it has become such a systemic problem in our culture.

Gender sociologist Michael Kimmel believes that homophobia is a natural extension of the dysfunctional concept of masculinity embraced by the modern man (Kimmel 24). Kimmel argues that masculinity, rather than existing as an immutable essence, is instead a socially constructed ideal empowered by other men and granted by other men: "Other men: we are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval" (23). Kimmel describes masculinity as a sort of performative mask where the performance is put on for and judged by other men. However, this means that the very act of striving towards the masculine ideal puts a man at the mercy of other men, because what has been bestowed can also be easily taken away. Kimmel refers to this threat as "unmasking," and it's

every man's greatest fear: to have his status as a man revoked, his masculinity stripped away by his peers, to be seen as a "sissy" (24).

According to Kimmel, the gay man is viewed as a man who has already been unmasked: due to the historical perception of homosexuality as an "inversion of normal gender development," the gay man is considered to be effeminate, a sissy, not a real man (27). Women, both straight and gay, are also considered less than men by a traditionally sexist masculine consciousness (24). Kimmel isolates the source of homophobia (and even sexism, because the two go hand in hand) as "the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (24). In other words, the gay man represents that which straight men fear most: unmasking. Homophobia, in turn, comes from the active efforts of straight men to distance themselves from the gay man, in hopes of avoiding being unmasked themselves. The oppression of gays frequently comes not from a hatred of gay people, but from the oppressor's desire to prove that he himself is not gay. Kluwe's public advocacy of gay rights stands out to us, because as a straight man standing beside the gay man, he is doing the exact opposite of maintaining distance. Kimmel's theory may also explain why so few straight men have followed Kluwe's example: they fear that by fighting too hard for gay rights, they may be seen as a "sissy" themselves.

Although the symbiotic nature of the relationship between homophobia and masculinity may resolve our question of why there are so few straight men in gay rights, it also simultaneously demonstrates why straight men are necessary to the movement. Since it is straight men's implicit acceptance of homophobia-driven masculinity that allows it to persist, we are the only ones who can excise the homophobia from masculinity and redefine manhood for ourselves and other men. The straight man may be powerless in the sense that he is constantly at the mercy of the judgment of his fellow men, but he is also very powerful in the sense that his fellow men are constantly at the mercy of his judgment. That means that straight men are uniquely positioned to accomplish a singular goal of tremendous value to the gay rights movement: challenging the homophobia harbored by other men. The severe homophobe will not heed the gay activist: after all, it is not the gay man who grants the homophobic man his manhood, and it is not the gay man who threatens to unmask him. It is the other man he fears, the other man he performs for, the other man whose evaluation he holds dear: the other straight man.

This is why Kluwe's letter of advocacy is such a brutally effective and ultimately newsworthy move: though the content of the letter is about gay rights, the letter itself is a message from one straight man to an audience of other straight men. Not only was it directed towards Burns, an ostensibly straight, male politician, it was published on a mainstream media website where it would be viewed by countless straight men across the internet. Kluwe's open letter is a wide-spectrum broadcast to straight men everywhere that if you support gay rights, he, Chris Kluwe, a fellow straight man, will

not unmask or humiliate you for doing so. More than that, as a professional athlete who's an icon of masculinity itself, Kluwe is inverting the definition of the masculine man from one who opposes gay rights, to one who supports them. This is the power of the straight man: to reach out to men who are misguidedly employing homophobia as a preemptive defense against unmasking, or simply men who may be too afraid of peer backlash to stand up for the rights of the gay community, and to let them know that there is nothing to fear.

Kluwe's show of support for gay rights doesn't end with his letter: he takes it one step further by allowing *Out* magazine to include a series of topless photographs of himself in its article. If a straight man who speaks up for gay rights is an uncommon sight, then one who poses shirtless for a gay magazine is an even more extraordinary. No doubt there will be detractors who will use these photos to question Kluwe's heterosexuality, but demonstrating that he is willing to brave such inevitable attacks is precisely why Kluwe's move is so powerful. With his letter, he is saying that there is nothing un-masculine about standing up for gay rights. With his photos, he is saying that there is nothing un-masculine about being gay. After all, what could be more "gay" than posing shirtless for the eyes of countless gay men across the country? A man who speaks out for gay rights, yet does everything possible to ensure that he himself is never perceived as gay cannot hope to make as strong a statement as Kluwe does. In this case, a picture allows Kluwe to do what a thousand words cannot: dissociate not only gay advocacy from unmasking, but homosexuality itself.

Using the power of the image to subvert masculine ideals is something well-documented by feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, who studied marketing campaigns that used a similar strategy to disrupt the American fashion industry in the '80s. Bordo observes that little more than a couple of decades ago, American men were generally absent from sexualized treatment by the media, such as in fashion advertisements, because to appear in such a manner was considered to be "incompatible with being a real man" (Bordo 171), much like being gay is still perceived by many today. Bordo also notes that attitudes have changed since then, and "today, good-looking straight guys are flocking to the modeling agencies, much less concerned about any homosexual taint that will cleave to them" (181). This broad cultural shift represents an important case study for gay-rights advocates, because it demonstrates how a perspective that was once viewed by mainstream culture as "feminine" and "gay" has been subverted into an ideal to which heterosexual men aspire. This subversion of a longstanding cultural norm is exactly what the gay rights movement is seeking to achieve today, only on a different front.

The revolution in men's fashion traced by Bordo occurred largely through image-driven marketing campaigns executed by fashion tycoons like Calvin Klein. Recalling some of these campaigns, Bordo recounts:

> In 1981, Jockey International had broken ground by photographing Baltimore Oriole pitcher Jim Palmer in a pair of briefs, airbrushed, in one of its ads—selling $100 million worth of underwear by year's end. Inspired by Jockey's success, in 1983, Calvin Klein put a 40-by-50 foot Bruce Weber photograph of Olympic pole vaulter Tom Hintnaus in Times Square. . . . The line of shorts 'flew off the shelves' at Bloomingdale's and when Klein papered bus shelters in Manhattan with poster versions of the ad they were all stolen overnight. (178)

The crucial thing to notice here is the shared tactic employed by both Jockey and Klein to tremendous success: rather than using anonymous male models in their highly provocative, groundbreaking new ads, they instead chose to use, rather than models, named celebrity figures. Jim Palmer. Tom Hintnaus. A name conveys identity, and identity conveys sexuality: in this case, heterosexuality. Equally important was the fact that both men were elite athletes, much like Chris Kluwe, alpha males in a world that was perceived to be the exclusive domain of the rugged, masculine, straight American man. Their masculinity and heterosexuality could not be called into question. They were the type of idealized men against which other men scrutinized themselves. Klein understood that "gay sex wouldn't sell to straight men" (177), so it was no coincidence that he used a man like Hintnaus to sponsor a cutting-edge ad campaign that might have otherwise been dismissed as "gay." It's also no coincidence that it worked. The fashion marketers of the '80s successfully redefined America's ideas about manhood, and they did it by leveraging the cultural influence of the straight man. In the end, gay sex did end up being sold to straight men: it just took other straight men, particularly top athletes like Palmer and Hintnaus, to do the selling.

Chris Kluwe is the Tom Hintnaus of the new millennium, except the stakes being played for today are not merely for men's fashion, but gay rights. Like Hintnaus, Kluwe is a popular celebrity figure who is widely known to be straight. Like Hintnaus, Kluwe is a sports hero, a profession that grants him a certain degree of insulation against unmasking by other men. These elements imbue both men with a unique capacity to challenge the reigning definition of manhood, but that capacity itself is not enough to subvert a cultural mainstay like homophobia-driven masculinity. A strong execution is required, and Calvin Klein knew it when he chose to employ Hintnaus for his landmark ad campaign. Klein's genius was in his understanding that it wasn't sufficient for Hintnaus to, for example, appear in a television commercial professing his endorsement of Klein's underwear line. Instead, he had to take it one step further, and this was the result:

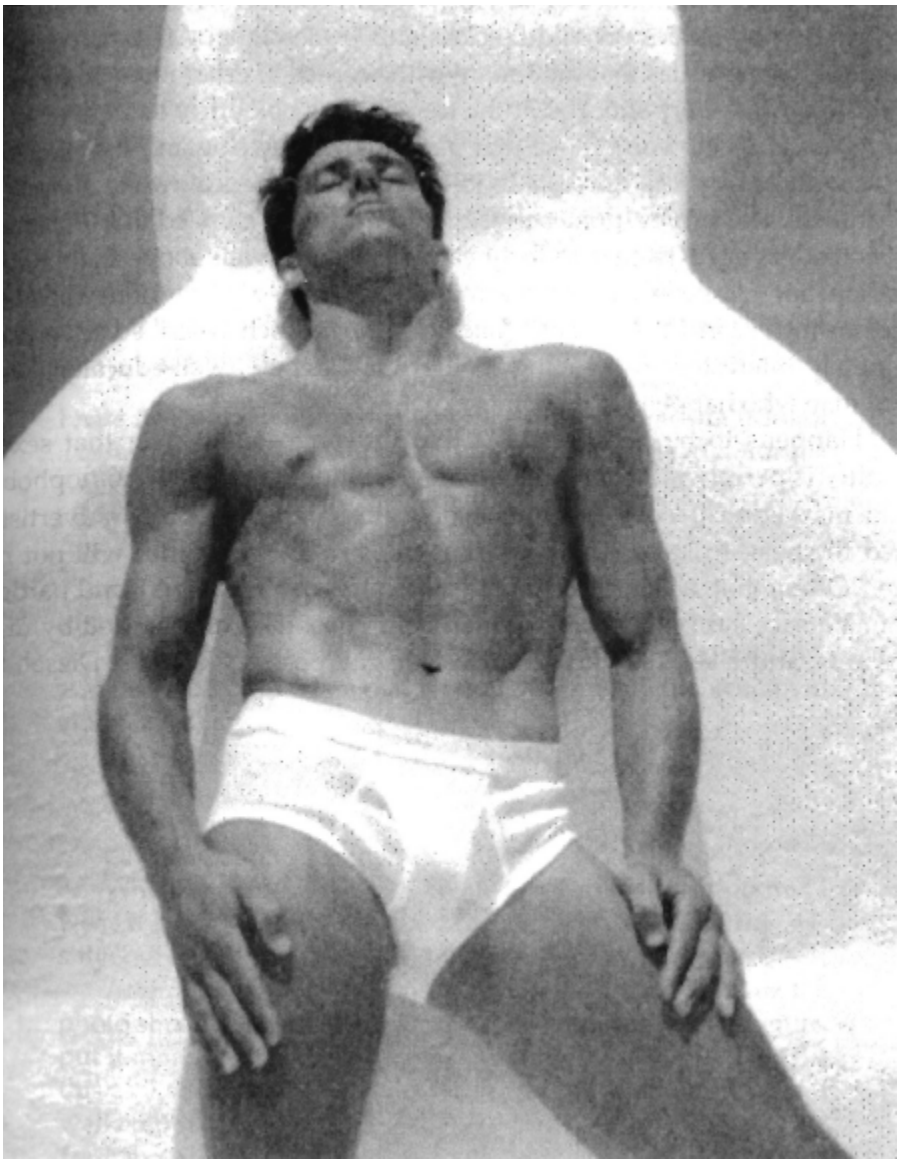

Fig. 1. Bruce Weber, Photograph of Tom Hintaus, 1982.

This was the billboard placed in Times Square that shocked New York's men to such a degree that they had no choice but to accept Klein's updated definition of masculinity and buy his underwear (Bordo 178). Compare this to one of Kluwe's photos in his *Out* spotlight:

Fig. 2. David Bowman, Photograph of Chris Kluwe, 2012.

Just as Hintnaus took his message to the next level with his highly provocative, highly sexual advertisement, so too does Kluwe follow suit with his own highly provocative, highly sexual photograph. But wait: didn't Bordo just teach us that it is no longer taboo for men to showcase their bodies in public media? If so, wouldn't that make Kluwe's self-display much less meaningful than that of Hintnaus, who didn't have anyone to pave the way for him? That would be true if not for one key difference: Kluwe's photo was displayed not in a neutral place like Times Square, but in a gay magazine. While it is indeed now culturally acceptable for straight men to put their bodies on display in mainstream media, doing so for gay media is entirely different. The "good-looking straight guys . . . flocking to the modeling agencies" who are "unconcerned about any homosexual taint that may cleave to them" may suddenly find themselves extremely concerned if they were told that the viewers who will be appreciating their bodies are nearly exclusively gay men. Kluwe's move of posing sexually for gay media is as much of a game-changer today as Hintnaus's was three decades ago—and as necessary.

Kluwe's photo-op elevates his message of advocacy to new heights by accomplishing two key things that combine to augment the position originally established by his letter. The first involves the fact that by posing sexually for *Out*, he is taking on a massive risk of being judged and unmasked by other men, the same risk braved by Hintnaus with his own revolutionary image in the '80s. Of course, that is the inevitable danger of challenging existing notions of manhood. However, neither man ends up emasculated by his trespasses, and Kimmel explains why: he notes that

despite the existence of men as a power group, individual men often don't feel powerful in their lives, because "only a tiniest fraction of men come to believe that they are the biggest of wheels, the sturdiest of oaks . . . the most daring and aggressive" (30). By boldly facing the risk of unmasking, the greatest fear of all men, in pursuit of a higher purpose, both Kluwe and Hintnaus not only avoid emasculation: they ultimately secure their seat amongst the "most daring and aggressive" of men. This translates into a concurrent strengthening of their message: by becoming that which all men aspire to, they simultaneously transform that message into one that other men are likely to listen to. Kluwe first establishes his support for gay rights with the letter to Burns: he then follows up with a devastating second act, his appearance in *Out*, a maneuver that amplifies the effect of his letter by reinforcing his own masculinity.

Kluwe's photo not only serves his original message by elevating his masculinity in the eyes of other men, but also by affirming his conviction to his own words. The old maxim "actions speak louder than words" arrives in full force here. In order to lend support to the words of advocacy in his letter, Kluwe uses his photo to actively invite *Out's* gay readers to "scrutinize" him in the same way that he and other straight men might scrutinize them. This is key, because rather than treating gay men as "the other against which [he] projects [his identity]" (Kimmel 27), Kluwe instead offers his exposed body to be viewed by the readers of *Out*, inviting each gay man to "watch" him and "rank" him in the same manner as "other men." Bordo writes that men are conditioned to attempt to escape the "gaze of the Other" (172), but Kluwe isn't trying to escape here. Instead, by laying back and offering himself willingly to the scrutinizing gazes of *Out*'s gay men, he demonstrates through that very action that he sees gay men not as "the Other," but as "other men": two groups as different in meaning as they are alike in language. The Other is he who we oppress out of fear: the other man is our equal. Speaking up for gay rights is one thing, but proving that we are truly committed to equality is a much more powerful move. It was not enough for Hintnaus to simply talk about how sexy and masculine Calvin Klein underwear was: he had to wear it proudly in front of millions of New Yorkers. In the same vein, it isn't enough for Kluwe to simply write his letter to Burns: he has to prove the conviction of his support for gay rights through action, and that is exactly what he does with his photo spread in *Out*.

Kluwe's crushing two-hit combo, represented by both his letter and his photo, is what makes his show of support to the gay community so notable, so effective, and so newsworthy. It is also what makes Kluwe's actions so worthy of study by other straight men. As the source of the corrupted paradigm of masculinity that gives rise to homophobia, straight men are uniquely positioned to attack it from an angle no one else can. Straight men are not optional allies to the queer community in the war for civil equality. If we want to put an end to the vicious cycle of discrimination and violence against America's gay citizens, we must speak up and act out, in the same

manner Chris Kluwe did. Other men: you are under the constant, careful scrutiny of other men. Use that power to make the world a better place.

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THE FEMINIST AGENDA OF VAMPIRE SLAYING

QINYI FAN

March 10, 1997 marked the birth of a strange pop culture phenomenon, a fusion of "vampire mythology, horror revival, teen angst, and kick-ass grrlness": *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fudge). Sixteen-year-old Buffy Summers, Joss Whedon's eponymous heroine, is a deliberate and sassy refiguring of genre stereotypes. Instead of "bubble-headed blondes wandering into dark alleys" where they are preyed upon by typically male monster antagonists, Whedon envisioned a fragile-looking young woman who is attacked, "and then turns around and destroys her attacker" (Wilcox and Laverly xvii). Indeed, as the teenaged defender of Sunnydale against the forces of darkness, Buffy's character features quite an interesting juxtaposition, occupying an indistinct position between physically empowered heroine and ultra-feminine girly girl:

> Her ever-present tank tops showcase her rack quite efficiently. She has a passion for justice and goodness—even when it means killing her boyfriend, Buffy performs with martyr-like grace. Her makeup is impeccable, her eyebrows well-groomed. . . . She may have returned from a night of heavy slaying, but her frosted hair is still in its pigtails, her sparkly makeup intact. (Fudge)

In the wake of a socio-political climate "saturated . . . with mixed messages about feminism and femininity" (Fudge), Buffy's appearance in American pop media is not unexpected—nor are the hundreds of books, journals, and other academic writings that have emerged in order to discuss Buffy's feminist potential as a pop culture icon. Yet these numerous feminist voices are hardly in agreement. On the one hand, Buffy's popularity as a strong-headed, demon-slaying female character has much potential in its self-conscious rejection of stereotypical portrayals of women in pop culture. On the other, Buffy is determinedly girly in a way that subscribes to traditional patriarchal standards of beauty and femininity: she is "young, blond, slim, and vigilantly fashion conscious" (Pender 36). Some feminists argue that her conventional femininity undermines her agency as a powerful female character, revealing that she is ultimately unable to escape gender stereotypes. Is Buffy the vampire slayer a refreshing and politically potent female role model or a return to oppressive male-imposed traditions of femininity? Is Buffy feminist?

At the heart of this issue is a need to define the meaning and purpose of feminism itself. Though "feminist" and "feminism" are loosely applied terms that take on numerous different interpretations, according to Joanne Hollows, the author of *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, it is at least,

> generally accepted that feminism is a form of politics which aims to intervene in, and transform, the unequal power relations between men and women. . . . Feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s—and, arguably, of the present—did not simply seek to explain the inequalities between men and women but to use this as a basis for change. (Hollows 3)

In other words, feminism is inherently and ubiquitously concerned with action and agency. What sets disparate feminist practices and theories apart are disagreements of method—how exactly to achieve social change—which in turn shape feminists' reading of ideas and social behaviors. For instance, for second-wave feminists, adhering to society's standards of femininity consists of bowing down to patriarchy, which effectively implicates women in their own oppression (Hollows 10); in contrast, some forms of third-wave feminism (such as "Riot grrrl" and "Girlie feminism") sought to embrace and reclaim femininity and female sexuality for the sake of promoting self-confidence, individualism, and social empowerment (Archer and Huffman 73-74). These two ideological stances contest femininity as a either a harmful institution or a "power tool" for the downtrodden (Karp 7). As Christina Köver puts, it, "Feminist Theory is always interested in the pragmatic 'use,'" or the strategic helpfulness of a text or theory to the feminist agenda. This potential for helpfulness is exactly what many feminists try to identify when reading Buffy.

Seemingly inevitable to this critical process is a polemicizing of the issue. As feminist writer Patricia Pender describes it, "Feminist critiques of popular culture frequently mobilize a similar strategy to Buffy's slaying technique . . . is it friend or foe?" (Pender 35). The implication is that any idea or item of pop culture must help feminism in its socio-political goals, or it hurts it. As a result, the question of whether or not Buffy is helpful or unhelpful has been regurgitated and rehashed continually. For instance, Rachel Fudge of *Bitch* magazine writes: "Is Buffy really an exhilarating post-third-wave heroine, or is she merely a caricature of 90's pseudo-girl power?" Alternatively, Anamika Samanta and Erin Franzman of "Women in Action" posit the same question a slightly different way: "No longer damsels in distress, women are kicking ass and saving the world from doom—in Hollywood technicolor. But is happiness really a warm gun? . . . Are we on our way to mass physical empowerment? Or are we just headed for a whole new pack of stereotypes to live down?" (28) The concerns of these (and many other) feminist writers largely deal with the same "helpful-unhelpful" question: Can Buffy serve as a transgressive and empowering female role-model, confident in her own strengths and embracing her femininity, or is she too much a slave to her own femininity and the oppressive patriarchal traditions of a sexist society?

The answers that have been supplied to this query have naturally been just as dichotomous. Lynette Lamb, author of the article "Media Criticism: The Sad State of Teen Television," for instance, unequivocally rejects Buffy and similar television

programs for their superficial female characters and damaging use of gender clichés. She says of '90s TV series popular amongst teen girls:

> Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Sabrina the Teenage Witch may have magical powers, but they have no real power outside their supernatural ones. . . . Like so many teens on prime time TV, Sabrina's and Buffy's major preoccupations are their appearance and their boyfriends, in roughly that order. (Lamb 14)

Lamb clearly condemns these programs for perpetuating the notion that young women should be concerned first and foremost with beauty, next with romance. Her outright and unqualified disdain for Buffy for these particular reasons are very reminiscent of second-wave feminist ideals—she views Buffy's well-groomed ultra-girlishness and love of shopping as frivolous and without substance, negative ideals invented by a male-dominated society. Any powers these characters do display are literally imaginary. Lamb also takes a very firm stance on the "usefulness" of Buffy and other teenage serials to the feminist agenda: "the values that TV cultivates and the worldview it presents—especially insofar as women are concerned—are not likely to be those you'd want your girl to learn" (Lamb). Present in this is the fear of 'colonization,' the socialization of arbitrary feminine and masculine ideals by pop culture, society (Hollows 10). This view considers Buffy to be not just unhelpful to feminism, but outright harmful and pernicious to impressionable young audiences.

Jennifer L. Ponzer, in "Thwack! Pow! Yikes! Not Your Mother's Heroines," takes the opposite stance on such female figures in television. Rather than becoming disheartened by the state of media culture, she rejoices that "pro-feminist options are springing up on almost every network," citing shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *The Simpsons* as some of the most "subversive programs in television." Unlike Lamb, she believes young female viewers should take the physically and intellectually empowered women that populate these series as role models. On Buffy specifically, she says "cornered by three snarling freaks, [Buffy] does what most high school girls wish they could do—thanks them for dropping by, tells them she's not in the mood, and kicks them into another dimension, literally. . . . How's that for a role model?" (qtd. in Pender 37). Ponzer is the other side of the "helpful-unhelpful" Buffy coin: While Lamb reprimands Buffy's conventional femininity, Ponzer considers the juxtaposition of Buffy's deadly vampire-slaying skill and unabashed girlishness an excellent example to young girls. Buffy's embrace of both masculine and feminine stereotypes is, to Ponzer, a delightful transgression, a novel and empowering concept that has great political potential. As such, the same femininity denounced by Lamb is not, to Ponzer, considered a surrendering to stereotypes about gender roles, but a reclaiming of girly qualities in order to remove any sense of feminine inferiority to masculinity.

Despite their opposite stances on Buffy's usefulness as a feminist agent, Lamb and Ponzer are similar in the way they attempt to unambiguously evaluate the political worth of her character. Even less resolute opinions on Buffy's potency as a pop culture icon tend to cling to similarly black-and-white binaries. The previously mentioned Fudge, for instance, at first concedes that Buffy, with her "refusal to be intimidated by more powerful figures (whether the school principal or an archdemon)," has "deeply feminist potential." Fudge distinguishes Buffy from "other eponymous TV heroines, who spend more time gazing at their navels than thinking about injustice," and praises her for her martial arts prowess, her sassy, intelligent quips, and her supreme confidence. Interestingly, Fudge even compares Buffy's eternal crusade against darkness to the feminist call to duty:

> The impulse that propels Buffy out on patrols, night after night, forgoing any semblance of "normal" teenage life, is identical to the one that compels [feminists] to spend endless hours discussing the feminist potentials and pitfalls of prime-time television. . . . we can't simply sit back and watch the show: We have to try to change the ending. Buffy, for her part, is resolute in her conviction that the world can be a better place, and that she can help forge it.

Clearly, Fudge finds a wealth of feminist subtext to discuss in Buffy and has much to say about Buffy's feminist potential. Fudge seems to consider *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a brilliant, self-conscious, and complex work, but despite the powerful case she makes in favor of Buffy's subversive feminist agency, Fudge ultimately believes Buffy lacks feminist efficacy. Despite Buffy's strengths, Fudge believes that these fail to negate her barefaced femininity: "Yup, she's strong and sassy all right, but she's the ultimate femme, never disturbing the delicate definition of physical femininity." Even as Fudge praises Buffy's "spunky girlness," she paradoxically calls her girly foibles a "limitation inherent in the Buffy phenom," reducing Buffy to a "diluted imitation of female empowerment." Even as Fudge celebrates Buffy's strength, she cannot help resorting to the same "helpful-unhelpful" binary that Lamb and Ponzer use—introducing contradiction and irresolution to her position. In this case, loyalty to this "Good Buffy" versus "Bad Buffy" method of evaluating feminist agency robs Fudge's argument of weight: Despite the excellent case made for Buffy as an effectual and exciting feminist role model, Fudge reduces Buffy to an unhelpful femme, and ultimately dismisses any feminist promise Buffy has. The problem here is that no middle ground exists in the valuation process, and Fudge's conclusion on Buffy's worth is unsatisfying.

The problem with all of these interpretations of Buffy is, as mentioned before, the tendency to reduce the discussion of Buffy to her being "helpful" or "unhelpful" to the feminist agenda. This "transgressive-or-oppressive" attitude tends to cause a dismissal of a great diversity of interpretations, and it forgoes an opportunity for more

complex discussion. Instead, the academic conversation on Buffy's feminism is restricted to vacillating between those two extreme poles. The difficulty becomes trying to definitively declare any text as completely and perfectly empowering before assigning it any political value; in Fudge's case in particular, any productive discussion that might have been had about Buffy's feminist agency is lost because she largely dismisses her own analysis in favor of a binary classification of Buffy's worth. In his book *Sexual Dissidence*, queer-issues writer Jonathan Dollimore makes a similar case: "Containment theory often presupposes an agency of change too subject and a criterion of success too total. Thus subversion or transgression are implicitly judged by impossible criteria" (Dollimore 85). The containing of Buffy's feminist agency would then be due to her inability to satisfy all feminist standards, which is quite an impossible task—by such difficult and ambiguous criteria, all figures in pop culture and media must necessarily be labeled as damaging or useless to the feminist agenda. Theories and texts under feminist examination should not have to be absolute vehicles of the feminist agenda or else be dismissed as useless or harmful to gender equality.

A better construction of feminist agency and political subversion is perhaps one that is "less based on an intentional and autonomous female individual or subject and more on the discursive power of language" (Köver). Notably, a recurring obstacle that encumbers Buffy as a feminist agent is the issue of her femininity. Perhaps the reason it is all too easy to fixate on the insufficient "helpful-unhelpful" binary is because the concept of gender itself is a false dichotomy. To think of Buffy as a subversive of patriarchy, or as an empowered redeemer of femininity is to think of her only in terms of gender clichés of masculinity and femininity—another arbitrary and unnecessary division. Judith Butler, the feminist philosopher, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, introduces this concept of gender performance. She argues that

> gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative . . . there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as regulatory fiction. . . . Gender reality is created through sustained social performances . . . [which] conceal gender's performative character. (Gender Trouble 180)

In other words, Butler argues that no true identity exists behind the concept of gender; rather, gender norms are simply imagined constructs perpetuated by socialization and reiteration, which give them the illusion of being stable, normal or natural; "male" and "female" are in fact cultural clichés that individuals perform, drawing from what an individual thinks or expects about gender. Thus, gender is a product of language and discourse, reified by the dialogue that is had about it in the form of socialization and exposure to popular attitudes. Viewed from this lens, any

discussion of Buffy in relation to patriarchal power structures or girlishness is not only unfruitful due to the meaninglessness of masculinity and femininity, but perpetuates the false dichotomy of gender, and "restricts the production of identities" (*Gender Trouble* 34) to this binary.

If repetition and reiteration is what perpetuates restrictive and oppressive gender norms, then the important question becomes "What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?" (*Gender Trouble* 42). Or, what can be done to destabilize the arbitrary gender constructs currently in place? In "Feminist Contentions: For a Careful Reading," Butler returns to the concept of using language and dialogue as a tool for change and subversion; she writes "'Agency' is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed" ("Feminist Contentions" 135). Feminist agency, therefore, should rely on the "resignification" (*Gender Trouble* 42) of gender norms through texts, ideas, pop culture icons and individuals that stimulate productive discourse and dialogue in order to shake the illusion of expressive gender.

Considered this way, the feminist agency of Buffy no longer relies on a denial of either masculine or feminine stereotypes, but on its potential for resignification, illuminating discourse, and what Butler calls "gender trouble," the revealing of gender norms to be performances. Thus, as a strange hybrid of ultra-girlishness and physical brawn; of the traditionally masculine existing within the deliberately culturally feminine, Buffy serves to call into question the definition of such gender norms. Buffy participates in feminist discourse very meaningfully as a source of debate and negotiation over both the purpose of feminism and the validity of gender norms. Rather than limit her political potential to the unproductive "helpful-unhelpful" binary, it is more useful to consider her an important "site of intense struggle over the meaning of femininity" (Köver).

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SPOUSES BUT STRANGERS: ENGLISH WORLD WAR II MARRIAGES AFTER SEPARATION

CLARKIE HUSSEY

I'm lonely in college, and when I'm with other people it's worse. Most conversations feel like a game of missed handshakes: I put out my thought, they put out theirs several inches away, we stand awkwardly for a moment, then shrug and do it again. All my thoughts end up slumping back to my own head, untouched, until I wonder if I'm crazy.

I miss Michael. I felt sanest with him. Our thoughts connect: We don't always have the same opinions, but we can see the same way, trace the pathway from opinion to mind and argue at every step. This is true with other close friends too, but with them I sometimes feel like I'm aiming my thought to a level where they'll grab it, holding it in a slightly uncomfortable position so it'll be in the same place as theirs. With Michael, I don't have to aim: He's just there, wherever I am.

But we're a few thousand miles apart now, and I'm afraid of what happens with separation. When our lives are so different, do those experiences change us? And if so, at what point do I lose him?

I didn't know it when I started my research, but I think it was this question that drew me to the stories of homecomings between long-separated British World War II veterans and their wives. World War II England was the extreme case of growing apart in separation, both because of the long years without much contact and because experiences like army life or running households alone and holding jobs often demanded change. Husbands formed new ambitions and emotions based on military experiences, wives developed new habits of independence, and both adjusted psychologically to separation. By the time they reunited, many spouses couldn't connect anymore. With little contact and having built up psychological defenses against dwelling on the missing partner, their minds had been cut off from each other and had grown in different directions. For many, this growth felt like maturing, but maturity had its cost when their thoughts were no longer in a place where their partner could grab them. The homecoming stories pointed me to a tradeoff between growing up and keeping a connection: Trying to do both now seems like a terrifying tightrope, though may be possible if Michael and I are willing to keep looking forward for the thoughts born of each other's new lives and backward for the thoughts born of the life we had together.

I whine about how phone calls and Facebook are never the same as being with Michael in person, but we're outrageously spoiled compared to spouses in World War II England who had only heavily censored letters and almost inevitably became distant. Psychologist Edwin Howard Kitching posits, in his 1946 *Sex and the Returned Veteran,* a theory of marriage success based on case studies of soldiers and their wives: a soldier

"cannot talk about his job for security reasons . . . [s]o what has he left to write about?" (Kitching 63). The difficulty of expressing war experiences to wives who hadn't been through the same was compounded not just by official censorship, but by self-censorship: Many soldiers feared their experiences would be too shocking and upsetting for their wives. Alan Allport's *Demobbed: Coming Home After World War II*, a recent study that looks back at WWII-era England through letters, diaries, newspapers, and books, records Royal Artilleryman Alan Harris's comment on the inevitable emptiness of his letters home: "I say that I am fit and well, when in fact my bowels are wrenched with diarrhœa, when my stomach is retching and my head aches" (Allport ch. 2)[1]. Wives, too, felt pressured to share only cheerful news with their already-burdened husbands and were advised in magazines like *Good Housekeeping* that '"letters should be full of jolly family incidents, fun, [and] music" (ch. 2). With their real emotions and troubles carefully protected from each other, it's unsurprising that psychologists Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside found in their *Patterns of Marriage; A Study of Marriage Relationships in the Urban Working Classes* that "Letters were a thin thread . . . a sense of loss of touch was universal" (Slater 19).

For World War II British soldiers and wives, long-distance communication was so unsatisfying that they often developed an emotional numbness towards their partner as a defense against the pain of separation. Kitching reports that drafted men of a "neurotic" temperament became so unstable upon separation from their wives that they were discharged for being unfit for service (Kitching 40). Stability required not dwelling on the missing loved one and instead getting absorbed into the new military life. Kitching's prototype of a soldier of "normal" temperament rid himself of separation anxiety by focusing on work to distract himself, smoking and drinking to chemically alleviate stress, and making fun of sentimentality to harden himself against vulnerable feelings (42). Wives who were classified as "normal" (rather than "neurotic") were those who were able to develop psychological defenses against anxiety (33). But though these emotional brakes might have been necessary during separation to keep from careening into neurosis, it could be hard to disable them upon reunion. One wife said sadly, "I have taken no interest in anything for so long that I now find it impossible to be interested in even the prospect of his return," and many more found themselves equally numb (Allport ch. 2). Men too felt shut off from their own emotions, and worried about what kind of husbands they'd be in their deadened state: one man who'd been away for five years wrote, "I still love [my family] . . . but I feel if they expect me to show my feelings I'll run away because I have no energy left" (ch. 2). For him, as for many separated spouses, feeling love had become so exhausting that they avoided it instinctively. In self-defense, they closed their minds to their spouse entirely.

Others did still feel a strong love for their spouses, and throughout the separation were able to keep painfully alive an image of how they had been before the war. But these men and women often ended up heartbroken, never really getting back the

people they remembered. Cordelia Holman, one of the wives surveyed in Ben Wicks' collection of homecoming stories *Welcome Home: The Stories of Soldiers Returning from World War II*, stayed with the husband who was "absolutely great" before the war because she couldn't let go of "the love we once had" (Wicks 49). But he had turned aggressive and indifferent to her and their son, and they were never happy together again. Even the Herculean task of maintaining a fierce and ever-present love for a spouse throughout separation wasn't enough to save a marriage after reunion when the spouse wasn't the beloved person he or she had been. It was not just time apart, but the transformative nature of that time for soldiers and women on their own that created an emotional and mental isolation between spouses.

For soldiers, that transformation often meant becoming traumatized by battle experiences; their paranoid and short-fused tendencies alienated them from their wives after reunion. Veterans frequently had phobias of anything from confined spaces (Wicks 16) to hearing "God Save the King" (Allport ch. 7). Wives could find it difficult to sympathize with these irrational fears, especially when they were forced to abide by them too, as when Dorothy Parker's husband badgered her if she wasted any food (Wicks 58). But the heavier burden was husbands' angry, aggressive behavior, which Kitching explains as a holdover from the lowering of moral standards required by war, since "it is impossible to tell men to go and kill an enemy and risk their lives in doing it, and expect them at the same time to be honest, chaste, kind and unselfish all the time" (Kitching 56). Soldiers and prisoners of war got locked into the belligerence that they needed to keep fighting, so that it became second nature to them. One prisoner of war explained that after years of constantly rebelling against enemy restraint, he couldn't "suddenly assume voluntary restraint" (Allport ch. 7). For wives like Elise Moyer, whose husband shouted at her all through his homecoming night, their husbands' touchy violence inevitably hindered intimacy (Wicks 49-50). More, it made them seem crazy, unhinged: Families whispered things like "Be very careful with Ray, he's mad as a hatter" to guests (Allport ch. 7). The belief that returned husbands were insane expresses an unbridgeable gap between the viewpoints of spouses, a complete breakdown of the ability to connect.

Even when veterans weren't psychologically crippled by war, other changes like new intellectual or career interests could prevent spouses from connecting. Joining the army during WWII offered rare opportunities for travel as far as Japan, and wives felt keenly the difference between their worldly awareness and their husbands', commonly lamenting, "they've been around, they've seen the world" (Slater 223). Army education and rank promotions also broadened soldiers' horizons, so that they were generally reluctant to return to their prewar employment; in his wry guidebook *Call Me Mister!: A Guide to Civilian Life for the Newly Demobilised*, Dennis Rooke portrays the typical veteran telling a friend that he's "certainly not going back to [his] old job before the war" (Rooke 19). Just as old jobs could feel too limited to acknowledge new skills and ambitions, the outlook of a wife could seem "narrow and restricted to a husband who

had been broadened by life in the Army" (223). Afraid that she might not be able to keep up with her husband's new intellectualism, one wife even rehearsed highbrow conversations as she dusted (Allport ch. 2). Nor were her fears unfounded, for many soldiers did find that their wives couldn't understand the serious thoughts arising from war. When one soldier started philosophizing about life in a letter to home, his wife thought he had "gone mental." Here again, the rejection of her husband's sanity shows that his thoughts were now so far away from hers that she gave up entirely on trying to grasp them. Philip Meninsky, who during the war "had grown up to become a very much [more] serious person" and who found that his wife had no interest in any of his new ambitions, described the disconnect as "living in two totally different worlds" (ch. 2). Trauma wasn't needed to sever a husband's worldview from his wife's: sometimes, just growing up was enough.

Women too had to grow up to make it through the war, and the independence they developed often wasn't recognized or valued by their husbands as they were pushed back into being housewives after reunion. During the war, with only about thirty-eight shillings (the equivalent of less than $80 in modern American currency) a week as state allowance and allotment from their husbands' pay, most wives had to work. By 1943, more than four in five wives without children at home were in full-time war work (Allport ch. 2). One woman said after being "a cabbage" for so many years, getting out of the house to work felt like escaping a cage, after which a lot of housewives wouldn't want to go back to "the old narrow life" (Mass Observation 58). Surveys are divided on whether the majority of women wanted to continue working after the war; one 1943 survey found that three-quarters of professional women wanted to keep their job after the war (Wicks 130), while another in 1944 found that a majority of women said they "hope and expect to settle down" (Mass Observation 57). Desire to return to the home may largely have been based on exhaustion, however; one woman who wanted to get "right out" of work explained that she "didn't want to go on, being married and working. After a few years it gets too much for you . . . we're all getting tired" (Mass Observation 56). In her *Women and the Future*, Margaret Goldsmith writes that women fantasizing about laying down the burden of trying to do it all might not have taken into account that "unconsciously they have formed habits of independence, which will be difficult to break" (Goldsmith 15). These habits of independence came partly from the unusual state of being alone all the time, since a soldier's wife was "married and yet not married," not allowed to go out with other men (Slater 215). Simply living alone could be hard for women to give up on, and some bitterly regretted the loss of small freedoms like a room to themselves or quiet mornings (Allport ch. 2). Largely, though, independence came from the challenge of working and running the household, which gave women a "very deserved sense of achievement and confidence" that would have to be given up if they let their husbands take over (Kitching 72).

Snubbing that sense of achievement and confidence, many husbands didn't support their wives' interest in working and in doing so rejected the mature, independent women their wives had become. One man grumbled that his wife "'seems to enjoy [work] too much for my peace of mind," and only thirty percent of men surveyed in Mass Observation's *The Journey Home* believed women should be allowed to keep their wartime jobs (Allport ch. 2; Mass Observation 64). During the war, these men had often come to idealize their homes and wives and expect that they would be just the same as ever when they came home; a common post-war fantasy was simply a return to the pre-war status quo (Kitching 61; Mass Observation 18). The same veterans who were acutely aware of how war had changed them didn't appreciate that their wives had been through an equally transformative experience. Women's new concerns were trivialized, as husbands complained that "all the wives have got so dull" for only talking about "queues, rations, babies, coupons, their poor feet" (Allport ch. 2). With this lack of respect shown for the ambitions and interests they had developed, women felt their husbands weren't trying to connect with the people they had become; as Rosie Longman reflected sadly, "after the war I was 'Mummy,' 'my daughter', 'my wife' or 'the landlady'. I was never me" (Wicks 132). Women like Rosie found that their real selves continued to live alone and apart from their husbands after reunion.

Over and over, husbands and wives tell stories of coming home to strangers. Reading these stories of missed handshake after missed handshake, I started to believe that change was the enemy of intimacy, and indeed many of the rare stories of entirely happy homecomings featured some variation on the theme of not changing. Captain A.M. Bell was relieved to find that "there was no disappointment or disillusion or anticlimax"; his reunion was "sheer heaven" because his wife Frances "is lovely and hasn't changed an atom" (Allport ch. 2). Carol Cockburn O'Neill, who like her wartime coworkers was happy to return to being a housewife after the war, describes being comfortably stuck in the domestic mentality they were raised with despite their new jobs: "The word career wasn't in our vocabulary" (Wicks 135). Other marriages worked well because the dynamic created by war wasn't so different than their prewar dynamic; Vicky Masterman found that her marriage didn't have any problems after she took over as head of house during the war because "he was a very quiet man, so I just took over automatically" (Wicks 138). One way or another, happy reunions seemed to result from lack of change and discord and distance from change; the only way to not grow apart was to not grow.

But as Michael often has to remind me when I make up a theory, it's not that simple. Some couples managed to keep up with each other's changes through letters: Slater and Woodside found that some spouses said they "got to know their partner better by writing, or had learned to appreciate the other more" (Slater 219), and Karina Powell remembers that "every day during the evening I would write a six-to-ten page letter . . . I really think John being away made us grow much closer to each other" (Wicks 47). Meanwhile Alexander Korda, director of the 1945 movie *Perfect Strangers*

(released in the US as *Vacation from Marriage*), had a more radical idea for the benefits of separation: Spouses could end up liking each other more than they had before as a very result of their separate changes. His characters Catherine and Robert Wilson are dull people in a passionless marriage, with Robert's choice of Catherine based on her "dependability" about not wasting money or making foolish choices. Both transform during the war. Catherine, who at first has so weak a sense of personal identity that she introduces herself to new coworker Dizzy as "Wilson . . . Mrs. Wilson" and won't wear lipstick because Robert doesn't approve, ends the movie as a glamorous lipsticked woman who informs her husband that she has no intention of becoming a "weak child-wife" again. But Robert, now a dashing soldier who dances well and craves adventure, no longer wants a weak child-wife who is dependable before anything else. Both intend to ask for divorces, but end up attracted to each other all over again.

I want to believe Korda. I don't think I need lipstick, but I'm not content with who I am, not just yet. I want to somehow dig my way out of the mires of self-consciousness that make me question whether everything I do or say is genuine or an elaborate manipulation. I want to find some kind of volunteer work that I really care about, become a contributing member of the human community. I want to grow up. And yes, I'd like to come back to Michael in four years a better person and have him love me more for it, have us connect on the levels I've grown up to. But I remember making smoothies in his kitchen, laughing over our manipulative tendencies, the constant scheming neither of us could quite turn off. I remember exchanging "oh brother" looks at school assemblies when students fresh off GSL trips enthused about the difference they'd learned they would make in the world. And I'm afraid of losing that, of not being able to find each other in the old favorite haunts of the thoughts of the people we were.

I read a letter from a World War II wife who shared my fear and gave me some hope that Michael and I can both change and stay together. Defying *Good Housekeeping's* advice for letter topics, Minna Scott wrote her husband about her sadness over their dog's recent death and her fear that he would find her grief trivial when his experiences of war had made him aware of true human suffering (Scott). Trying to catch up to where she imagines her husband's mind must be now, she describes turning on the news "to be reminded of the senseless butchering going on everywhere to get the matter of a little dog into perspective" (Scott). But her husband writes back remembering the dog's role in their life together, able to return to the place where the dog mattered tremendously even though he is aware "just a pet dog" isn't much in the larger picture of war. Minna is profoundly relieved, writing, "These letters have reduced the distance between North Africa and Warlingham to something negligible" (Scott). That moment, I realized, was the hope I was really looking for. Minna's husband has changed, but they are as close as ever. He has new thoughts in places that are hard for her to reach, but she stretches to try anyway; he comes back to their old

places when she most needs him to. As long as Michael and I are willing both to let each other change and remember the dogs we had together, we're going to be okay.

NOTE

1. I came across Alan Allport's *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* in the initial stages of the project. I got stuck on passages, and I read and reread them until I admitted how close to the bone they were. The anxiety of separation, and the coping mechanisms, and the absorption into new lives, new independence, new adulthood that periodically broke into the fear that there would be no going back now—this was what I had been looking for. But it wasn't enough. Allport was, first and foremost, a historian, and he ends his epilogue with a call to Britain to improve her system of demobilization. I was, at bottom, a sad college freshman and I wanted a different kind of answer. Not how a country can reintegrate its soldiers into society, but how two people can make it.

   So I went back to his sources, the primary accounts of the men and women who lived during the war and the psychologists interviewing them, and tried to make my own sense of their stories. One of these, Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside's *Patterns of Marriage*, is available from the Butler stacks. For the others, I got myself a New York Public Library card and discovered the wonderland of the offsite collection. They have just about everything, and books can be ordered online through nypl.org and delivered to one of the libraries for in-library use. Some materials can be delivered closer to campus, but if you're ordering several books and want them all in the same place most things can be sent to the Schwartzman reading room, in the main library on 42nd Street. I found out later that you can use the scanners in the library (although they aren't free), but I just sat with the books under the stained glass and copied out all the quotes I liked onto a Word document. I was the kind of Columbian who rarely made it further south than Absolute Bagels, but I was in that moment very, very happy to be in New York City.

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THE IDEOLOGY OF THE VEIL: FUNDAMENTALLY MISOGYNISTIC OR FUNDAMENTALLY MISUNDERSTOOD?

KARINA JOUGLA

For many Americans like me living in the post-*9/11* era, the veil is the ultimate symbol of women's oppression. In her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" Lila Abu-Lughod pulls no punches in her criticism of the United States for using the "liberation" of Muslim women to justify what was a war of aggression in Afghanistan at best and an imperialist conquest at worst. I could not help but see her point. However, when Abu-Lughod suggests that the burqa is not an object of women's oppression but rather of their liberation, my instinctive reaction was to automatically reject this notion as counterintuitive. By the end of Abu-Lughod's article, I was left wondering, "But still, isn't there something inherently misogynistic about the burqa?"

For me, the moment of doubt came when Abu-Lughod cited fellow anthropologist Hanna Papanek, who described "the burqa as 'portable seclusion'" and "noted that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men" (Abu-Lughod 785). This concept of portable seclusion seemed to me irreconcilably incompatible with liberty, if not diametrically opposed to it. Seclusion denotes confinement and isolation, but liberty means freedom from restraint. From my perspective, the very fact that women in cultures where the veil is worn live in sex-segregated societies where they are expected to be covered in public spaces conveys a certain inferiority and treats these women as second-class citizens, or perhaps not as citizens at all. The notion that women must be protected outside of their homes from men also implies that if they were to go unveiled in public, they would be inviting harm upon themselves. This insinuates that there is something dangerous, shameful, and sinful about the female body and that sexuality that must be covered up to protect women from themselves. Given these implications, I set out to prove that the veil as an object is inherently oppressive of women.

However, in the process of researching the practice of veiling and reading accounts from women who had chosen to veil or not to veil, I came to realize that my initial approach had been misguided. It is not useful to ask whether veiling is fundamentally misogynistic, because the practice of veiling occurs in so many historical, political, geographical, social, and cultural contexts that even asking such an oversimplified question is hopelessly essentialist. Indeed, as Abu-Lughod cautions, "we must take care not to reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing" (786). It is telling that in English, "veil" is the only word

that exists to describe this item of clothing, but in Arabic there are over one hundred words that name the veil. When the limitations of the very language we use to communicate with each other obscure "such multivocality and complexity, we lose the nuanced differences in meaning and associated cultural behaviors" that the veil represents (Guindi 7). As a consequence, we risk conflating the vast varieties of veiling into a single "indiscriminate, monolithic, and ambiguous" stereotype (7).

To avoid such a conflation, I instead seek to understand how women's agency in choosing whether or not to veil affects the meanings that they convey with this decision. As one Muslim female scholar explains, "[social] codes . . . are represented in women's clothing," and since "[s]exual control of women is fundamental to patriarchy in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies," women's bodies are often universally the targets of oppression, whether that is through imposed clothing styles or restricted reproductive rights (Shaheed 299). When women are denied the agency to choose their own clothing and lifestyles, the meanings associated with the veil become perverted and exploited for political ends by fundamentalist extremists with a regressive agenda to defend patriarchy.

The Veil as Liberation?

The tension between oppressive versus liberatory conceptions of the veil manifests itself in a heated debate amongst feminist Muslim scholars. In her book *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women*, social scientist Marnia Lazreg challenges Abu-Lughod's argument that the veil liberates women by enabling them to appear in public. According to Lazreg, the recent resurgence of the veil "coincides with an approach espoused by academic feminists that seeks to correct the notion that the veil is a sign of 'oppression,'" the very approach that Abu-Lughod advocates (Lazreg 6). Lazreg criticizes this view as apologia that "in reality makes oppression more intellectually acceptable . . . The implication is that the 'oppressed' are not so oppressed after all; they have power" (6). She argues that this naturalization of the veil excuses women from having to critically examine their personal reasons for choosing to veil. On the other side of the same coin, the ramification of Lazreg's criticism is that women who accept the veil and hail it as a source of liberation are actually oppressed but do not realize it. Proponents of Abu-Lughod's case counter that this "classic Western and secular Muslim feminist answer . . . is condescending: women who aren't bothered by veiling just don't know any better, and one day, with guidance and continued freedom, they will be enlightened and stop veiling" (Kaft 38). In this light, Lazreg's argument is equally problematic because it implies that women who do choose to veil are either submitting to oppression or do not have valid reasons for veiling to begin with.

As a woman, I found myself caught between Abu-Lughod and Lazreg. On one hand, I would be accused of being apologetic for and complicit with oppression if I accepted Abu-Lughod's notion of the veil as liberatory, but on the other hand, I would

be condescending and self-righteous if I disagreed. Many Muslim women similarly find themselves in this untenable position between irreconcilable views. They are presented with the impossible choice between betraying their culture or acting as willing accomplices in their own oppression. When feminists argue over the veil, neither side wins; but the clear losers are the women at the center of the debate. The root causes of their oppression become obscured by the distracting controversy surrounding the veil. This ongoing argument inevitably leads to an impasse that is counterproductive to the ostensible goal shared by both sides of advancing women's rights.

However, one thing that both sides can agree upon is that "veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency" (Abu-Lughod 786). Instead of arguing over whether the veil is a tool of oppression or liberation, feminist scholars like Abu-Lughod and Lazreg should draw attention to firstly who is manipulating the veil to strip women of agency and, secondly, for what ends. Ultimately, centering the debate on veils and the bodies they cover distracts from the underlying causes of oppression embodied by fundamentalist patriarchies.

Understanding the Reasons Behind Veiling

Before considering the crucial element of free choice (or the lack thereof) in the practice of veiling, it is necessary to understand the reasons that Muslim women cite for deciding to veil or not to veil. These reasons range from religious piety and modesty to protection from sexual harassment and preservation of cultural identity. Marnia Lazreg explores these justifications at length in her open letter "Questioning the Veil." In addressing the origins of veiling in religion and in notions of modesty, Lazreg explains that one interpretation the Quran instructs, "tell the believing woman to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment" (21). According to Lazreg, the translation of the word "modest" is disputed and may have originally meant roughly "to cover one's private parts," which would contradict the interpretation that equates moral modesty with covering one's entire body (21). Lazreg asserts that "[m]odesty is not reducible to the veil" and suggests that modesty of character is separate from clothing as she challenges, "What if a woman is modest in her dress but immodest in her speech and actions?" (23). In addition to conveying modesty, many women wear the veil to symbolize their commitment to Islam similarly to the manner in which Christians wear crucifixes or Jewish men wear yarmulkes. However, Lazreg questions why covering herself is the only way a Muslim woman can demonstrate her piety, and instead proposes that women's religious expression should not be limited to an article of clothing.

In addressing the "protection" reason for veiling, Lazreg criticizes the "fiction that the veil is an antidote to sexual harassment" (48). She claims that, realistically, women who practice veiling are just as likely to be sexually harassed by men as women who

do not veil. Lazreg argues that, even though a woman's sexual purity is supposed to be safeguarded by the barrier of the veil, "When a man says that the veil prevents sexual harassment, he implies . . . [that] the veil protects his sexual identity by signaling to other men that his wife, sister, or . . . daughter is off limits" (51). The implication is that women are not being protected from strange men but rather from their own sexuality, which is seen as a dangerous invitation to commit sexual sin. However, some women counter that beyond potentially safeguarding against sexual harassment, the anonymity created by the veil gives them a sense of safety as they are able to "see without being fully seen" and "know without being known" (Kaft 30).

Another common reason that women give for choosing to veil is a desire to express their cultural identity, especially in the context of non-Muslim cultures or in countries where veiling is banned. Indeed, the veil "has emerged as an increasingly attractive method for women from Muslim communities in Europe and North America to display pride in their culture" (Lazreg 54). In countries like France where headscarves and face coverings have been outlawed, many Muslim women report feeling that lawmakers have violated their rights to cultural expression, and these women have reacted to defend their cultural freedoms (Gauthier-Villars). Contentious cases like this have driven a wedge between Muslim and secular "Western" feminists. Lazreg concedes that, "Feeling comfortable in one's culture and asserting its worth is one thing," but cautions that "reducing the essence of that culture to the veil is another. A woman who lives in a non-Muslim society but does not wear a veil is no less proud of her culture than the woman who wears one" (Lazreg 61).

There are a multitude of reasons given by women both in favor of and against veiling, but these rationales become irrelevant when women do not have a choice in the matter. Political extremists have abused these very reasons to deprive women of the ability to choose identities for themselves, making women the focal point of ideological battles.

Women's Right to Choose

Abu-Lughod attests that images of Afghan women forced to wear the burqa by the Taliban provided propaganda for the American invasion of Afghanistan, but the reality is that women have not always been forced to veil and, in recent history, they have actually been forced to unveil. In her essay "From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed," Mohja Kaft explores how, for much of the twentieth century, governments banned veiling as part of a modernization agenda in parts of the Middle East from Turkey to Iran to Syria. Instead of being arrested for going out in public uncovered, women were being persecuted for wearing veils. In one instance in 1982, Turkish troops forced women to unveil at gunpoint in the streets of Damascus as a theatrical state demonstration of "'progressive' secular ideology" (Kaft 35). As Kaft frames the incident, "imagine having your blouse removed while passerby watch, or your

underwear. Such a parallel is a realistic translation of a hijabed [veiled] woman's mortification at being unveiled in public" (34). It is one thing to condemn forced veiling, but what about forced unveiling? In both instances, the veil is exploited as a political issue at the expense of a woman's agency to choose for herself whether or not to practice veiling. This suggests that the veil itself is not oppressive, but its imposition or prohibition constitutes the denial of women's right to self-determination of their lives and identities. As Kaft asserts, "power is not given or taken away from Muslim women by the absence or presence of the veil, but by the presence or absence of economic, political, and family rights" (39). Ultimately, women are not oppressed by the veil itself—women's rights are denied by their patriarchal social, political, and economic institutions.

In "Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic Is the Veil?" Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed examines the interplay between politics, fundamentalism, and patriarchy that deprives women of the right to choice and self-determination. Critics of the veil are quick to blame Islam as the culprit responsible for imposing veiling upon women, but as Shaheed instructs, "contemporary debates around the veil should begin with politics rather than theology, as both state-level and non-state groups further their own [political] agendas by exercising control over people's clothing in the name of religion, culture, and authenticity" (Shaheed 293). These politics of dress are closely linked to fundamentalist movements, which arose in reaction to social changes that challenged the patriarchal status quo. Even though many of these reactionary movements espouse a fundamentalist brand of Islam, they are not religious—they are political movements masquerading under the metaphorical "veil" of Islam (296).

As the trend toward modernization gained momentum in many predominantly Muslim countries, their governments undertook reforms to reduce inequalities between men and women by opening opportunities for education and participation in the workforce to women. Fundamentalist movements then sought to reestablish old social hierarchies based on sex by demonizing female sexuality in a backlash against the threat that empowering women posed to men's dominant place in the social order. In some countries such as Afghanistan, the veil was reinstituted and made compulsory. The consequence of such laws ("made by men, not God") is that "A woman does not face a man as an equal being; she faces him as a fundamentally different being whose difference must be given the symbol (the veil) of inequality" (Lazreg 106, 107). One could argue that fundamentalism also oppresses men—for example, Afghan men were forced by the Taliban to wear salwar kameez (trousers and tunic), turbans, and beards in the 1990s—but within fundamentalist regimes, women are still subordinate to men and suffer greater consequences (Shaheed 298). Shaheed explains,

> As collective cultural identities are formed and re-formed, women's sexuality is controlled through legal impediments (such as access to safe abortion), through

> violence (such as so-called honor killings . . .), and through their public appearance (such as enforced veiling). (299)

This subjugation of female sexuality is not unique to Muslim countries under fundamentalist rule; women's rights to control their own bodies are also restricted in other societies where extremism exists, such as the restriction of reproductive rights under Christian fundamentalism in many Western countries. Women's shared experiences of oppression by patriarchal fundamentalism can provide common ground for women to build global feminist coalitions across cultures.

It will take nothing short of a powerful global feminist movement to truly liberate women from the bonds of fundamentalist patriarchy, and according to Abu-Lughod, this will require the universal "acceptance of the possibility of difference" within feminism (787). A feminist movement is emerging in many Muslim countries to gain equality for women within the framework of Islam, but many Western proponents of women's rights are skeptical of this brand of "Islamic feminism." Abu-Lughod posits that Islamic feminism is a "viable movement forged by brave women who want a third way"—women who seek an alternative to the "polarizations that place feminism on the side of the West" and everyone else in opposition (788). In order to forge a global movement, feminists must make room amongst ourselves for different kinds of feminisms, and accommodating difference means accepting women's free choice to wear (or not wear) the veil. When a woman makes the informed, independent, and uncoerced decision to take up or take off the veil, she has the agency to define the meaning of her action. The veil itself should not be seen as an object of misogyny, but its exploitation by male political and religious authorities in order to preserve patriarchal structures is undeniably misogynistic. Rather than being oppressive, the veil is often just misunderstood and misconstrued. For Lazreg, "Rehabilitation of the veil cannot dispense with a hard look at the subversion and transformation of the meanings of the veil, ranging from a tool of confinement to one of purported liberation" (102). For Muslim women, this rehabilitation of the veil will require a process of reconciling the contradictory identities symbolized by the veil and renegotiating women's roles in society on an equal basis with men. On a larger scale, the birth of a global feminist movement will require a parallel reconciliation between different types of feminisms and a renegotiation of Islam's place within the movement in order to truly liberate women from patriarchy everywhere.

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THE PROBLEM WITH EMOTION

MARC PELESSONE

On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy hit the shores of New York and New Jersey. The East River overflowed. The lower half of Manhattan flooded. Seven subway lines became submerged. Boardwalks and coastal communities were destroyed. Many people still remain in need of assistance. It will be years before some of these communities are rebuilt. And global climate change and difficult economic times are causing us to question whether some communities should be rebuilt at all. Amid the debate and cleanup, the New York Photo Festival held an exhibit at The Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn entitled "Sandy: Devastation, Document, and the Drive to Rebuild, Renew, Renovate, Refurbish, Regenerate, Replace, Refine, Redefine . . . Rebirth." The Powerhouse Arena itself suffered damage from 28 inches of floodwaters during the superstorm. After repairs, Powerhouse displayed more than one thousand Sandy exhibit photos at or above the 28-inch floodwater line. Therefore, a visitor to this exhibit symbolically steps into the flood zone to view the flood. This placement adds another dimension of reality to the photos. It furthers the exhibit's stated goal "to make sure the devastating visuals from the storm remain at the forefront of the public consciousness" (NYPF). But what is the real effect of these images? The pictures may evoke strong empathy for the victims, but simultaneously distract us from the larger issue of how best to address coastal lands and deal with the realities of global climate change. The pictures may even motivate us to take some sort of action. But will they guide us towards the best course of action?

Fig. 1. New York Photo Festival, "Sandy: Devastation, Document, Drive" at The Powerhouse Arena, 2013.

Compassion is a key component to how a society responds to any calamity. In the essay "Compassion and Terror," Martha Nussbaum argues that compassion is the foundation upon which we build a civil society. She acknowledges the "role of tragic spectatorship, and tragic art generally, in promoting good citizenship" (Nussbaum 25).

Clearly, the New York Photo Festival, in devising their exhibit, understood the power of tragic spectatorship; the exhibit's photos of Breezy Point, Queens are particularly poignant. One photo shows an obviously middle-class neighborhood decimated. Several street blocks are visible where all that is left are the concrete foundations of what used to be rows of homes. In the background, several blocks away, are a few homes that remain standing. It appears arbitrary as to why these four homes still stand while the other houses on all the other blocks were washed away. This photo engages with its audience in much the same way that the great Athenian tragedies do; as Nussbaum explains, "they start with us 'fools' and the chance events that befall us" (25). We have an emotive response to this tragic art because we see ourselves as the possible fools whom the chance misfortune could befall. We might easily have been Sandy's victims ourselves.

Concern for our own misfortunes can now easily be extended into compassion for the real victims. When a viewer feels a connection to "the victims," he expands his sense of community to include those victims. Nussbaum articulates this point when she considers Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* written to elicit mercy from its Greek audience, explaining that "compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar" (11). The New York and New Jersey landscapes in the Sandy exhibit's photos look nothing like the landscape of my home in San Diego. The density, the architecture, and the color palate share nothing in common with my own neighborhood. It is easy for me to see the Sandy devastation as foreign. In Southern California, our annual rainfall is less than twelve inches a year. Our biggest natural disasters are the Santa Ana winds which blow hot dry air through our canyons, setting them ablaze. It is fire, not water, that threatens me and my neighbors.

For some reason, I find myself most moved by these images. Why? Judith Butler offers an explanation. In her essay "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," Butler questions the effect "certain larger norms, themselves often racializing and civilizational, have on what is provisionally called 'reality'" (Butler 74). Butler's text suggests these photos connect with the norms of my reality; norms derived in large part by race and culture. Within the Breezy Point photos, there is a makeshift shrine erected to an obviously Christian saint. Two American flags hang on two of the now-empty foundations. These images do speak to my own "larger norms," specifically a Judeo-Christian ethic and a sense of national pride. Being that these are the "larger norms" of most Americans, the Sandy exhibit in general, and the Breezy Point photos in particular connect with the people of this nation. We are them. This exhibit expands our sense of community to include the victims of this tragedy. It is a key aspect in getting our country to step up and provide assistance. The exhibit's title, which characterizes it as the "drive to rebuild, renew, renovate, etc.", is intended to fuel that drive. And the exhibit succeeds in large part. The images expand our nation's sense of community with the hurricane victims. Our compassion inspires us to want to

contribute the aid necessary to provide the longer-term assistance some of the affected will need. And yet a more critical view of the exhibit reveals a more complicated truth.

Fig. 2. Rose Magno, "Breezy Point–After the Storm," Breezy Point, Queens, 2012.

As viewers of photographs, we like to believe that the photo lens is presenting reality with some degree of precision and objectivity and thus the compassion it inspires in us is genuine and not coerced. But this is not always the case. Butler explores the darker side of photography—when photos become complicit in extracting a particular response from the viewer. Consider the current U.S. policy of embedded war reporting with regard to photography. Butler points out that "the visual perspective the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) permitted to the media actively structured our cognitive apprehension of the war" (Butler 66). The DoD's "regulation of perspective thus suggests that the frame can conduct certain kinds of interpretations" (66). Clearly, the restrictions placed on war photographers have framed the Iraqi and Afghani war photos with a certain bias. And these war photos rightfully raise our suspicion.

How might Butler's argument apply to the New York Photo Festival's Sandy exhibit? Unlike the photos by embedded reporters, there is a natural legitimacy to the Sandy disaster photos. The New York Photo Festival placed an open call for exhibit submissions. It accepted work from professionals, amateurs, and victims. It placed no restrictions on photo content. As a result, the exhibit has a decidedly disparate quality. The photos jump around from the high rises of midtown Manhattan to the boardwalks of the Jersey shore, from the dense ethnic neighborhoods of Staten Island to the posh

waterfront estates on Long Island. Sometimes photographers focused on the destruction, other times on the surreality of a beach littered with TV controllers or frying pans. The exhibit's lack of direction implies a lack of agenda that lends the Sandy exhibit a credibility that the embedded war photographers could never approach. Hence, we might take comfort that the feelings of compassion the Sandy photos evoke are genuine. But Butler's claims about photography give us reason to pause.

There is something endemic to photography that might alarm the savvy viewer. Butler points out that the simple mechanics of "bringing an image into focus" also necessitates "that some portion of the visual field is ruled out" (74). So, photography actually toys with reality. Butler elaborates further:

> The represented image thereby signifies its admissibility into the domain of representability, and thus at the same time signifies the delimiting function of the frame—even as, or precisely because, it does not represent it. In other words, the image, which is supposed to deliver reality, in fact withdraws reality from perception (74-75).

Even though I accept that the Sandy exhibit is not trying to advance a specific agenda, the mechanics of photography do distort reality specifically because of what is not shown. Let me now reconsider the Breezy Point photo to which I felt a strong simpatico. I was not seeing the destruction of non-human habitat. I was not seeing all the housing materials that no longer exist on the empty foundations. All this material was swept out to sea, wreaking havoc with marine ecosystems. And unseen still is the further damage that will occur when all the Breezy Point rubbish washes ashore in someone else's community.

I view the exhibit again, this time searching for what the camera lens tries to obscure, to see not just what is in focus but also what is blurred. An exhibit photo of a home on Sea Gate Coney Island provides a good opportunity. The home still stands but with a hole now in it through which a car could pass and through which a viewer can see the ocean. When we focus not on the home but rather at the ocean, we see how precariously close this home sits to the sea. This is perhaps the unintended consequence of the photos. The photographer clearly focused his lens on the house—an act Butler contends places an interpretive spin on the photo's content. But photography (at least un-doctored photography) must still deal with the physical realities of the subject matter. Although the exhibit's images do reveal a great deal of destruction, the proximity of the ocean so close to many of the structures does make obvious the colossally risky location of these building sites. Framing angles and lens manipulation can only do so much. There is a large looming ocean captured in snippets by many of these photos. We need to be cognizant of the photo's framing to fully appreciate the implications of how we view the photos and the response they elicit from us. This is incredibly important. As Butler points out "the way these norms enter

into frames and into larger circuits of communicability are vigorously contestable precisely because the effective regulation of affect, outrage, and ethical response is at stake." (78) The emotion we feel from these photos drives our ethical response.

Fig. 3. Danielle Mastrion, "Beachfront Living," Seagate, Brooklyn, 2012.

We are returned to the argument proffered by Nussbaum and the great philosophers Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hume. Compassion serves as the bedrock from which citizens develop a civic-minded concern for humanity. From the standpoint of war—the position from which both Nussbaum and Butler consider the emotional response to photos—they argue that compassion should act to inform our policies. It thus seems appropriate that compassion should also form the basis of our civic response to the hurricane's destruction. But is it appropriate?

Thus far, the basic argument of looking at photos, whether to evoke Nussbaum's compassion or Butler's grieving, seems to imply that our emotional response, that of compassion and/or grieving, will in fact assist us in coming to the correct conclusion

of how to respond. But what if that premise were flawed? Susan Sontag understood just this predicament. In her essay "Looking at War," Sontag suggests the downside to photos is that the image is all we retain. Sontag contends, "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don't help us much to understand" (Sontag 14). The intense emotional response overpowers our ability to rationally consider all of the often complex and nuanced issues. And Hurricane Sandy has many such issues that extend beyond the devastation of the affected communities.

The United States Global Change Research Program characterizes the evidence of global climate change as "unequivocal" (Karl 9). The world's consumption of fossil fuels continues to increase, producing ever more heat-trapping gases to drive up global temperatures. Clearing of natural forests and mismanagement of agricultural lands continues, exacerbating the problem. Warming in this century is on track to be greater than that of the last century. Storm surges and flooding are expected to increase in frequency and severity. What is now considered a "once-in-a-century coastal flood in New York City" will increase in frequency and possibly reach one per decade during this century (109).

Today, there are calls for radical changes to the development of vulnerable coastal areas. San Francisco is orchestrating a "managed retreat" of public land in response to rising sea levels (Lubber 1). Insurers, taxpayers, and various organizations are pushing for stronger building codes, vulnerability assessments, and resiliency mitigation plans as a prerequisite for federal disaster assistance. These are all fitting responses based on what Jay Fishman, CEO of Travelers Insurance, succinctly states: "We've embraced the notion that weather is different. If you are not impressed with what the weather has been doing over the last few years, you're not keeping your eyes open." (2)

But the New York Photo Festival exhibit stirs our compassion and grief. It leads us to rebuild rather than to adjust to the reality of global climate change. Although society might be better served if we redefine the boundaries of our coastal communities, how do we deny the residents of Breezy Point the chance to rebuild? We cannot. The images of their community have garnered them our most heart-felt compassion.

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KINKY BOOTS: HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEX WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT SEX

G. WANG

"One never knows what joy one might find amongst the unwanted."
—Lola, *Kinky Boots*

In our cultural library of films about drag, there is a little-known gem called *Kinky Boots* that is often lost in the shuffle. *Kinky Boots* is a 2005 British film about a young Englishman named Charlie Price who inherits a struggling shoe business from his deceased father. In a gamble to resuscitate his ailing company, Charlie hires a feisty drag queen named Lola to advise him on how to diversify into a new product line: women's stiletto boots with a heel sturdy enough to support a man's weight. After watching *Kinky Boots*, I found it to be a powerful film that successfully challenges mainstream perceptions of gender and drag, while telling a heartwarming story to boot. But many critics didn't share my enthusiasm when they reviewed the movie after its theatrical release (Holden; Puig; Thomson).

Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* criticizes the movie for lacking "genuine sexual provocation" and argues that Lola isn't convincing as a protagonist because she "never behaves seductively, nor is there even a hint of sex in her life. Because her flouting of convention doesn't extend beyond sartorial display, her brand of gender-bending subversion is almost reassuring." Holden believes that the creators of *Kinky Boots*, inspired by the financial success of thematically similar British films, neutered their drag queen in an attempt to produce a family friendly film with mass appeal. However, Holden's gripe with *Kinky Boots* cannot be understood to pertain to a simple lack of sex in the movie: after all, many classic films that enjoy universal critical acclaim don't focus at all on the sex lives of their characters. What is it about *Kinky Boots* that makes sexual provocation a "crucial ingredient" to the success of the movie when it isn't for so many others?

Kinky Boots is held to a different standard as a drag film, a unique genre of cinema that is usually oriented around an organizing motive of challenging the prevailing gender and sexual norms. One way that drag films have traditionally done this is by putting the homosexuality of their drag queen protagonists on display (*The Birdcage* or *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*). Since drag in the real world is usually (but not exclusively) performed by the gay community (Holcomb 415), it makes sense for most cinematic drag queens to be gay as well. Holden's issue with *Kinky Boots* cannot be just that it doesn't show sex; sex has become such a mainstay of contemporary Western cinema that audiences are no longer the least bit scandalized by seeing a man and a woman making out on the big screen. Rather, Holden's grievance with the movie much more likely concerns its failure to depict gay sex, the expected next step in the

"flouting of convention" that he argues is conspicuously absent from Lola's role. Through this lens, *Kinky Boots* appears to be an overly conservative film that keeps its drag queen lead in the closet in order to avoid ruffling the feathers of potentially sensitive moviegoers.

Holden is correct on three counts and wrong on one. He is right that *Kinky Boots* needs to be sexually provocative to qualify as a meaningful drag film. He is right that Lola doesn't exhibit much sexuality in the movie other than a few saucy song-and-dance numbers on stage, and he is right that the choice to de-emphasize her sexuality obscures her sexual orientation. However, contrary to Holden's argument, this obscurity is decidedly not "reassuring," nor is it a move of conservative prudishness. Lola may not be identifiably gay, but it is a mistake to assume that films which showcase the homosexuality of their drag queens are automatically more provocative in doing so.

In a way, the opposite is true: a gay drag queen makes it all too easy for straight viewers to walk away from a film with the comfortable thought that no matter how controversially drag may be presented in the movie, it is a fringe element that is safely quarantined within the gay community and therefore doesn't apply to those outside it. By diverging from the tradition of setting its protagonist up to be immediately and obviously gay, *Kinky Boots* introduces the possibility that Lola, a man who dresses like a woman, may actually be straight. Holden might believe this approach to lack the necessary provocation, but anthropologist Ether Newton argues that the provocative nature of drag stems from its "double inversion," where the gender of the clothes inverts the gender of the body, and the gender of the body inverts the gender of internal identity (Newton 103). When the drag queen is sexually ambiguous, like Lola, this disruptive effect of drag is amplified because the audience is now threatened by a potential triple inversion, where the presumed homosexuality of the drag performer may be inverted as well. By adding this third layer of inversion, the movie unleashes the concept of drag from the boundaries of the gay community, challenging mainstream viewers with a drag queen who cannot be easily dismissed.

Kinky Boots accomplishes this feat not only by camouflaging Lola's sexual orientation, but by doing so intentionally, feeding its audience key snippets of scrambled signal that are open to interpretation. In a scene where Lola meets the workers in Charlie's factory, one of them asks her with genuine befuddlement, "If you don't want to get off with blokes, why would you put a frock on?" Lola responds with her characteristic blend of sass and insight: "Ask any woman what she likes in a man. Compassion, tenderness, sensitivity. Traditionally the female virtues. Perhaps what women secretly desire is a man who is fundamentally a woman." In this scene, the film consciously draws the audience's attention to one possible motivation for a heterosexual man to dress in drag and asks us to reconsider our immediate assumption that the drag queen is gay. Holden claims that drag for Lola is "all just an act," which is likely a thinly veiled reference to her perceived failure to come out. But the automatic

presumption of homosexuality is exactly what the movie seeks to challenge. However, the film also executes the scene in such a manner that it doesn't quite identify Lola as straight either—since the audience is not privy to the earlier part of the conversation, we don't know if the "you" in the factory worker's query refers to Lola herself or to a hypothetical drag queen.

Kinky Boots sustains this theme of deliberate ambiguity as the story progresses. Although Lola gradually develops a strong bond of camaraderie with Charlie, one that may be interpreted as having homosexual undertones, she also becomes close to Charlie's assistant, a spunky, business-savvy young woman named Lauren. At the end of the movie, after the titular boots are successfully pitched to fashion moguls in Milan, Charlie and Lauren share their first kiss on the runway in Lola's presence, and she looks upon the couple with a bittersweet smile. If Lola did indeed fall for either Charlie or Lauren over the course of the movie, the audience does not know which one. And that is exactly the point. The key takeaway from the scene is that it demonstrates that Lola, rather than being the asexual creature that Holden believes her to be, is instead ambiguously sexed. The fact that she could be any of us is what endows Lola with the unique capacity to move between cultural barriers as an ambassador of drag.

Lola's role as such an ambassador brings a new question to light: is the role even necessary? Drag has always been associated with the gay community, so why should straight people care about drag? To determine whether or not heterosexual audiences stand to gain something valuable from an exposure to drag, we must become acquainted with two opposing schools of thought that queer theorist Eve Sedgwick argues are central to the modern "homo/heterosexual definition" (2). The first is the "minoritizing view," where gay culture is seen to be "an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority" (1). The second is the "universalizing view," which interprets gay culture to be "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (1). Lola's sexual ambiguity in *Kinky Boots* essentially destabilizes the minoritizing perception of drag and advances the universalizing one: in order to break away from critics like Holden and recognize the film as an important, revolutionary work, we must prove that drag should be universally considered in the first place.

We should begin by defining two terms that are frequently and mistakenly conflated: "drag queen" and "transvestite." According to the *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, a transvestite is "a cross-dresser, or someone who wears the clothes of the other gender" (Hovey 1482), whereas a drag queen is "one variation of male-to-female cross-dressing" (Holcomb 415), with the term presently being "closely associated with theatrical performance" (415). Some drag performers may be reluctant to be identified with transvestitism since it is often conjoined with the pathological term transvestic fetishism, which is characterized by sexual pleasure induced by cross-dressing (Hovey 1482-1483). Since sexual arousal isn't a motivation for dressing in drag for most drag queens and kings, or even for many off-stage cross-dressers, we will employ the term

transvestite in the more general sense as outlined above, which includes those who cross-dress for any purpose.

Lola identifies as both a drag queen and a transvestite in Kinky Boots, which makes her sexual ambiguity a particularly astute reflection of real world dynamics, because although drag is usually performed by gay men (Holcomb 415), transvestitism is actually a behavior predominantly associated with straight men. Magnus Hirschfeld, the German physician who coined the term "transvestite" in 1910, conducted his studies on participants that were primarily heterosexual males (Bullough). Since Hirschfeld conducted his experiments in a time when homosexuality was simultaneously less recognized and more stigmatized in the Western world than today (Wolf), a cogent argument can be made that some of these straight men were possibly closeted gay men who were disinclined to identify otherwise due to fear of social backlash. However, despite the broad advances made by the gay rights movement since the early twentieth century, the heterosexual dominance of transvestite demographics has not changed: a 1997 study by sexologists Bonnie and Vern Bullough discovered that 67.4 percent of their sample group of 372 transvestites identified as heterosexual, with only 2.4 percent as strictly homosexual, with the remainder categorizing themselves as either bisexual or asexual.

Drag is clearly an "issue of continuing, determinative importance" to the parent population of transvestites, who either cross-dress on stage as drag performers or cross-dress in their personal lives. By divorcing the terms "drag queen" and "transvestite," we establish the theatrical artifice of drag as an object of relevance not only to the gay community, but also to the mostly heterosexual community of off-stage transvestites. However, we still have yet to demonstrate the universality of drag—after all, most people do not identify as either gay or transvestite. Why, then, would drag be relevant to this majority population?

Lola herself has the answer. In a scene where she's explaining drag culture to Charlie and Lauren, she tells them, "You're never more than ten feet away from a transvestite." Both Charlie and Lauren are taken off-guard by this comment and do not know how to respond, but Lola keeps talking without giving her two companions the opportunity to unravel this puzzle. If transvestitism is indeed as prolific as Lola claims it to be, then the universality of drag becomes self-evident. Although it is easy to dismiss Lola's comment as hyperbole, we as viewers owe it to her and to ourselves to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume for a moment that her statement is both intelligent and deliberate. How can it be true that we're all never more than ten feet away from a transvestite, even in the privacy of our own homes? The only way this can possibly be so is if we are all transvestites.

The *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*'s definition of a transvestite as a person who "wears the clothes of the other gender" implicitly assumes the existence of a true, natural, and original gender against which there is something to be "other" to. Judith Butler refutes this concept of an original gender in her book *Gender Trouble*, which is

now widely cited as a foundational text of queer theory. Butler argues that gender, rather than being the external manifestation of an internally encoded, immutable essence of self, is instead "manufactured through a sustained set of acts" (*Gender* xv) governed by social and cultural norms, and that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" ("Imitation" 127). In other words, dressing like a man isn't any more "original" or natural to men than dressing like a woman—the set of norms that determine what it means to "dress like a man" and what it means to "dress like a woman" are both socially constructed, rather than the inevitable product of one's "internal essence of gender" (*Gender* xv).

If the concept of an original gender is indeed a fabrication, then every gender must by extension be an "other," which means all forms of dress that are informed by gender expectations fall under the category of transvestitism. Lola's cryptic statement that we're never more than ten feet away from a transvestite is thereby fully realized and validated when we apply Butler's theory of performed gender to unmask us all as transvestites. As celebrity drag queen and pop culture icon RuPaul likes to say, "You're born naked and the rest is drag" (Koski 1). Butler herself recalls being profoundly enlightened by Esther Newton's idea that drag "is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed" ("Imitation" 127). Butler takes this concept further, arguing that drag effectively "constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation" (127). If drag exposes gender as an impersonation, then those who "do" gender are likewise exposed as impersonators, as Lola's ubiquitous transvestites that we are never more than ten feet away from.

The artifice of drag reveals the artificiality of gender, and demonstrates how the seemingly substantive divisions of identity that separate the mainstream from the subcultural, the heterosexual from the homosexual, and the masculine from the feminine are nothing more than a shared fiction of our own invention. Drag shatters the illusion of substantiality by intentionally mismatching different signals of gender, drawing attention to the malleable nature of gender itself. It is no coincidence that drag was embraced first by the gay community and that it continues to be a celebrated part of gay culture today. Due to the gay population's status as a disenfranchised minority historically perceived to represent "an inversion of normal gender development" (Kimmel 27), gay men and women have long been cognizant of the notion that there is no such thing as "normal" when it comes to gender. However, this is a concept that the heterosexual population has yet to internalize—according to Butler, one of the enduring compulsions of heterosexuality is that it "sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic" ("Imitation" 127). Drag may be a celebrated form of self-expression and entertainment in the gay community, but for straight people, it is also a means through which this longstanding compulsion can finally be challenged. The value of *Kinky Boots* lies in its deliberate exportation of the pedagogical device of

drag from the gay community to the film's heterosexual audience, using its sexually ambiguous drag queen as the cultural intermediary.

Some in the gay community may interpret this exportation of drag to be an appropriation of what rightfully belongs to gay culture, but to believe so is to fall into a dangerous trap described by Butler: the trap of using one's identity category to segregate and discriminate against others outside that group ("Imitation" 125). The oppression of minority groups exists because of the tendency of those in the majority group to fall into this destructive mode of thinking, but Butler argues that the drive to rally around a common identity to facilitate political resistance can lead those in minority groups to participate in the same kind of discrimination that they struggle to combat (125). Butler questions the value of identity definitions themselves, arguing that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (121). Although she is a lesbian, she notes that to identify herself by such a label results in "anxiety" and "discomfort" (125), and that the act of declaring her lesbianism often feels like nothing more than coming out of one closet to step into another (122).

Kinky Boots shares Butler's awareness of the dangers of attempting to police identity categories. Although the film doesn't set Lola up to be explicitly gay, it doesn't set her up to be straight either, purposely leaving viewers with just enough hints that an argument of equal merit can be advanced either way. In doing so, the movie is saying that it doesn't matter whether she's gay or straight, that what she has to teach the film's audience about gender and drag is universal. Ultimately, it isn't about keeping Lola in the closet or taking her out—*Kinky Boots* strives to eliminate the closet altogether by removing the door.

Despite critic Stephen Holden's assessment, *Kinky Boots* is neither "formulaic" nor "reassuring." The choice to not talk about sex allows the film to make a deceptively profound sexual statement, forcing viewers to cope with the ambiguity by engaging with the conceptualizations of drag, heterosexuality, and homosexuality simultaneously. This is a meaningful undertaking because we all have something valuable to learn from drag, which, as Butler writes, functions as an imitation and parody of the ways in which everybody performs gender, regardless of sexual orientation. The ultimate message of *Kinky Boots* isn't about heterosexuality or homosexuality: it's about the porous nature of identity boundaries, and how, as the real-life drag queens of Key West's famous 801 Cabaret like to say, we are all "One Human Family" (Taylor 12).

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THE KILL FACTOR

VINCENT WALDRON

"No, I didn't kill anyone."

"Yes, I went 'over there.'"

"No, I don't know if I have PTSD."

"Sorry, I don't know your brother's roommate who's an officer."

And with that she turned and walked away from the bar. I was happy to see her and the $7 drink go. Nine out of ten conversations I have had since my honorable discharge in 2012 hit this same threshold.

It seems my entire four-year enlistment in the Army can be distilled down to these sorts of remarks. I fondly refer to this exchange as "The Kill Factor." Unless I am speaking about deployment, death, or basic training, most people lose interest once they find out I don't know their other military friend. The difficulty of reintegration is something veterans deal with once their contract is up because it's almost impossible to apply "military life" to what is referred to as the "civilian world."

Even the terminology is incompatible.

These misunderstandings occur in more realms than just the New York City nightlife. The same awkwardness I encounter while enjoying a beer, I have found waiting for me in uncomfortable silences at job interviews. It seems employers are as much at a loss to find common ground as everyone else. I spent over a month working with professional resumé writers just to translate my military experiences into a language that a civilian employer could understand. One year later, I still don't know what a second interview looks like.

As of May 2013, there are more than twenty-one million veterans in the American population and with 100,000 soldiers set to phase out of Afghanistan—34,000 of them in the next year alone—Americans are going to see a huge rise in awkward conversations at local pubs, not to mention high rates of unemployed vets.

As a medic in the Army, I worked for three years in a primary-care medical clinic followed by one very intense year in Afghanistan. That year, when I wasn't out on mission, I was running an aid station near the Pakistan border and was personally responsible for the lives and health of 120 men. After nine months I was transferred to a field hospital emergency room where I assisted doctors, surgeons, and specialists

treating soldiers with traumatic injuries. Despite this on-the-job training, the only certification I carry to a job interview is an EMT-Basic card. In the civilian world, my scope of practice is limited to administering oxygen to patients and documenting their complaints.

Not to say that oxygen isn't important, but it's a half-step from insulting to suggest that my experiences amount just to that.

While volunteering on my campus ambulance corps, I ran into the same problems. Once my peer volunteers got over "The Kill Factor," my past military experiences were irrelevant. As a new volunteer, my responsibilities were limited to stocking the ambulance and taking patients' vital signs. After handling mass casualty situations on my own and being responsible for the lives of many, this was a half-step past insulting.

Thankfully, the government has incredible programs to help veterans get an education. The Post-*9/11* G.I. Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program are nothing short of legislative miracles that are incredibly effective for integrating veterans into civilian educational and professional life. However, there is no legislation that can bridge the social disconnect between those who no longer identify with the military and a civilian society that learned how to typecast from *The Hurt Locker*.

The "broken soldier" image casts a shadow over veterans that will always keep us from returning to our normal lives. Without a doubt, there are plenty of men and women exiting the military who deal with PTSD and innumerable other military-induced issues and impairments. I purposely avoid using the word "disability" here because stereotypes of victimization must be avoided. These wounded warriors do not deserve to be ostracized by the consequences of their service.

Indeed, none of us do.

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