

**“Reeled in [...] and Warmly Socketed”:  
Mass Mediated Identity of the Contemporary Literary Figure**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama  
May 14, 2010

Keywords: literature, media, identity, twentieth century

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## Abstract

In the literature of a globalized twenty and twenty-first century world, mass media help to shape characters' perceptions of selfhood and agency. As media forms are incorporated into the daily lives of characters, important messages concerning identity formation result. This dissertation reflects upon both the emphatic and more subtle character interactions with mass media to uncover the shifting terrain of the past fifty years. Characters rely on books, periodicals, film, television and the internet to respond to an increasing sense of alienation and dislocation triggered by the accelerated cultural change and cultural mobility of the age. Mass media is an important tool for such characters as they search towards self-fulfillment, self-awareness and a sense of shared experience. This tool assuages their growing anxiety over the complex realities they face and, often, induces a sense of nostalgia for a romantic lost era. This dissertation highlights an ambivalence concerning the role of mass media in the lives represented and shows that viewers and users must navigate their media use carefully and understand and acknowledge the risks and potential of cultural influences.

## Acknowledgments

The author extends special thanks to Doctors Miriam Marty Clark, Marc Silverstein and Jonathan Bolton for their guidance and insight during her graduate career at Auburn. She also thanks her husband, Steven Shafor, for braving the dissertation process by her side. As always, she is grateful to her parents, Thomas and Charlene Shoop, for their support, encouragement and ceaseless confidence

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## INTRODUCTION

“This is the language of waves and radiation.”

-Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

At the start of the twenty-first century, the global impact of mass media is inarguable. In 2007, a Venezuelan uprising responded not to the economic decisions of the Chavez presidency, but to the government’s abrupt denial of access to a television station. The following year, U.S. Army Intelligence cited the popular social networking tool Twitter as a powerful means of conveying real time information to a mass audience of subscribers in the report “Potential for Terrorist Use of Twitter.” In the same year’s presidential campaign, Web-based media became a formidable means of spreading political messages and gaining votes for future president Barack Obama. It is within the context of such a hyper-mediated culture that this dissertation is situated as I aim to question the influence of mass media in contemporary world literature.

The influences of mass media upon contemporary life have been the topic of a wealth of critical and theoretical work throughout the past and present centuries. Such work in media studies provides an important foundation for the close reading of the literary examples in the following chapters.

Walter Benjamin’s 1936 “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is a valuable starting point for such an understanding. In this essay, Benjamin outlines a theory of art that points to the “revolutionary demands in the politics of art” of the

twentieth century. He explains the consequences of the mechanical reproduction of art – a practice involving technical methods of reproduction such as woodcuts and printing rather instead of original creation. Because such reproduction “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” “it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” This results in the “shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind” as art ceases to possess “the authenticity” of the “original.” The subsequent “decay of aura” results in the “quality of presence [being] depreciated” as the function of art moves from “ritual” to the practice of “politics.” He uses the divide between painting and film as an example of the effect mechanically reproduced art has on spectators. “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film [...] extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.” While a painting elicits “contemplation” from a spectator, film elicits “distraction.” The spectator cannot “abandon himself to his associations” because “no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.” He writes, “A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.” Ultimately, Benjamin ties these changes in the function of art to Fascism, which, he claims, is the “result” of “the introduction of aesthetics into political life.”

Mid-century work in media studies continued to understand mass media with a particularly wary eye. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton explain that mass media

commonly “confer status,” “enhance[s...] authority,” and “enforce[s] social norms” (20; 21). They explain that because of the “great business” of mass media, the influence “contribute[s] to the maintenance of the [social and economic] system”(23). They warn about the effects of this influence though, explaining that “by leading toward conformism and by providing little basis for a critical appraisal of society, the commercially sponsored mass media indirectly but effectively restrain the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook” (24).

The understanding of mass media as a cultural commodity is stressed by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” They assign mass culture the label of “culture industry” to explain the economic aspects of production, arguing that the culture industry is “ideological and debased” as it “stunt[s...]” “consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity” (4). Consequently, and as earlier theorists also suggest, “sustained thought is out of the question” for consumers who exhibit “no independent thinking [...] because the product prescribes every reaction” (4; 10) Adorno explains that “The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which [...] enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 37; 36). Instead, “Conformity has replaced consciousness” (37).

Raymond Williams acknowledges that “we are used to descriptions of our whole common life in political and economic terms” and cites advertising as the “official art of modern capitalist society” (“Mass Communication’ ” 44; *Problems*). However, he argues

it is essential to understand that “men and societies are not confined to relationship of power, property, and production,” but rather, “their relations in describing, learning, persuading, and exchanging experiences are seen as equally fundamental” (“Mass Communication’ ” 44-5). Advertising, he shows, succeeds when “consumption of individual goods leaves that whole area of human need unsatisfied” when “the attempt is made, by magic, to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference” (707). This magic, however, is “always an unsuccessful attempt to provide meanings and values” because

If the meanings and values generally operative in the society give no answers, no means of negotiating problems of death, loneliness, frustration, the need for identity and respect, then the magical system must come, mixing its charms and expedients with reality in easily available forms, and binding the weakness to the condition which has created it. Advertising is then no longer merely a way of selling goods, it is a true part of the culture of a confused society. (709)

More contemporary theorists of media studies continue to understand the role of mass media in new and nuanced ways. John Fiske also understands “television as a cultural commodity” encoded by the “dominant ideology” (“*Moments*” 539; *Television Culture* 1). He, however, emphasizes the “intertextuality” and “polysemy” of the medium – the potential for the audience to become a “producer of meanings and pleasures” during the “semiotic experience” of the “processes of viewing” (“*Moments*” 537; 539; 538). Television, he explains, “is not quite a do-it-yourself meaning kit but neither is it a box of ready-made meanings for sale. Although it works within cultural determinations, it also



offers freedoms and the power to evade, modify, or challenge these limitations and controls” (539). There is “power” inherent in this “cultural economy” (541; 539).

In *Media Culture* (1995), Douglas Kellner cites contemporary media culture as providing “the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary technocapitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global culture” (1). He explains the products of this “commercial culture” as “commodities” (1). “Learning how to read, criticize, and resist media manipulation,” he stresses will “enhance individual sovereignty,” “power over [...] cultural environment,” and “literacy to produce new forms of culture” (2). Kellner warns, however, that this “diversity of choice, more possibility of autonomy over culture, and more openings for the interventions of alternative culture and ideas,” comes “provide new forms of surveillance and control,” “powerful forms of social control,” and “a dominant force of socialization” (16; 17). With this in mind, he advises “reading media culture in a socio-political and economic context” which involves “situating it in its historical conjuncture and analyzing how its generic codes, its positioning of viewers, its dominant images, its discourses, and its formal-aesthetic elements all embody certain political and ideological positions and have political effects” (56). It is through “cultivation of methods to promote critical media literacy” and “use of media” for “self-expression and social activism” that Kellner foresees the potential in mass media interaction (336).

In *Information Please* (2006), Mark Poster looks to the internet as a precursor to globalization. He cites advances in information technology as allowing “more persons in more parts of the world [to] consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.” Mass media “present a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives” (34). At the

same time, “the media unconscious estranges the human from itself, introducing a symbiosis of human and machine that destabilizes the figures of the subject and the object” so “assurances about identity [...] are must less certain” (36; 42).

The mass mediated contemporary world has also been emphasized in a variety of literary responses to such cultural changes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such works of fiction often foreground advances in the technology of communication and highlight the overt intrusion or influence of media forms into both the public and private realms. In turn, much contemporary critical work looks to fiction that very *consciously* acknowledges the prominent presence of mass media in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* John Johnston cites a “new state of information multiplicity” as “the informing principles of and central interest in a series of American novels published btw 1973 and 1991” (3). He goes on to analyze DeLillo and Pynchon among other authors well-known for the attention they devote to media in their writing. Likewise, Mark Conroy’s *Muse in the Machine* considers literary representations of mass culture in texts such as *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *White Noise* and *Lolita* – all novels that position popular culture at their centers.

There is, however, very little critical work concerning more subtle and nuanced references to media influence in literature. There is a gap between the discernible flash of media in some fictional worlds and other representations of contemporary life where

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<sup>1</sup> More examples of critical texts that consider overt instances of media in literature include Peter Freese and Charles B. Harris’ *The Holodeck in the Garden: Science and Technology in Contemporary American Fiction* (2004), John Johnston and Friedrich A. Kittler’s *Literature, Media and Information Systems* (1997), and Philip E. Simmons’ *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture & History in Postmodern American Fiction* (1997).

media forms are incorporated into story lines in far more subtle ways. Such inclusion, however muted it might be, is still significant because these references to the day-to-day incorporation of media into contemporary life hold important messages concerning identity formation in the literary representations of a mass-mediated world. Thus I have geared my study primarily towards texts that incorporate media only subtly. I do, however, draw in two examples of novels that more overtly deal with mass media, *The Moviegoer* and *Pattern Recognition*, in the opening and closing chapters in order to highlight the broad spectrum of emphatic instances of and more subtle interactions with mass media that are represented in contemporary world literature.

The texts I draw upon span a half-century and are composed by a range of American, British, ethnic-American and ethnic-British authors. Of particular importance, is the thematic structure that guided my choices. It seemed a logical progression to begin my study in the 1960s – an era closely following the advent of commercial radio stations and major motion pictures when television became commonly integrated into American homes. Thus, the influx of “mass” media into everyday American life seems a fertile ground from which to begin the investigation of media’s influence upon identity. The close of the dissertation then responds to this first chapter through consideration of texts emblematic of the new millennium and the most contemporary of media forms: the internet and reality television. The intermediate chapters straddle the line between the twenty and twenty-first centuries and deal with topics of timely importance in this mediated and globalized age: the influence of mass media on young people and on immigrants.

In the first chapter, I consider how mass media affect individual character's identity formation in the mid-century American novels *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan Connell and *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy. Various media forms (print, film and television) appear throughout both novels, and these influences are integral to character development. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* relies upon media forms to define social convention – a representation of mass media consumers from this era is typical. *The Moviegoer*'s Binx Bolling claims that film “certifies” life and is affected by “malaise” when life fails to live up to the movies. In both cases, in response to this mediation, characters romanticize the past rather than work towards an understanding of the present. They are consequently left unfulfilled until they begin to live in the moment. Percy's non-fiction essays, offering pessimistic characterizations of the mid to late twentieth century subject, coupled with Fredric Jameson's understanding of the “racial break” of the postmodern era cited in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* lay the groundwork for this chapter.

While the first chapter considers identity formation of adult characters, the second chapter alters the scope to consider the coming-of-age experiences of young characters from immigrant families. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* both highlight the influence of contemporary culture upon the passage to adulthood, yet they also exhibit an important shift in the relationship between identity and culture in the twenty-first century. Books, television and music are obvious influences on the protagonist of Lahiri's novel, Gogol, as he faces generational and cultural conflicts in his struggle for identity. Diaz's character Oscar, however, experiences the more fundamental pull of popular culture as he actually defines himself

in relation to culture. As Oscar consistently tries to escape his pain by redirecting his attentions toward fictional worlds, he faces great instability, highlighting the more pervasive effects of media saturation.

The third chapter returns to the theme of migrancy, positing mass media as a visible marker in stories concerning the assimilation process of immigrant characters. This chapter integrates acculturation psychology as the foundation to explain how media forms act as important tools for characters who aim to transcend cultural boundaries. Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* details two instances. In "Seven," the female protagonist moves to the U.S. to reunite with her husband, only to become immediately fearful of her surroundings after listening to a threatening radio broadcast. In "The Water Child," Nadine, another Haitian immigrant to America, isolates herself from both work and social interactions via the company offered by her television. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Bengali immigrants to Britain are either isolated by their foreign surroundings, subjected to racism or fall prey to unsavory aspects of assimilation. In both novels, mass media hinder the transition between new and native environs and stifles the assimilation process for most characters. There are exceptions, however, as the rare character, Naznine, relies on a television image as she integrates reverence for her heritage, places value on her present situation and understands the potential for inclusion in the future.

The final chapter of my dissertation exposes the influx of media influence in literature of the new millennium by focusing on two markedly contemporary works. Each takes a global approach to contemporary issues as the settings traverse continents and ultimately blur the lines of nation and culture. Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, a novel emphasizing the nearly obsessive appeal of reality television and consumer goods,

and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, a thriller focusing on consumerism in an internet-mediated world, illustrate the powerful hold of the most contemporary media forms and the implications of their effects on the identities of those characters who succumb to their powers. This chapter illustrates the media forms that define the age of the new millennium, television and internet. These influences, in turn, define the culture represented in contemporary literature and are aptly read via the lens of cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra. The manner in which these media forms are visible in such fiction reinforce particular ways we view and understand contemporary culture. The metaphor of kudzu in both novels brings Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome from "A Thousand Plateaus" to the center of this understanding.

Through this range of texts, I hope to consider relevant questions about the relationship between contemporary literature and media as I uncover the shifting terrain of media culture presented in these works. Characters who rely on books, periodicals, film, television and the internet respond to an increasing sense of alienation and dislocation triggered by the accelerated cultural change or cultural mobility of their ages. Mass media is an important tool for such characters as they search towards self-fulfillment, self-awareness and a sense of shared experience. These influences assuage their growing anxiety over the complex realities they face and, often, induce a sense of nostalgia for a romantic lost era.

Each of the examples point to an ambivalence concerning the role of mass media in the lives represented and acknowledges the powerful effects of mass culture on consciousness cited by early media theorists. However, the texts also recognize the potential cited by more contemporary thinkers. Viewers and users are prompted to

navigate such a world carefully, and, as Binx explains, “listen” and “see,” as they rely on mass media to cope with the anxieties of the ever-changing factors of culture and mobility. Those who understand and acknowledge the risks and potential of cultural influences – who realize that mass media is never a successful escape mechanism – are the rare examples of characters who remain “warmly socketed.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### **“Overtaken by nostalgia”: Media and Malaise in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Evan Connell’s *Mrs. Bridge*<sup>2</sup>**

“I can no longer think what I want to think.  
My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.”  
- Georges Duhamel<sup>3</sup>

In his 1985 critical work *Diagnosing the Modern Malaise*, American novelist Walker Percy warns that “something is indeed wrong” with “the modern world (206). One year later, in “Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time,” he questions the passive manner in which people have accepted the “awful [...] happenings” in this “century of terror,” pointing to “fault lines in the terrain” of the twentieth century, “small clues that something strange is going on, a telltale sign here and there. [...] A sign that things have gotten very queer without anyone seeming to notice it [...] notice that people are not themselves yet feel obliged to act as if they were.”<sup>4</sup> He draws upon his professions as both a physician and a writer when he calls attention to this “pathology” afflicting contemporary American culture – a “society [that] has been overtaken by a sense of malaise rather than exuberance, by fragmentation rather than wholeness” (206). Man,

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<sup>2</sup> Percy writes of Sam Yerber that he is “overtaken by nostalgia, the characteristic mood of repetition” (*The Moviegoer* 169).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (19).

<sup>4</sup> Percy cites the words of Raymond Aaron.



Percy writes, seems “more dead than alive,” as he is barraged with “instant media, large numbers and telephotos of stacked corpses” and “falls prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one’s very self from itself, into an all-transcending ‘objective’ consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of ‘needs’ to be satisfied” (“Novel” 162; 157; “Notes” 113). In response, Percy charges the mid-twentieth-century writer with the task of “diagnostician” as his duty is “to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable” (206). The writer must begin by acknowledging the “peculiarities” of the time and then call attention to the fact that “people don’t seem to notice how awful the happenings are”(“Novel” 156).

Percy’s pessimistic characterizations of the modern world in his non-fiction writings from the Cold War era of the 1980’s reflect and reinforce the existential issues he identifies in his seminal 1961 novel, *The Moviegoer*. In each, he calls attention to aspects of life in the twentieth-century that have situated man in a state of perpetual despair. Issues of warfare (from the Nazi concentration camps to the threats of nuclear annihilated and Cold War tensions), environmental dangers (from the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island to the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal), and social threats (ranging from the effects of rampant consumerism on the American identity to the increasing reliance on media forms which broadcast these new concerns) have all had an undeniable effect on the American psyche. In *The Moviegoer* in particular, Percy responds to such contemporary threats by emphasizing the pervasive influence of American mass media in mankind’s “search” for self-fulfillment and self-awareness in an age reliant upon nostalgia for a romantic lost era (*Moviegoer* 10).

*The Moviegoer* is a provocative starting point for a study of the role that media plays in the identity formation of the individual in the mid-twentieth century American novel. Percy's vivid message regarding one man's relationship to his memory of the past and the media of the present helps to illuminate the complexities and consequences of the more subtle mediation at play in another mid-twentieth century American novel: Evan Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* – another novel which reverts to the past to tell a story of the present. Although Percy positions themes of mass media in a central role while Connell works them only faintly into the background of his work, these novels do converge on a central characterization of mediation and message regarding its effects: characters in each work turn to newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television and film as an integral means of defining the self. Such reliance, however, is shown to be both empty and misguided, and characters are left suffering from a sense of existential discomfort (akin to the “modern malaise” Percy describes) when their relationships to media are not as fulfilling as they had hoped.

In order to grasp the role of nostalgia that lies at the heart of each novel, a firmer understanding of the era in which these novels were produced is necessary. Postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson defines the late 1950's to early 1960's (the years when these novels were written and published) as an era when the “underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror,” and explains this as the moment when there was a “radical break” in the twentieth century (5; 1). He characterized this new era of postmodernism by the

‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B

Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote;' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance. (2-3)

Furthermore, he defines the period as having "a new depthlessness" where "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces," as being "dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time," as resulting in the "waning of affect," and as the "decentering of that formally centered subject" (12; 16; 15).

Most importantly, Jameson cites a "weakening of historicity" that is characteristic of the postmodern period (6). On one hand, he cites individuals in this era as "increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of [their] own current experience," instead relying on a nostalgia towards the past (21). On the other hand, this past now exists as images, aesthetic representations of a "glossy [...] '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness,'" rather than as any sort of "'real' history" (19). Thus the past is "effaced altogether," and Jameson concludes that for the contemporary subject, culture is nothing but "heaps of fragments" (18; 25).

In *The Moviegoer*, Percy's protagonist Binx Bolling reacts to the postmodern world that envelops him in very much the same way Jameson suggests, by "incorporat[ing media] into [his] very substance." Percy creates a world akin to that defined by Jameson – where individuals like Bolling rely upon "paraliterature" and turn to nostalgia to combat their inabilities to adequately deal with their "own current experience."

Bolling lost his father to World War II and was himself injured in the Korean War. He now resides in Gentilly, Louisiana, near his paternal Aunt Emily, who acts as a representative of the Southern gentry, and his Uncle Jules, who employs him as a stockbroker. Binx also remains close with his mother and her new family and particularly enjoys the company of his disabled yet theologically-driven stepbrother Lonnie. Approaching his thirtieth birthday, Binx is pressed by his aunt towards a profession in medical research and encouraged to discover a more driven path for his adult life. He, however, prefers to concentrate on having affairs with his ever-changing line of secretaries and dedicating himself to the movies by which he models and gauges the significance of his life.

Percy's first novel was published, according to Alfred Kazin in *Harpers*, without "any great expectations," yet met acclaim upon release, garnering the author the 1962 National Book Award (81; *Prescott*). Criticism of the text typically aims towards explaining the "search" conducted by Bolling. Often this is explained in terms of either the novel's Catholic roots or its existential leanings. "The church is always in the back of Walker Percy's novels" Jac Tharpe writes, and Percy is repeatedly characterized as a "Christian novelist" (*Prescott* 73). In fact, Kazin writes, the greatest shortcoming of the first draft of Percy's novel was the "rather evangelical Catholic ending" (81). In *The Moviegoer*, Bolling's search is often linked to a divine search. Terrye Newkirk likens Bolling's life journey to a "religious contemplative" who is "led to God" through "via negativa" – the notion that "God is 'not this, nor this, nor this'" (187). John Desmond likens the search to the "heart's desire for unification with God" (50).

Similarly, many critics highlight the traces of existentialism that are evident in

much of Percy's work, both fiction and non-fiction. In the *Moviegoer*, Percy relies upon Kierkegaardian concepts of "repetition" "rotation" and "the despair" or, as Percy characterizes it, malaise, as integral components of Bolling's search (Desmond 61; Taylor 134). Janet Hobbs in *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being* and Jerome Taylor in *In Search of Self* both parallel Bolling's evolution as a character to Kierkegaard's "aesthetic, ethical, and religious" stages of life (Hobbs 37). Martin Luschei agrees that "in making (his leap of faith) [Binx] vaults over the ethical stage altogether and lands in a definite posture in the religious" (106). Preston Browning relates the import of community in the novel to an understanding of Gabriel Marcel's existential philosophy, where there is "no such thing as selfhood apart from relationship and interpersonal communion" (279). Mary Deems Howland also explains Bolling's search as a need for community realized by the novel's epilogue where she claims Bolling has "abandoned his role-playing, that he has become available to his family, and that he is now a full participant in life" (42). Desmond concurs, suggesting that relations to community are a precursor to relations with God (42). Tony Tanner, in "*The Moviegoer* and American Fiction: Wonder and Alienation," characterizes Binx's quest as the "desire [...] to preserve a sense of wonder" and his malaise as the "dread" at "being 'cut loose metaphysically speaking'" (3).

Much other criticism of *The Moviegoer* forefronts cultural aspects, such as the agrarian past of Percy's Southern setting, anxieties over nuclear war and new technology of the era, and the growing presence of mass consumer culture. In "'The Most Ordinary Life Imaginable': Cold War culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*," Virginia Nickles Osbourne characterizes Binx's alienation as a sign of the seminal historical moment

where the South “shifts away from its traditional value system” and “cold war anxiety” overtakes the American psyche. Philip E Simmons writes in “Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination” that Binx must negotiate the “tension” between mass culture as “the cutting edge of progress and the decline of civilization” (2; 1). *Atlantic* essayist Richard Todd explains Percy as concerned with “‘the search for whatever it is that can banish despair’ in this era when science and technology alleviate physical suffering but offer no solutions to spiritual crises” (“Walker Percy”). Howland and Lewis Lawson emphasize the objectivist leanings of Percy’s work as they draw on Percy’s own medical background to call attention to the divide between scientific inquiry and romantic idealism expressed by Bolling’s searches (“Moviegoing”).

While movies are obviously a large thematic aspect of *The Moviegoer*, there is strikingly little critical work that acknowledges the truly central role of film in the novel. Percy himself, an avid commentator on his own work, has had little to say regarding the presence of movies in the novel.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, I would like to redirect my reading of the novel to fill in the gaps left by critiques of *The Moviegoer* that ignore the explicit role of not only film, but magazines, television and radio in the novel. Critics most certainly write about the role of consumer culture; however, I see an absence of critical work dealing with a particular aspect of consumer culture that is so central to the text:

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<sup>5</sup> While Percy rarely makes explicit mention of his use of film in this novel, he does offer commentary of an important, yet more general nature. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy touches on the significance of reflection (in film, on television, etc.) as he suggests the contemporary need for an “individual [to] see himself in his reflection to really understand who he is” (107). In “The Man on the Train,” Percy argues that true alienation is only felt by an individual who finds his alienation “unspeakable.” Once this individual sees alienation in another (in this case, a character in a book), he is able to “rejoice in the speakability of his alienation” and form an “alliance” with the character and author of the book (83).

mass media.

The reader is introduced to Binx as a character driven by an insightful understanding of consumer culture. Not only is he, as the title suggests, a moviegoer, but he is steeped in the influence of multiple modes of media. Each night, he goes “to bed warm and dry in the storm [...] from TV to radio for one little nightcap of a program”: *This I Believe*. Jerome Bourdon, in “Some Sense of Time,” explains the “ontological security” that a “recurring [television] viewing situation provides” (19). Likewise, Binx is drawn to the “cute and heart-warming” articles in the *Reader’s Digest* magazines lent to him by his landlady. These articles verify Binx’s hunch that “people are much the same world over” (77). The social role of the good citizen directs him to follow a certain set of guidelines with fervor. One watches a certain lineup of television shows, buys specific types of consumer products and behaves in a particular fashion. Binx blithely acknowledges his participation in such existence, explaining that

I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one’s name on it certifying, so to speak, one’s right to exist. I subscribe to consumer reports and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant...I pay attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving-though, as I say, I usually prefer to ride the bus.

(6)

He has decoded the lifestyle he observes his fellow man living: an existence that entails “giving up [...] grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings; selling stocks and bonds and mutual funds; quitting work at five o’clock like everyone else; having a girl and perhaps one day settling down and raising a flock of Marcias and Sandras and Lindas of my own” (9). In *Sovereign Wayfarer*, Martin Luschei explains these platitudes as Binx’s response to the condition of “dispossession” in the modern world, where “a man’s right to exist has to be certified institutionally, by identity cards or receipts for money spent” (75).

Nonetheless, Binx’s dedication is accompanied by a heightened awareness of the alienating effects inherent in such a mass consumer culture. Binx criticizes the lifestyle because, as he observes, “Everyone is dead” (99). The world is “upside down,” and “all the friendly and likable people seem dead to me; only the haters seem alive.” He explains this death as the “malaise” – “the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it” (120). His immersion in this lifestyle then, Mary Thale aptly argues in “The Moviegoer of the 1950’s,” is through a sense of irony (89).<sup>6</sup> She explains the “irony of his being ironical” is the factor that separates Binx from this life; he “escapes the everydayness by plunging into it [...] partly as a way of reminding himself that what he wants is the reverse” (85). Likewise, Lewis Lawson suggests that Binx is “hiding behind [the] parody” of the “model consumer and believer in culture” and “has been secluding himself behind his disguises” (“From Tolstoy” 416). Binx’s masquerade is an effort of avoidance.

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<sup>6</sup> Howland also suggests that Bolling acts as a “poseur” – “one who assumes roles in order to engage another person but who never approaches the ‘other’ as a presence” (416; 28).



Percy characterizes the specific day-to-day factors that he views as threats to the present and future states of mankind.<sup>7</sup> He illustrates the belief that, as Thale explains, the “evil of the times is not recognized [...] to] the healthy, creative, enthusiastic citizen of the Eisenhower era, [who uses] his money and leisure to express his individuality [...] everyone sees himself as a unique person but acts just like everyone else [...] it is a world where most people are types” (85). These “types,” Binx believes, have been reduced to a state of conformity where the typical existence is that of an “Anyone” (69). This “Anyone” does not exist as an authentic individual, but instead as an indistinguishable member of the masses and is so “sunk in the everydayness of his own life” that “the world is lost” (13; 120). Binx explains that “everydayness is the enemy,” and there is a “danger” to “becoming no one nowhere” – “of slipping clean out of space and time [...] to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville” (145; 82; 75).

Binx’s observation that the typical “Anyone” is subjected to living “Anywhere” suggests place has become as indistinguishable as the masses have (69). The rise of consumer culture produced an increasingly homogenized landscape as chain businesses grew, and towns found any sense of their essence lost with growth and the consequent suburbanization. This is a charge laid by critics who read the changed backdrop of the

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<sup>7</sup> In this aim, Percy relies on the language of Kierkegaard’s existentialism, that which he later bases the course of Binx’s search.

South's modern social and industrial makeup represented in the novel as factors symbolic of Binx's despair.<sup>8</sup>

I understand the despair-inducing effects of consumer culture as presenting a more far-reaching existential threat that marks contemporary American culture as a whole, rather than simply Southern alienation. Binx remembers the day in his youth when his father took him to the "Century of Progress" World's Fair in Chicago.<sup>9</sup> He recollects only one thing from that visit, that "the sense of the place, the savor of the genie-soul of the place which every place has or else is not a place" (202). This "genie-soul" is much like the "aura" Walter Benjamin describes in his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin argues that in an age when art is infinitely reproducible, there is a threat to the presence of the original work. Reproductions of art "lack[...] presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (3). The experience at the World's Fair illustrates to Binx the quintessential notion of aura – in this case, the aura of place. All other experience is measured by this standard. To Binx, the progress of the imminent future threatens the

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<sup>8</sup> Kazin characterizes Binx as "another southerner orphaned by modern history" (84). Also see Osbourne, Simmons and Hobbs for criticism regarding the significance of history to the text.

<sup>9</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Chicago* explains the economic and cultural factors leading to this World's Fair; the "Exposition was conceived in an atmosphere of economic, political, and social crisis, shaped this time by the economic recession that followed America's victory in World War I, [and] the ensuing Red Scare." The goal was that the fair "would build confidence in the fundamental soundness of the American economy and political system." An Exposition dedicated to the promise of progress, the fair emphasized that "Americans needed to spend money and modernize everything from their houses to their cars." The "unofficial motto" of the fair was "Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms." This notion of conformity as a response to science is at the heart of Binx's anxieties in the novel.

loss of such a “genie-soul” because American modernization, as prompted by this World’s Fair, promoted a hegemonic consumer culture. He now wishes that, like the Exposition which focused on the promise of the future, “every place of arrival” could emphasize its genie-soul by having “a booth set up and manned by an ordinary person whose task it is to greet strangers and give them a little trophy of local spacetime stuff- tell them of his difficulties in high school and put a pinch of soil in their pockets – in order to ensure that the stranger should not become an Anyone” (201). This would assuage the anxiety concerning what the future will bring by assuring the individual that, even in the days to come, he will maintain his individual presence.

In Binx’s understanding, the greatest threat to existence is on a personal level, when the unique intricacies of being an individual diminish; in a culture of mass images and mass consumerism, the greatest challenge is to the individual. Mary Howland acknowledges this threat when she claims Binx’s aim is to move from an “inauthentic way of living to an authentic one” (25). For John Desmond, “the terror” of the contemporary subject “lies” in the danger of ‘falling prey’” to the “‘abyss’ of inauthenticity that surrounds” (41; 60).

Such musings lamenting the loss of individual and place, along with anxiety about the future, hint at a sense of nostalgia for an era when authenticity reigned. Percy articulates this by illustrating a divide between the contemporary world and that of a past era. He uses Aunt Emily as a representation of an idealized, yet lost generation. Harold Bloom characterizes Emily as the “book’s moralizer,” a description reiterated in Desmond’s portrayal of Binx’s aunt as emblematic of the “stoic” virtues of “honor, nobility, decency, and a fateful acceptance of the inevitable doom of a present civilization

whose ‘moral fiber’ is rotten” (3; 75).<sup>10</sup> While Aunt Emily has a romantic notion concerning the coming-of-age process, pressing her nephew to fulfill the male need for “Wanderjahr” before “settling down” to a life as a medical researcher, Binx, however, would rather “shoot [himself] on the spot” before following his aunt’s advice and views her ideals as prosaic (55). Aunt Emily acknowledges this contrast between past and present generations, admitting “I no longer pretend to understand the world. [...] The world I knew has come crashing down around my ears. The things we hold dear are reviled and spat upon. [...] It’s an interesting age you will live in – though I can’t say I’m sorry to miss it” (54). In a moment of clarity, she draws an ominous metaphor comparing her generation to a setting sun that has left the world in darkness: “[...] it should be quite a sight, the going under of the evening land. That’s us all right. And I can tell you, my young friend, it is evening. It is very late” (54).<sup>11</sup> Characterizing the contemporary world as “evening” and warning that it is “late” implies a certain fear of the state of humanity. At the same time, Aunt Emily insinuates that her nostalgia is for a brighter yesteryear, one in which Binx certainly does not belong.<sup>12</sup>

Aunt Emily, however, is not the only character who reminisces about an earlier, lost era. Binx was raised amidst memories of his father, a man who combated the malaise of being an Anyone to such a degree that he began to starve himself because he felt that “eating was not important enough” (153). World War II, however, gave his life

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<sup>10</sup> Aunt Emily is also characterized as “stoic” by Luschei and Web (67; 10).

<sup>11</sup> The light imagery Percy uses brings to mind Lewis Lawson’s reading of *The Moviegoer* in terms of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* in “Walker Percy’s *Moviegoer*: The Cinema as Cave.”

<sup>12</sup> To some critics, this brighter yesteryear Emily yearns for is instead a call for a return to the doctrines of Catholicism, morality and values of which she represents.

meaning, as he “carr[ied] off the grandest coup of all: to die. To win the big prize for them and for himself (but not even he dreamed he would succeed not only in dying but in dying in Crete in the wine dark sea)” (157).

Binx longed for a life reminiscent of his father and aimed to follow the legendary footsteps of a man characterized by Web and Howland as the quintessential romantic (10; 30). Although Binx was not killed in the combat of the war of *his* era, the Korean War, he was indeed injured with a shot to the shoulder. Binx read his self-proclaimed “decent wound” as a symbol, a sign of the legitimacy of his existence that connected him both to his father and to a romantic ideal of the past.

Cousin Kate explains, “the war [...] gave [Binx his] life” (58). This penultimate moment of existence, however, is also the marker by which the rest of Binx’s life is measured. He looks to the past as an unattainable measure of what it was to exist as a Someone, and his present rarely comes close to his memory of the high point of the war. Nostalgia for this lost moment of life, a moment when Binx felt that he might leave a legacy similar to that of his father, is the force that drives his philosophy on life and actions throughout the novel. In fact, the malaise that Binx experiences is, in essence, an emotion triggered by his inability to effectively re-create the past. He reminisces that “only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch (145). Yet now he experiences “malaise,” “the pain of loss,” and in effect, the past *is* lost to him. Instead, each day he “awake[s] in the grip of everydayness.” “Everydayness is the enemy” because “no search is possible.”

From the start of the novel, Binx’s preoccupation with this notion of a “search” guides his perspective. Two types of searches exist. At first, he was on what he calls a

“vertical search” (69). This is a search to “understand” the “universe” (69). It rests upon the belief that such understanding is gained via book-learned knowledge rather than personal experience. Critics, such as Howland, commonly liken this search to the scientific method or an “objective-empirical approach” to experience (30). Desmond and Tanner, however, are critical and fault Binx’s vertical search for “ignor[ing] divine agency” and relying on the “cold myopia of the scientific, analytic eye” (Desmond 30; 49; Tanner 14). I understand the failure of this search in that Binx ultimately realizes that “the main goals of [his] search were reached or were in principle reachable,” and while “the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over.” Binx was successful in his search towards uncovering the meaning behind his surroundings, but was sacrificing a greater understanding of his selfhood in the process.

With this in mind, Binx adjusts his search. Rather than moving up towards some attainable goal of objective truth, he aims to come to a greater understanding of self through a “horizontal search” for existential truth (69). In this goal, he takes to the streets on a quest for authentic experiences and polishes his attunement to the art of moviegoing.

Critics of the novel vary on their interpretations of the presence of film in the story. Some diminish the significance of Binx’s moviegoing, suggesting that movies are a “depthless” means to “entertain” or “only a pleasant diversion” (Osbourne 110; Simmons 11). Others minimize the potential of moviegoing as simply a “band-aid” because “alienation endures” in the end (Lawson, “The Dream” 35). Moviegoing only succeeds in “temporarily suspend[ing]” “‘real’ life” in an age fraught with anxiety and “alienation” (Howland; Desmond; Tanner 12).

Few critics acknowledge the more powerful effects of moviegoing. Of those who

do, several describe movies as the “ultimate reality” in which the “pure possibility of being and actuality seem to meet” to “bring[...] to life the dead spaces” (Thale 35; Desmond 44; Simmons 10). I concur that moviegoing is a very significant act where, in response to his longing for the past, Binx justifies and gains a fuller, deeper understanding of his own existence.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, however, Binx values the authenticity of the screen more so than that of his own life. He actually emulates the men of the movies by romanticizing an injury he has incurred as “as decent as any [wound] ever inflicted on Rory Calhoun or Tony Curtis” and comparing the potential effects of being injured in the line of duty to the achievements of Movieland’s greats: “O tony. O Rory. You never had it so good with direction. Nor even you Bill Holden, my noble Will. O ye morning stars together. Farewell forever, malaise, farewell and good luck, green ford and old Ohioan” (126). Binx is particularly susceptible to the draw of film for, as Benjamin cites, film is a “most powerful agent” because it relies on “transitoriness and reproducibility” rather than “[u]niqueness and permanence”(4). Movies are outlets that allow Binx to experience the world without risking the anxiety-inducing investment in the here and now.

Watching films promises several benefits for Binx. To begin with, movies offer Binx a means by which to “certify” his own existence in a world from which he feels alienated, one missing the essential genie-soul. Binx explains that “nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it

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<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Simmons claims that moviegoing is accompanied by “the threat of losing one’s individuality and sinking into the “everydayness” of the repetitive massified life...enjoyment of the movies comes at the risk of disappearing into the anonymity of the mass audience” (7).

evacuates the entire neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere” (63). However, a film that highlights a locale familiar to the viewer, allots that locale an entirely new dimension. It becomes more real to the inhabitant/viewer because it was verified by its fictional representation. Cecilia Tichi explains in *Electronic Hearth* that “to be transposed onto television is to be elevated out of the banal realm of the off-screen [the Everyday] and repositioned in the privileged on-screen world;” “self, place, objects and experience come to be ratified by television” (140). The individual then attains an existence parallel to the actors in the film in that they are linked by their ties to a common place. For once, the individual belongs; moviegoing diminishes alienation.

Specifically, Binx illustrates an example of Richard Widmark’s film *Panic in the Streets*, a film set in New Orleans and featuring the very neighborhood where Binx’s movie theater is located. The film, which tells the story of a Navy doctor uncovering and subsequently investigating a case of the plague, not only showcases Louisiana, but also dramatizes life there. Certification, viewing a film and subsequently justifying the existence of place, acts as a combative weapon against malaise – especially when the film adds a fascinating twist to reality.

While certification is a method of coming to terms with place, Binx better understand his own life experience through what he calls “repetition.” Binx explains a repetition as “[T]he re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle” (79-80). In other words, the recreation of a past experience has the potential to erase the years and



experiences that bridged the two experiences. He uses the example of an advertisement for Nivea Cream to illustrate his point. Twenty years after first viewing the ad, he sees it again in a magazine, and

The events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized, the thirty million deaths, the countless torturings, uprootings and wanderings to and fro. Nothing of consequence could have happened because Nivea Cream was exactly as it was before. There remained only time itself [...]. There was this also: a secret sense of wonder about the enduring, about all the nights, the rainy summer nights at twelve and one and two o'clock when the seats endured alone in the empty theatre. The enduring is something that must be accounted for. (79-80)

At another point, Binx reminisces about the “season and smell” brought to mind by viewing the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This desire to emphasize the “enduring” nature of experience again highlights Binx’s idealization of nostalgia. Although time might pass, attention to repetition allows for there always to be a connection between the present and the idealized past where “nothing had changed.”

Another effect of moviegoing Binx characterizes is the “rotation” (144). He defines this effect as “the experience of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (79). For instance, he explains, if a person were going to a Taxco for the first time, this would simply be an ordinary experience. However, if he “g[ot] lost on the way and discover[ed] a hidden valley,” the experience would certainly be a rotation. With this in mind, Binx aims to make the most mundane life experiences into rotations that promise a life-renewing significance. A boring car ride to meet with a

client is turned into such a moment when Binx gets into an accident, and his secretary must soothe his hurt arm (while first noting his shoulder wound from the war). Likewise, an average day spent walking through his neighborhood is altered completely when actor William Holden is spotted, and the young man who interacts with Holden “w[ins] the title to his own existence” (16). Bourdon terms this type of encounter a “close-encounter memory,” where “the world on the screen [...] and the world off the screen [...] interact [...] and] viewers experience an important symbolic change, not unlike that of a pilgrimage” (14)

Beyond Binx’s reliance on going to the movies is his simple desire to emulate the actors he idealizes. He admires their ability to fill the smallest, least significant moments of life with meaning. Whenever he desires a posture of substance, he draws on the nuanced delivery of these characters. For instance, in an effort to woo his secretary, Sharon, he claims to “keep a Gregory Peckish sort of distance” and later attempts to remain “Gregory grim and no fooling this time” (68; 71). Later, Binx feigns frustration with Sharon when she makes an error in dictation and acts out the dramatic scene he expects the situation is worthy of. He describes the effect he attempts: “it is possible to stand at the window, loosen my collar and rub the back of my neck like Dana Andrews. And to become irritable with her [...] go to the cooler, take two aspirins, crumple the paper cup [...]” (104).

Binx also most appreciates the people around him when he is able to translate their appearance and behavior into the language of the movies. He bolsters Sharon’s appeal by comparing her to “the secretary in the Prell commercial” and claims that she looks “like a snapshot of Ava Gardner” (70; 93). He understands the world around him

and the people in it via the lens of the world of the movies. For instance, the realization that a man on a train “looks [...] like the actor Gary Merrill and has the same certified permission to occupy a pleasant space with his pleasant self” is exceedingly reassuring to Binx (104; 188).<sup>14</sup> In each of these examples mass media has been a central component of Binx’s understanding of reality. Tichi explains such a phenomenon, characterizing television as the “frame of reference” “by which the non-TV world is perceived, ordered, and understood” (37).<sup>15</sup> “We experience events in its terms, begin to live in reference to it and ratify experience in terms of its on-screen simulation. We live through it.” “Authenticity” becomes more attainable from creating a “simulation” because the “hyperreal” is not “ordinary;” it is “the real thing, supra real” (130). She quotes Schorr, “I am seen, therefore I am” (137).

The centrality of television to the perception of self is evident in the novel beyond simply romanticizing films and emulating film stars. Binx’s own personal past – his memories – center on his experiences with movies. Rather than reminiscing about moments *he* has lived, as others who “treasure memorable moments in their lives,” Binx’s “memorable moments” are all cinematic.<sup>16</sup> “What [he] remember[s] is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine” and when “the kitten found Orson Welles in

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<sup>14</sup> This is especially evident in light of the “fitful twilight [...] where waking dreams are dreamed and sleep never comes” that had plagued Binx while on the train until this point (188).

<sup>15</sup> Tichi’s work on television seems equally applicable to film in Binx’s case.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdon explains that “remembering television [or in this case moviegoing...] is remembering contacts with a certain world ‘out there,’ which comes to exist through the television screen, but generates a variety of interactions that cannot be reduced to simple viewing” (12-13). In other words, Binx’s recollection of film is accompanied by an appreciation of the “genie-soul” of the moment.

the doorway in *The Third Man*” (7). Repeatedly, he turns to film as evidence of his past; he not only appreciates life via the lens of the movies, but he actually begins to live vicariously through these films.<sup>17</sup> As moviegoing becomes Binx’s lifeblood, an interesting phenomenon occurs. Reality begins to follow fiction.

In the first page of the novel, Binx recalls a film that bears a strikingly significant resemblance to his own transformation by the novel’s end. The man in the film “lost his memory in an accident and as a result lost everything,” finding “himself a stranger in a strange city” (4). He then enlists the help of a librarian to aid him in “going through the newspaper files in search of some clue to his identity.” The “amnesiac” is a foil to Binx who also experienced a tragic event (the war) which forever altered his perception of reality. Binx, too, is a stranger separated from the Anyone’s around him. While the plot of the film seems “tragic,” the man eventually “found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian” (5). In other words, he succumbed to the Everyday. Although Binx fights falling prey to the same fate throughout the novel, on a “search [for] some clue” about the meaning of life, in the last pages, he does exactly that. He marries Kate and begins medical school – all as per the wishes of his Aunt.

Likewise, the only book that Binx makes a claim of owning, the one book title that surfaces repeatedly throughout the novel, is *Arabia Deserta*. This travel narrative

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<sup>17</sup> While Roger Silverstone explains the “sociological aspect” of “television memory” as a certain “sharedness” between viewers that reinforces a sense of “common ground” between viewers, the moviegoing in this novel seems to function differently (Bourdon 29). For Binx, mass media is a means of distancing himself from contact with other ordinary people. Moviegoing thwarts the sense of community that Silverstone links to authentic selfhood.

written by Charles Doughty details the Christian author's trek with tribal Muslim nomads through the Arab desert. Characterized for his unwavering Christian ideals and judgments of the religious beliefs of his "savage" guides, Doughty serves as another foil – one who highlights the transformation Binx makes throughout the story. While, early on, Binx remains static and dogmatic in his doctrines, like Doughty who remains resolute in his religious and moral principles, Binx ultimately learns from the life experiences he pursues and chooses to make a dramatic role reversal at the finale of the novel. This change is emblematic of a casting off of the nostalgia that has plagued Binx. Rather than privilege the message of *Arabia Deserta* (symbolic of a nostalgia for the past), Binx is opting to let his own experience of the present guide him.

The transformation Binx undergoes at the end of the novel portrays him as a subtle, yet dynamic character. Some critics suggest Binx's transformation relates to his newfound relationship to community evidenced by his marriage to Kate. Preston Browning explains the epilogue of the novel through Gabriel Marcel's philosophy that authentic selfhood hinges on communal relationships. In Marcel's words, "authenticity of the 'I' depends utterly upon its willingness to risk a radical openness to another self" (Browning 280). By linking himself to Kate, Binx has dedicated himself to the "intersubjectivity, availability, presence, fidelity" that constitutes "spiritual wholeness" (Browning 279). The importance of community, however, is closely related to Binx's preoccupation with moviegoing. Emulating movie stars and experiencing life via repetitions and rotations are simply circuitous means of avoiding the alienation of modern life. Although mass media is an existential comfort for Binx, it is also the very factor that perpetuates his estrangement. Thus, his communal transformation happens in conjunction

with a de-emphasis on moviegoing and a greater appreciation of experience.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of perpetuating the reliance upon nostalgia that has driven him throughout the novel, Binx comes to a radically new appreciation of the here and now. After dedicating himself to a search, both scientific and existential, he finally claims to “know nothing” and admits, “there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire.” His “search has been abandoned” (228). The last lines of the novel illustrate Binx giving a “shrug” and admitting “there is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along” (233). He sees value in the reciprocal bond with others rather than solely in his commitment to moviegoing. While Binx’s finale posture – the shrug – reeks of resignation and his words do seem that he has given up and given in – to his search, to his Aunt, and to the threat of being Anyone – there is a significant understanding that accompanies his new thinking. Desire is in and of the moment; Binx has traded his nostalgia for the past and anxiety over the future for a better understanding of the value inherent in living in this moment. He can now appreciate the reality that he is “not one of [his aunt’s] heroes but a very ordinary fellow.” Living as any Anyone is not the real threat to Binx. Instead, relying upon the posturing of the movies is the risk.

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<sup>18</sup> Cecilia Tichi makes a vehement claim about the novel’s message about the movies. She argues that Percy reacts “with outright repudiation” of “media-age certification,” claiming that the novel “urges its audience to get its moral bearings by rejecting the spurious media world” because Percy “scorns the privileging of media-generated illusion,” “delusion, [...] alienation – in sum, its unreality.” A “person properly claims title to life” she explains, “by differentiating the self from those enthralled to the media image” (141).

### ***Mrs. Bridge***

Evan Connell's 1959 novel *Mrs. Bridge* is a collection of vignettes that take the reader into the world of India Bridge, a Midwestern wife, mother and member of the "country club set" (205). Like *The Moviegoer*, the setting of *Mrs. Bridge* is of an earlier American era. The novel is written from Mrs. Bridge's point of view and acts as the precursor to *Mr. Bridge*, a novel from her husband's perspective, and two major motion pictures of the same titles. Critical attention towards *Mrs. Bridge* has centered upon the novel as a statement on the existential state of the midcentury American citizen. Critics cite Mrs. Bridge's story as emblematic of "the emptiness of middle America" and "World War II suburban ennui and dissatisfaction" (Samuels 21; Gilmore 68). Shawn Gilmore's "The 'Double Exposure' of History," a lengthy critical response to both novels, suggests that the novel is significant in terms of its setting: "post-World War II culture set in prewar Kansas City of the 1920's and 1930's" and the "alienation and dissipation of postwar suburban life" it highlights (67).

Connell's novel follows a character who is strikingly reminiscent of the Anyones of Percy's novel. Mrs. Bridge is defined by her attention to conformity, and "appearances were an abiding concern" of hers. She adheres to the notion that "it was the way things had always been, and so she complied" (76). Mrs. Bridge adheres rather closely to the characteristics of the "model citizen" Binx describes in *The Moviegoer*. The sense of satisfaction brought on by conformist thinking is strikingly evident by her musings on one ideal: the meeting of minds in a unanimous vote. She finds such consensus "gratifying" and "is put at ease by the very idea" of overwhelming agreement. "Every time she heard or read about a unanimous vote she felt a surge of pride and was

reminded, for some reason, of the pilgrims” (89). In an admission reminiscent of Binx Bolling’s fascination with being a “good citizen,” “she enjoyed all kinds of oaths and pledges and took them regularly” (89). In fact, she sincerely relishes the opportunity to be one of the Anyones Binx Bolling recognized because it was a position of safety, comfort and certainty.

Accompanying Mrs. Bridge’s preoccupation with conformity, though, is a sense of passivity. Mrs. Bridge is so concerned with acting in accord with those around her that she is characterized as passive to the point of ridiculousness. A particularly memorable moment in the novel occurs when the Bridges dine with the Van Metres at the country club. As per usual, the dialogue between Mrs. Bridge and Van Metre is simply an attempt by Mrs. Bridge to avoid disagreement. When discussing Van Metre’s time in Gilman, the following conversation ensues:

[Mrs. Bridge] “I don’t believe I’ve ever been there. It must be nice.”

Van Metre put the napkin to his mouth and coughed. Then he continued. “Well, India, I shouldn’t care to live there. However, Andrew and I did stop there overnight, although at this moment I am unable to recall our reasoning. It was a mistake, you may be sure of that.”

“Sounds dreadful.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was quite that bad.”

“I didn’t mean that exactly, it’s just that those little farming towns can be awfully depressing.”

“I wouldn’t call Gilman a farming town.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that it was.”



“It’s quite a little city. [...] In fact, Gilman might have quite a future.”

“Is that so? I suppose it is altogether different than I imagine.”

Mrs. Bridge goes to great lengths to be a polite conversant and keep complete accord during the conversation, even when her intermittent statements fail to display any discernable point of view. She proves herself to be the quintessential milquetoast.

Later in the novel, during another dinner at the club, a tornado siren warns the patrons to take cover. Mrs. Bridge grows increasingly alarmed as the entire restaurant clears out with guests retreating to the basement, yet her husband remains unconcerned.

Although she strongly wants to avoid danger, she does not press her husband. In fact,

it did not occur to Mrs. Bridge to leave her husband and run to the basement. She had been brought up to believe without question that when a woman married she was married for the rest of her life and was meant to remain with her husband wherever he was, and under all circumstances, unless he directed her otherwise [...] For nearly a quarter of a century she had done as he told her, and what he had said would happen had indeed come to pass [...] Why then should she not believe him now? (147)

The conformity and passivity by which Mrs. Bridge is characterized are largely facilitated by her interaction with mass media. Tichi explains “the deep involvement of television in national values including American individualism, domesticity and patriotism” (7). A central factor in her understanding of the world around her is via the local society paper, *The Tattler*, which “consisted of photographs of significant brides, of visiting celebrities feted at the homes of wealthy Kansas Citians, and pictures of subscribers, together with long lists of names of those who had either given or attended

social affairs during the month.” *The Tattler* reinforced the social positioning of Kansas Citians, and the Bridge family was, at times, honored by being pictured. With *The Tattler*, Mrs. Bridge “killed many an interminable hour. She read it, not avidly, but thoroughly” seemingly more out of a sense of duty, a need to fulfill her role of socialite, than out of any particular interest in the paper itself (205).<sup>19</sup>

The aspect of *The Tattler* that *does* draw Mrs. Bridge’s interest is the blurb of philosophical musings that grace each edition. She characterizes them as quotes by thinkers such as Emerson, Saint Francis, and Oliver Wendell Holmes – “a thought or two – preferably cheerful, affirmative at the very least.” The paper typically offered real world application for these thoughts by linking them to related situations of Kansas Citians. For instance, in one issue, one such maxim was connected to an editorial with the accusation, “I wonder if the scion of a certain well-known family doesn’t realize his many conquests are causing talk among the younger set” (205). Mrs. Bridge often “tr[ied] to memorize certain quotations, despite the fact that there never seemed to be an appropriate occasion to re-quote them”(205). Rather than allowing these quotes to prompt her toward deeper thought or understanding of the human condition, Mrs. Bridge appreciates the quotes only in relation to social mores. Any depth in thought is minimized.

Even more interesting is the line between appearance and reality in much of what Mrs. Bridge reads in *The Tattler*. For instance, although the paper publishes a picture of

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Ohman defines the areas of “daily life and contemporary American society” historically targeted by magazines. “Magazines told people how to live [...] and made itself a bulwark of middle-class values against the dangerous classes [...] on one side and decadent classes on the other” (149). Magazines also “told how society works” and “contribute[d] notably to ideological domination” (149; 151).

her riding a horse with the caption “Mrs. Walter G. Bridge [...] likes nothing better than a canter on the bridle paths,” she has not been on a horse in years because she is self-conscious of the image she portrays. Nonetheless, the paper represents her as an equestrian – a pastime that bolsters her social image. Conversely, the paper uncovers a truth unknown throughout her social circle: when tales abound of a bank robbery affecting several friends who had money and jewels stolen, the true tale is uncovered only when the paper publishes information regarding the theft. Mrs. Bridge is surprised to learn that the “money” amounted to only a few dollars, and the jewels were actually fake. *The Tattler* has quite literally tattled on people who were posturing beyond their means. At the same time the paper is able to forge a false, albeit flattering, sense of reality in its representation of Mrs. Bridge, it is also capable of exposing the untruths residing beneath the façade of polite society. *The Tattler* holds an immense power over ways that Mrs. Bridge and people like her conceive of the social world around them.

In addition to reading *The Tattler*, Mrs. Bridge turns to books in her past time; typically, she opts for either “a best-seller she had heard about or seen advertised, a self-improvement book, or a book by a Kansas city author no matter what it was about” (82). Similar to her interest in *The Tattler*, these books are read, perused or displayed by Mrs. Bridge for no reason other than to cement her ties to society. Each has been endorsed by her circle of friends and promises to inform Mrs. Bridge of any information needed to participate in polite discussion.

The sense of certainty, comfort and safety promised by conformity and passivity, however, are elusive to Mrs. Bridge. As the novel progresses, she has increasing doubts as to her position in life, her happiness and the choices she has made or is making. Some

of these thoughts stem from dissatisfaction with the lack of purpose that pervades her days. Her responsibilities as dutiful wife and mother are diminished by the fact that she leads *too* leisured a life. Mrs. Bridge finds herself “so often dismally bored” because she has a maid who carries out most of the cooking and cleaning. She laments having “too much leisure time” and is embarrassed by the extravagant gifts bought for her by her husband. Even she eventually understands that “the leisure of her life was driving her insane” (202).

Most times, these thoughts are fleeting, and she quickly transitions back to her role of wife and mother.<sup>20</sup> However, a growing sense of loss begins to pervade these thoughts. She begins to comprehend that each year of her life “had slipped away without a trace, without a sound” (65). She was “restless and unhappy and would spend hours thinking wistfully of the past, of those years just after her marriage when a day was all too brief.” Like Binx Bolling, Mrs. Bridge experiences malaise and longs for an earlier time when her life had meaning. As a younger wife and mother, she had a significant place as her family’s caregiver. Later in life, with grown daughters, an independent son, a maid, and a distanced husband, she yearns for the days when her presence carried more weight. She aches for the hope that “someone must be needing her. Yet each day proceeded like the one before. Nothing intense, nothing desperate, ever happened.” This “sense that she was waiting” was “oppressive”; although, “waiting for what [...] she did not know” (94).

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<sup>20</sup> Granville Hicks explains that she is “dimly aware” she is “insulated from life” (16).

Furthermore, thoughts of the future terrify her as they threaten to exacerbate her already tenuous situation. “The world was reeling, so it seemed, and she lost faith in tomorrow” (234). Worse yet,

She had a foreboding that one day, without warning and without pity, all the dear, important things would be destroyed. So it was that her thoughts now and then turned deviously deeper spiraling down and down in search of the final recess, of life more immutable than the life she had bequeathed in the birth of her children. (94)

The nostalgia for yesteryear that Mrs. Bridge experiences is strikingly similar to that experienced by Binx, as are her fear of the present and future. Unlike Binx, however, she makes little effort to act upon this longing. Her malaise is ephemeral; Mrs. Bridge is never able to embrace her dis-ease for long enough to understand it – or even question it. For, to ponder too long on her dissatisfaction would somehow contradict her notion of propriety. She would fail in her domestic and social roles if she dared to question them. During one particularly thoughtful moment, as Mrs. Bridge is sitting at her dressing table, applying cold cream and “thinking deeply about how to occupy tomorrow,”

She wondered who she was [...] She considered her fingers, which dipped into the jar of their own accord. Rapidly, soundlessly, she was disappearing into white, sweetly scented anonymity. Gratified by this she smiled, and perceived a few seconds later that beneath the mask she was not smiling. All the same, being committed, there was nothing to do but proceed.

She is caught precariously between her desire to conform to the status of an *Anyone* and the reality, at times unsettling, that she might have succeeded in this goal.

Although her moments of realization are fleeting, and she never acts towards agency outrightly, Mrs. Bridge does respond, albeit unconsciously, to these moments of longing by seeking out certain media forms in a manner redolent of *Binx's* moviegoing. These media forms offer the enticement of agency, just as they do for *Binx*. For example, since Mrs. Bridge had always spoken of an interest in learning Spanish, her children gave her a Spanish lesson record for her birthday. After putting off the instruction for weeks, she finally dedicates herself to completing a lesson. The record offers "Senora Brown" as a model for the student to imitate, asking the student to repeat lines of dialogue as a means of learning the language. Mrs. Bridge progresses through the first minutes of the lesson with "increasing confidence," aptly copying the emanations out of Senora Brown's mouth (39). The lesson comes to an abrupt halt, however, when Mrs. Bridge receives a phone call and is prompted to go on a social visit. She never returns to her lesson. Mrs. Bridge's step towards fulfilling a lifelong desire is thwarted by her attention to social decorum. In addition, the Spanish lesson itself makes a significant point. Instead of being a tool to help her understand and communicate in another language, the record relies simply on repetition. She happily repeats the simple phrases, yet does not retain the lesson. In the end, she has only succeeded in continuing to model behavior.

Likewise, in the hopes of expanding her vocabulary to impress her friends, Mrs. Bridge aims to put to use a vocabulary-building book she has won. The book promises that, with "only a few minutes a day," the reader's "abilities to express himself would so

noticeably improve that within two weeks friends would be commenting.” In fact, “tests had proved, so said the dust jacket, that the great majority of employers had larger vocabularies than their employees, which, the jacket hinted, was the reason for the status quo.” In other words, expanding her vocabulary was one duty of her privileged position. Besides, she notes, “everyone else in Kansas city was reading it” (73).

While she dedicates herself to the book with gusto at first and is pleased to recommend the book to friends, she is disappointed to find that her friends do not seem to notice her linguistic improvements. In fact, a friend has also used the book, yet Mrs. Bridge observes, “the book has obviously not affected her vocabulary.” Again, Mrs. Bridge loses focus on her lessons, and the book begins to “wander around the house [...] “find[ing] its way from a table in the living room to [...] a dresser drawer to [...] dying] on the shelf between T.E. Lawrence and *The Rubaiyat*” (74). Like the works with which it is placed, the vocabulary book is never again removed from the shelf.

After being chided by a friend to “have a mind of your own,” Mrs. Bridge turns to a list of books approved by certain friends as being appropriately cutting edge. She begins by reading a radical political book and is somewhat titillated by the “danger” involved in reading such an unorthodox text. The book prompts her to re-consider the political leanings she has always had, and she vows to vote liberal in the next election. For once she is filled with “conviction,” “determination” and “confidence,” and she even attempts to discuss her newfound political views with her husband. As with each of her other forays into such media, however, Mrs. Bridge ultimately “became doubtful and a little uneasy” with challenging the status quo, “and when the moment finally came [at the

voting poll] she pulled the lever recording her wish for the world to remain as it was” (88).

Mrs. Bridge has turned to various mass media forms in her attempts to think and act independently; however, these attempts are dulled by a vagueness. She lacks the fortitude to follow through with such acts of agency. In the end, she is every bit as ineffectual as she started. The last scene of the novel illustrates the lack of progress made by this character. Mrs. Bridge finds herself locked inside her car – the extravagant Cadillac bought for her by her husband – the car which she been the source of her discomfort and anxiety throughout the novel. In an effort to free herself, she “began tapping on the window and she called to anyone who might be listening, ‘Hello? Hello out there?’ but no one answered”(246).<sup>21</sup> As her means of maintaining the status quo and, consequently, her the reason she fails to attain independence, mass media has been a prominent factor of her dis-ease.

Mrs. Bridge, however, is not the only character in the novel who maintains an important relationship to media forms.<sup>22</sup> Several other characters more fully grasp the subversive potential of mass media. In fact, their use of media forms more aptly parallels Binx Bolling’s moviegoing. Grace Baron “was a puzzle” to Mrs. Bridge. Although she had a prominent place in society, “she seemed dissatisfied there.” While Mrs. Bridge typically found conversation in her “circle” to revolve around topics deemed socially

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<sup>21</sup> Conversely, William H. Nolte cites this ending as proof that life is “not quite” “unbearable” because while thinking “What was there to live for,” Mrs. Bridge grew “cheerful,” because she recalled her husband had told her to get the Lincoln waxed and polished.”

<sup>22</sup> Rather than reading to her as he did during the early years of their marriage, Mr. Bridge constantly separates himself from his wife with the barrier of the newspaper.



appropriate such as “the by-laws of certain committees, antique silver, Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, the price of margarine as compared to butter, what the hemline was expected to do,” Grace “talked of other things – art politics, astronomy, literature,” leaving Mrs. Bridge “fumbling for answers” (36). As far as Mrs. Bridge was concerned, Grace was altogether eccentric. While Mrs. Bridge bears the uncomfortable summer heat in stockings, simply because “It was the way things were, it was the way things had always been, and so she complied,” Grace has no hesitation about dressing – and acting – in a most unconventional manner: “faded blue jeans, dirty white tennis shoes, and a baseball cap” while playing football with neighborhood boys. Not only is Grace unconventional, but she finds social norms stifling and she is unafraid to challenge them. Mrs. Bridge details one cocktail party where Grace became particularly “unreasonable”(98). She was unwavering in her arguments against “ethnocentrism,” “scare headlines” of the “American press,” unprovoked violence by US against Seminole Indians, “censoring books” and “opening the mail of suspected Fascists and Communists” (99). While Mrs. Bridge’s circle find Grace shocking and inappropriate, Mrs. Bridge is fascinated by her unorthodox take on the world. Grace dares to challenge the role of media and ask the questions Mrs. Bridge never is able to: “Are we right? Do we believe the right things?” She even admits – out loud – her malaise, asking Mrs. Bridge “have you ever felt like those people in the Grimm fairy tale – the ones who were all hollowed out in the back?” (230).

Another newcomer to town, Lucienne Leacock, displays ideas that are relatively shocking to Mrs. Bridge. Mrs. Bridge is “somewhat disconcerted” by her friend’s “progressive ideas” as she witnesses Lucienne’s lax parenting; she allows her young son

to smoke and swear in her presence. Lucienne's favorite topics of conversation were "progressive education" and "politics." She is the first Socialist Mrs. Bridge has ever met, and Mrs. Bridge feels "slightly guilty" by the proximity of such radical political beliefs.

Both Grace and Lucienne are shaped by the progressive, at times even radical media forms that they come into contact with, and this influence emphasizes the difference between such women and women such as Mrs. Bridge. Grace is aware of and, at times, disheartened, by the difference between her beliefs and those of the women around her, while Lucienne seems entirely unfazed by the contrast.

Connell, however, creates a tragically telling end for both characters. Grace, unable to adapt to the sense of alienation that plagues her, commits suicide. Lucienne's lax progressive parenting rebounds when her son "having had a bellyful of psychology, or, perhaps, only feeling unusually progressive, had entered the bedroom of his parents while they were asleep and had shot them dead" (131). Thus, the two primary examples of nonconformity in the novel find that their ideals are ultimately the root of their demise.

One character in the novel, however, does rely upon media in a manner that results in both his independence and fulfillment: Mrs. Bridge's son Douglas. Mrs. Bridge is continually stunned by her son's lack of regard for social mores. "The only thing wrong with you," she complains, "is your big imagination"(78). "Do you want to be different from everyone else?" she pleads with him. While Mrs. Bridge "had been accustomed to responding immediately when anyone spoke to her," she is "dismayed" when "instead of answering, [... Douglas] paused to think" (62). While Mrs. Bridge learns from repetition and has aimed to "adroitly steer[...] around threatening subjects, Douglas seeks out information to quench his curiosities (191). She is horrified to find a

dirty magazine hidden in his room; however, he does not simply desire the titillation of such a magazine, as would most boys. More so, he is simply curious about sex and has also sought out additional non-stimulating information about reproduction.

Accompanying the magazine is a pamphlet detailing a “story about the marriage of a sperm and an ovum” (192). Similarly, although Mrs. Bridge admits that “no one” had ever read the books, marred by “brittle, yellowed pages,” on the Bridge’s bookshelf, she once found her son “examining them” (213). Douglas is an exemplar of nonconformity, yet he turns to media to satiate simple curiosities rather than to prove his autonomy. In the end, he is directed by his own creative interests (the tower he builds) rather than preoccupation with the opinions of others. To the horror of his mother, he constructs his own personal architectural feat, his own version of found art: a giant tower composed of junk. He finds fulfillment from following his inquisitive impulses without the hindrance of the comfortable community of conformity or the alienation of rebellion.

Both *The Moviegoer* and *Mrs. Bridge* illustrate the tremendous influence mass media forms have over the day-to-day lives of characters when used in the “search” for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. From their newspapers and magazines, characters aim to gain insight on politics, reinforce notions of social norms, and come into contact with information on a variety of issues. In reality, however, these characters typically gain nothing but a skewed sense of identity based on their association with the empty markers of mass media. As a result, they romanticize the past rather than work towards an understanding of the present. It is only when one eschews the romance of a lost era to “listen” and “see” his surroundings that the act of moviegoing (or media influence in general) has the potential to become an art, a “dazzling trick of grace” (235). However, as

Douglas understands early on and Binx comes to learn, it is “much too late [...] to do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself” (237). This firm grounding in the present serves as what Binx refers to earlier in the novel when he writes, “I believe in a good kick in the ass. This – I believe” (109).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Media, Migrancy and the Contemporary *Bildungsroman* in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

Contemporary coming of age stories posit cultural influences as essential components of character development, shifting from a focus on the individual to a focus on the self in relation to culture.<sup>23</sup> This shift is complicated by the acceleration of cultural change and the movement toward a global culture, which radically destabilizes the processes and the narratives of identity formation. Of interest to this chapter are two novels that emphasize the shifting terrain of the contemporary coming of age story to highlight the trend of migrancy that foregrounds and figures this instability.

The coming-of-age experiences represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are shown to be

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<sup>23</sup> The constraints of the traditional German *bildungsroman* are most commonly defined by Wilhelm Dilthey in *Das Leben Schleiermachers* as the “history of a young man ‘who enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world’” (Hardin xiv). Typically, such stories are novels of “education” or “self cultivation” (Hardin xi; Jeffers 1). In *Apprenticeships*, Thomas L. Jeffers explains that the *bildungsroman* weaves the protagonist through conflict with parents or society, an introduction to love or sex, a “vocational test” where the protagonist chooses between business and artistic endeavors while concurrently finding a connection with the community at large.” Finally, he undergoes a period of “rumination” (51). The character would “accept a responsible role in a friendly social community” (Abel 5). This reflection culminates in what Barbara White explains in *In Growing Up Female* is “not only the harmonious development of the whole personality but the reconciliation of the transformed self with political and social contradictions in society” (White 13).

compounded by issues of nationality, immigration and belonging as characters turn to popular culture as a refuge. Both Lahiri's Gogol and Diaz's Oscar were born in the United States to parents whose emigration was prompted, directly or indirectly, by the powerful pull of literature and film culture. As the children grew into young adults, they find their status as hyphenated Americans problematic. Consequently, American popular culture becomes a great source of comfort and a fundamental component of each character's shifting identity in their formative years. Comic books, movies, books and music act, for Gogol, as a bridge to connect to the world of which he wants to belong and for Oscar, as a haven to escape a world of which he does not belong. While both characters are engrossed in popular culture of the eighties and nineties, mediation results in significantly different outcomes for each character. Gogol's interest in popular culture connects him to his peers and facilitates his inclusion, effectively transitioning him into adulthood. Conversely, Oscar's devotion is central to his estrangement from friends, women and his fellow Dominicans, inhibiting his growth into adulthood.

Both stories bear the markers traditionally associated with the *bildungsroman*. Gogol and Oscar experience conflicts with love and sexual discovery, "familial relationships," and "social institutions" as they struggle with girlfriends, parents, school life and vocation (DeMarr 130). In addition, their attentions to popular culture emphasize a factor that has become essential to the contemporary coming of age story: increased attention to the cultural environment of the era. In *The Adolescent in the American Novel Since 1960*, DeMarr and Bakerman explain that young characters are written as "useful symbols of American social attitudes and practices" as they, according to Kirk Curnutt in *Teenage Wasteland*, "actively engage the conditions affecting their generation" (xii;

106).<sup>24</sup> These characters often turn to or unconsciously rely on their culture or environment as they answer the essential questions, “‘Who am I?’ and ‘How can I prove that I control my own life?’” (DeMarr 131). The divide between Gogol and Oscar’s attentions to popular culture exhibits an even further shift in this relationship between culture and identity.

### ***The Namesake***

Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake*, followed the collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which garnered her a tremendous critical reception along with the Pulitzer Prize in the 2000. Critics most often emphasize in *The Namesake* thematic issues of generational and cultural conflict, immigration and Americanization.<sup>25</sup> Natalie Friedman considers these issues in “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” as she argues that “the immigrants of an older generation were formidable because they understood the act of crossing the ocean and making a new life here; the contemporary immigrant in Lahiri’s fictional universe is different, but no less admirable, for undertaking the act of moving about in a new global economy of travelers” (124). She cites an interview with Lahiri: “I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants—those with strong

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<sup>24</sup> These characters are also older than protagonists of the traditional bildungsroman. Kenneth Millard explains that the coming-of-age experience now most often happens when a character is in his twenties (5).

<sup>25</sup> See Celayo, Block, Shariff, Munson, Oates, Song, Friedman, and Caesar for more on these themes.

ties to their country of origin – is that they feel neither one thing nor the other” (115). Just as with *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri’s writing style is also the subject of many conversations regarding the novel. In “The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” Min Hyoung Song identifies *The Namesake* as a novel “which clearly combines an intense awareness of its own form [...] with a definite ethnic marking, but does so without the experimentation – nor the angst such experimentation routinely gives expression to – that we have come to recognize as indicative of serious postwar American fiction” (346). This absence of “experimentation” and “angst” makes the novel a useful contrast for Diaz’s more experimental précis.

*The Namesake* begins as a tale of just that: a newly immigrated couple must decide what to name their firstborn child, and this decision is one that troubles the child through his lifetime. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli face their first experience as parents in America – a land far from loved ones in their native India. In an unexpectedly desperate decision to name their newborn son, the couple settles on the name Gogol in homage to Ashoke’s muse, Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The young Gogol, however, is forever plagued by his name – one that symbolizes his adolescent feelings of disbelonging as he adapts to coming-of-age as an American child of Indian parents. Each stage of his life, from childhood and pre-school to marriage and a career as an architect, are complicated by his fixation on his name.

*The Namesake* is a traditional coming-of-age story in which popular culture primarily serves as a marker of generation and generational conflict. Gogol relies on books, music and television to connect him with his peers and, at the same time, distance



him from his family. At the same time, these media are cultural markers, defining the split between Gogol's American friends and Indian parents.<sup>26</sup>

To understand Gogol's relationship to popular culture, his father's experience must be taken into account. From his youth, Ashoke is a man steeped in the power of literature. This connection prompts him to leave his family and homeland of India to emigrate to the United States. From his earliest memories, he lived vicariously through the novels of the great authors of Russia, believing that, as his grandfather taught him, the Russians would "never fail you" (12). This advice was indeed true: a book saves and forever transforms Ashoke's life. Because he was engrossed in Gogol's short story "The Overcoat" while traveling to visit his grandfather,<sup>27</sup> his life was spared during a tragic train derailment. Not only was he awake and protected during the crash, but afterwards, lying lifeless under the rubble, it was a single page of Gogol's novel – flapping in the wind – that caught the attention of a member of the rescue crew.

This experience causes a rebirth that forever alters Ashoke's life. Rather than heeding his grandfather's advice to remain in India because books allow a reader to "travel without moving an inch," Ashoke is inspired by his reading to set out on his own adventure: against the wishes of his family, he moves to America to pursue his graduate degree. Years later, as a new father in America, Ashoke again looks to the Russians when he makes the all-important decision to name his newborn son. For Ashoke, the

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<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Ashima relies on Bengali books and magazines to cope with her first lonely years in America.

<sup>27</sup> The purpose of this trip was to acquire his blind grandfather's books. Since he never arrives at his destination, he fails to acquire these books.

written word of a man from another nation in a previous century was the saving grace that prompts his transformation of independence.

In “Gogol’s Namesake; Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” Judith Caesar explains that because Ashoke’s “world is not just India and America but the Europe of the authors he reads” and “his time both the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries,” he seems to have “found the balance among the various aspects of self that enable him to live comfortably in a foreign country” (106; 108). He was “lucky,” Song explains, because his “trauma freed him from the life that he would otherwise, unthinkingly, have assumed his own,” and he was subsequently “able to choose the course of his own life rather than having to follow the path that was laid out for him” (362-3). His name, meaning “without sorrow” “seems fitting” to Song “because he [...] seems most at ease with himself, at peace with the decisions he has made and the life he has chosen” (362).

While Ashoke relishes the independence of leaving his homeland for America, he still appreciates ties to his native India and his literary connection to Russia. His son, however, grows up tormented by his desire to separate himself from his parents and their Indian heritage and define himself as an American. From the start, he struggles with the ambiguous middle ground between his Indian and American identities. In his first days of life, he remains an unnamed infant in a country where names are required to even leave the hospital.<sup>28</sup> During his Anaparasin, an Indian ceremony in which a baby is offered three objects to symbolize his future path in life, young Gogol “frowns, and his

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<sup>28</sup> Indian parents traditionally have a relative name the newborn. The name secretly chosen by Ashima’s grandmother never arrived in the mail. Then, the grandmother died. Ashoke and Ashima were at a loss for what to do, and suggestions made by the American nursing staff sounded absurd to them.

lower lip trembles. Only then, forced at six months to confront his destiny, does he begin to cry” (40).<sup>29</sup> This event foreshadows a life of disquiet for the child.

During his school years, this generalized anxiety is manifested in anxiety over his name. When his parents first enroll him in school, they do so under his “good name” – the name customarily assigned by Indian parents for a child’s public life. Gogol is disoriented by his second name and experiences confusion over the loss of identity.

It is not until elementary school that Gogol realizes for the first time he bears an uncommon name.<sup>30</sup> He begins to see signs of difference when he looks to his classmates and realizes, “there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (69). He embraces this difference.<sup>31</sup> However, during adolescence, Gogol begins to loathe being branded by a name that “is both absurd and obscure, that it had nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (76). He also begins to understand the implications of bearing the last name of his Russian namesake. “Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name tuned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere shares him name. Not even the source of his namesake” (78). This name is a sign that is neither Indian nor American and marks his vacillation between cultural influences.

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<sup>30</sup> During a school trip to a cemetery where the students do rubbings of gravestones of their family names, Gogol first realizes the uncommonness of his name. His mother, however, finds the practice morbid and refuses to display his artwork – bringing to light another example of a failed attempt to assimilate.

<sup>31</sup> This is evidenced when, during the graveyard field trip, Gogol seeks out other unusual names to rub from tombstones.

In response to this existential confusion, Gogol turns to popular culture. Television, books and music are the means by which Gogol marks himself as an American and are key to his subsequent inclusion into American culture. During his early years, his mother sits him in front of the television to watch *Sesame Street*, to familiarize him with English before he begins pre-kindergarten. Rather than being steeped in the works of the Russian greats as his father was, Gogol reads works popular to typical American boys of the time: *The Hobbit*, *Hardy Boys* and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In later years, the sounds of the Beatles inspire him, and he keeps a worn copy of John Lennon's obituary tacked to his bedroom door. As they listen to and discuss music together, he bonds with his American friends. American popular culture is the source of Gogol's connection to his peers and subsequently brings him closer to his goal of being the typical American teenager.

As Gogol uses popular media to bond with his peers, he also uses these influences to create distance from his parents and his Indian heritage. When his parents are socializing with other Indian immigrants and listening to Bengali music, Gogol and the other children retreat to a bedroom to watch "Love Boat" and "Fantasy Island" (73). As a teenager, he often wishes his parents would "shut off [Bengali] music so he could hear cartoons" (61). Trips to Calcutta, which are wrought with frustrations with crowded living spaces and boredom, are assuaged by the Western books and music the Ganguli children bring to occupy their days. Gogol and his sister fight over walkman access to the American music they bring and breathe a sigh of relief upon boarding the airplane home because they are able to view movies such as *The Big Chill* and listen to American top forty songs.

One particularly telling moment of this distancing occurs when Ashoke first attempts to explain to Gogol the significance of his name. Rather than showing respect by listening, Gogol's attentions revert to his music. He "flips the record, turning the volume up on 'Revolution 1.'" Gogol literally drowns out his father's story – the story of his own origin in his namesake – with the Beatles. As "Ashoke looks around the room. He notices the Lennon obituary pinned to the bulletin board, and then a cassette of classical Indian music he'd bought for Gogol months ago, after a concert at Kresge, still sealed in its wrapper" (77). In contrast to the American music playing during Ashoke's story, this sealed tape of Indian music represents Gogol's desire to constrict and hide away his Indian heritage.

Even though popular culture is shown to reinforce his tie to American identity and separate him from the Indian identity he so wants to ignore, there is an underlying problem in his approach. Judith Caesar cites this as the "tendency to identify oneself" by "one's surroundings, clothing, food, and possessions [...]. Furthermore in a mobile society like modern America, unfortunately, the relationships of the social self are apt to be transitory, which seems to be part of the protagonist's problems in *The Namesake*" (Caesar 103). Caesar explains that this "makes finding a sense of self even more challenging for a person raised among different cultures and subcultures, especially if he concentrates on the question, "Which am I?," rather than realizing that he is both all and none of them" (Caesar 108). Gogol "passively [...] confus[es] a series of material and social selves for who he is. Moreover, because these outer selves are sequential rather than simultaneous, they provide him with no sense of continuity" (106).

In addition, reliance on popular culture is still an avoidance mechanism that shields him from what *he* sees as the root of his problems: the cultural dislocation symbolized by his name. In high school, Gogol complains that “no one takes [him] seriously” because of his name (100). He continues to feel this way until he is inspired by an article about second baptisms and makes the drastic decision to change the factor that he believes has held him back throughout life: his name. He opts to use Nikhil as his first name and hides his ties to the embarrassment of Gogol. Under this new name, Nikhil begins to come of age. His first kiss, his first sexual encounter, his first days of independence at college all occur under the persona of Nikhil rather than Gogol. There is a freedom in this new name, for it separates him from the awkward identity that plagued his childhood.

Gogol’s name-change, however, does not remedy his issues of disbelonging as easily as he had hoped. “There is [...] one complication: he doesn’t feel like Nikhil. Not yet. [...] At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning, the way his front tooth had unbearably throbbed in recent weeks after a filling” (105). Caesar suggest the root of his problem is that “he begins a pattern first accepting and then rejecting outer identities that seem imposed on him by others and which he is seems unable to distinguish from his essential self. He seems to think he must be one thing or another, Bengali or American, [Gogol or Nikhil] rather than accepting ambiguity and multiplicity” inherent in his situation (109).

In reality, his name was never the true root of his problems. “The only person who didn’t take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person

who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol” (100). Instead, these issues were more symptomatic of typical growing pains and a yearning to develop into an individual unfettered by parents’ expectations. Critics agree that Gogol’s struggle through adolescence and early adulthood is not unique. In an NPR interview with Lahiri, Melissa Block explains that the novel illustrates the “universal” “motivation” of “wanting to be someone else,” “struggling with his relationship to his parents” and “running from them in any way he can.” The *Missouri Review* concurs that Gogol’s story is “typical [...] he begins to assert, against his parents’ desires, his independence and individuality” (Oates 178).

Just as with most other coming-of-age stories, Gogol remains dissatisfied with his understanding of self and his placement in the world until he begins to come to terms with the disjuncture between his generation and that of his parents. Rather than run from his parents, his heritage, and his name, he must reduce the distance between his American and Indian selves. This does not begin until Ashoke unexpectedly dies, and Gogol is forced to acknowledge the significance of his heritage. Ashoke’s death “precipitates [for Gogol] a partial return to his origins,” Sam Munson states in “Born in the U.S.A.” and, as Natalie Friedman argues, the shock of the event “awakens in him a sudden need to reconnect with lost Bengali rituals” (68; 115). In one fell swoop, he cuts off ties with his American girlfriend, steps into the role of caretaker for his mother and, ultimately, accepts a date with an Indian woman arranged by his mother. Song suggests that Gogol’s subsequent marriage to the Bengali-American Moushumi “seals” Gogol’s “return to his origins” in an “allegiance to one’s ethos” (359). Friedman explains that his “His return to his parents’ house in Massachusetts is a physical and metaphoric return to his Indian

roots; it is the first time in the novel that Gogol acknowledges that he is Indian and not simply another American suburban boy” (121). His struggle is not over, but he has begun to come to terms with his status as an Indian-American, and popular culture is no longer the means to formulate this identity. Instead Gogol returns to the book given to him by his father on his fourteenth birthday, and for the first time in his life, reads the short story that saved his father’s life and began his own. Gogol also allows his profession to guide a more active role in defining himself and forging his own destiny. As a new architect, his “contributions” to his design team “are incidental, and never fully his own. Still, he knows that each component of a building, however small, is nevertheless essential, and he finds it gratifying that after all his years of schooling, all his critics and unbuilt projects, his efforts are to have some practical end” (125).<sup>32</sup> Gogol has become the architect of his own life.

### ***The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

The role of popular culture in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is best introduced in the author’s own words: Diaz explains in an interview with the *Yale Literary Magazine*, “When I was young genre forms were my everything. I loved sci-fi, fantasy, horror, apocalypse, whether in books, comics, TV or movies” (27). These stories became “lenses, epistemologies, that helped me to interpret the world and what it meant for me, a young Dominican immigrant, to live in it” (Yale 27). When asked in an

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Caesar disagrees that his profession is a sign of agency over life. She argues, “His being an architect seems to be a metaphor for the bildung of an outer self that he himself has designed. Yet he doesn’t seem to have been able to do that. Tellingly, he wanted to build homes, but ends up designing staircases and closets for offices instead. Instead of making personal spaces, he creates impersonal public ones” (111).



interview for *Callaloo* how this popular culture helped him “understand both worlds” of the United States and the Dominican Republic, Diaz responds, “In the end, you keep stacking up all these little languages, these threads. And so comic books, fantasy, and science fiction are like a very vibrant, alive and very American language” (Celayo and Shook 14). Fluency in this language was essential to not only him but also his peers because it “knitted us together as a generation” (Gross). It also helped him to understand “the extreme experience of being an immigrant in the United States” – to “explain the missing emotional cognitive disjunction” of migrancy from “Villa Juana, from latrines and no lights, to Parlin, NJ, to MTV and a car in every parking space” (Danticat “Junot”).<sup>33</sup>

After spending over ten years struggling to finish this first novel, which was first published as a novella in the *New Yorker*, Diaz was honored with the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2007 and the Pulitzer Prize in 2008.<sup>34</sup> Michiko Kakutani credits Diaz in a *New York Times* Book Review with being “one of contemporary fiction’s most distinctive and irresistible new voices” and characterizes the novel as “funny, street-smart and keenly observed.” Serious critical attention to the novel is minimal, and reviews typically emphasize the novel’s combination of English and Spanish as its central component.<sup>35 36</sup> Susan Straight asserts that the novel is “obsessed with language” and

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<sup>33</sup> As an adult, Diaz is surprised by the pervasive presence of media in a place that he remembers as underdeveloped, “Now they’ve got TV. Everybody got TV. I used to have to run blocks to see a TV. Now everyone got TV” (Cespedes).

<sup>34</sup> Note that Diaz was, at first, working on two other novels. One, “written before sept. 11 was an apocalyptic story set in New York City after a terrorist attack” (Stetler).

William Deresiewicz lauds the “audacity, bounce and brio of its bilingualism” in “Fukú Americanus.” A.O. Scott emphasizes the book as a “novel of assimilation,” and Alice O’Keefe agrees that the novel “straddles two cultures and two languages” (9; 58). Diaz, however, takes language much further than the obvious English/Spanish binary. He also writes in a variety of vernaculars: Yunior speaks the language of the street, Oscar is fluent in science fiction, Dominicans understand superstition and families communicate through their ancestral histories. In such a hodgepodge of linguistic modes, popular culture is a conspicuously integral language that influences Oscar’s understanding of identity throughout the novel.

Diaz’s story is a multi-dimensional tale told by Oscar’s friend Yunior, and, briefly, by his sister Lola. On one plane, there is the life of Oscar – the pain and alienation his obesity causes him from child through adulthood and the mass media outlets he turns to in response. The lives of his sister and mother are also significant threads of the novel. The sad story of his mother, Belicia’s, orphaning as a baby in the Dominican Republic and her subsequent maturation under the supervision of a distant aunt, La Inca, points the story even more deeply into the past to reveal the history of her family. This is the history of Belicia’s father Abelard, a successful doctor whose death was the result of his unwillingness to sacrifice his daughter’s purity to the licentious Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Anecdotes about Trujillo and his henchmen and

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<sup>35</sup> Carlin Romano calls it an “unformed freshman novel” and criticizes the “oppressive, glibly written footnotes” (2).

<sup>36</sup> The story is also read by many critics as both a love story and a quest narrative.<sup>36</sup> Diaz’s attention to detailing the political past of the Dominican Republic is also of note to Armando Celayo and David Shook who point to the “overbearing weight of history” in their Diaz interview “In Darkness we Meet.”

Abelard's tragic life are interwoven with Belicia, Lola and Oscar's memories about the struggles of growing up.

Unlike its more innocuous presence in *The Namesake*, popular culture dominates *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Characters clutch to the safety of written and visual media to protect them from an instability perpetuated by government corruption, migrancy and unrequited love. For Oscar, in particular, these medium are not just outside influences as they are for Gogol; instead, they are central to his understanding of self. Thus, there are far more serious repercussions when they fail to assuage the pain of adolescence and early adulthood. In fact, Oscar's devotion to science fiction is at the root of a serious crisis of identity by the novel's end.

An understanding of this dominant role of popular culture must first acknowledge the familial history Diaz outlines for three characters: Abelard, his daughter Belicia and her son Oscar. Diaz begins by explaining the fundamental fate that these characters have in common: the fukú. The fukú is a Dominican superstition – a “curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” when “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world” (1). There is no particular force of origin behind the fukú; an individual need not commit any particular act to unleash its wrath, and its attack is indiscriminant and harsh.<sup>3738</sup> In the case of this novel, the fukú began with one man, Abelard Cabral who relied on his literary endeavors as a

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<sup>37</sup> In “Dreaming in Spanglish,” A.O. Scott makes the perplexing claim that “The evil spirits that are periodically invoked to explain Oscar's family's back luck are also, for the novelist if not for his characters, lucky charms.”

<sup>38</sup> However, it is commonly cited that the most certain way to instigate a fukú is to say the name of Christopher Columbus, the man responsible for discovering and subsequently colonizing the Dominican Republic.

means of resistance from Trujillo's tyranny. From this point on, subsequent generations of the Cabral family are drawn to reading, writing and viewing film in an effort to cope with the familial curse that afflicts each of them.

The man with whom the fukú began, Oscar's grandfather Abelard Cabral was a doctor with a penchant for writing about the supernatural. Supposedly, his greatest literary coup was "a book about the Dark Powers of [President Trujillo], a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president – that he was supernatural, that he was not human – may in some ways have been true. [...] that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world" (245).<sup>39</sup> Coupled with the offense of secluding his beautiful daughter from the dissolute Trujillo, Abelard's writing was his death sentence. For years, Abelard turned to the newspapers for "some hint" of his fate as he "waited for his name to start appearing in the 'Foro Popular' section of the paper, thinly veiled criticisms aimed at a certain bone doctor from La Vega – which was often how the regime began the destruction of a respected citizen such as him" (223). After his murder, not a single example of Abelard's books survived – "not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned" "not one single example of his handwriting remain[ed]" (246). Trujillo removed not only the man, but also the only source of Abelard's power in the tyrannical regime: the legacy of his written word. As newspapers offer omniscient warnings of death and authoring books lead to torture, murder and a generations-long familial curse, Diaz sets the novel up as a powerful commentary on the role of popular culture.

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<sup>39</sup> I say "supposedly" because the book was never found after Abelard's death.

The writing-induced curse levied against Abelard continues on in the life of his only remaining daughter, Belicia. After a tragic childhood where she is orphaned, sold into poverty, disfigured by her owners yet subsequently rescued by La Inca, it would seem that Belicia had been saved by the fate of her familial fukú. La Inca first introduces the girl to her heritage and her family when she “produced an old newspaper, pointed to a photograph [of Belicia’s father and mother]: [...] this she said, is who you are” (260). Because the only evidence of Belicia’s personal history lies in the burns on her body and within the pages of the newspaper, she turns to the comfort of media as she develops her adolescent identity. From this point, Belicia’s understanding of herself is deeply tied to both her body and popular culture.

The latter influence has devastating effects as Belicia falls prey to the glamour of Hollywood and finds hope only in the telenovelas she watched and society pages she read. “At thirteen [she] believed in love like a seventy year old widow who’s been abandoned by family, husband, children and fortune believes in god. [She] was [...] even more susceptible to the Casanova wave than many of her peers” (88). In one particularly pivotal moment, the media influences in Belicia’s life collide into one fantastic impression and fateful encounter. On this night, Belicia visited her first “real club,” The Hollywood (115).<sup>40</sup> At The Hollywood, Belicia met the man who would forever alter her life. He was “dressed in a rat pack ensemble of black smoking jacket and white pants and not a dot of sweat on him [...]. Handsome in that louche potbellied mid-forties Hollywood producer sort of way” (115). She was drawn to this glamorous vision immediately. In the following months, he “treated her to plays, movies, dances, [...] and]

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<sup>40</sup> Her co-worker Lillian, significantly characterized and idealized as being “the first woman [Belicia] met who read the paper,” convinced her to go on this adventure.

introduced her to famous celebrities [...] in other words he exposed her to the fucking world” (125). When the relationship ended, Belicia’s experience with this man continued in the realm of Hollywood: she only saw him again “on the TV” (131). Television provides a vicarious experience for her. Ultimately, when Belicia is beaten close to death by his wife’s thugs, she realizes “She’d been tricked [...] by her own dumb needs” (148). These “needs” are a susceptibility to the scent of celebrity promised by “the gangster.” They are her response to her familial fukú, and because of them, she is forced to leave her homeland and raise her children in isolation as an “angry, borderline-abusive” mother in the United States (Scott).

Just as the fukú precipitates Belicia’s immigration to the United States and her subsequent unhappiness, Yuniór blames it for similarly perpetuating Belicia’s future son Oscar’s spiral towards a lifetime of depression that culminates in suicide. Like Gogol, Oscar is a character plagued by the disbelonging of adolescence and being a second-generation immigrant. However, he is also marked by the massive presence of his overweight body, his preoccupation with the world of science fiction and his subsequent lack of social skills. While other Dominican men in his New Jersey neighborhood fulfill a stereotype of strength, confidence and masculinity, displaying what Díaz characterizes as “atomic level G,” Oscar is a striking contrast. He struggles with his large body, is awkward and friendless, and, although he continually tries, fails miserably with women. Yuniór, the novel’s narrator, writes that “Early adolescence hit [Oscar] especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious.” “He grew fatter and fatter” (16-17). He was “too dorky, too shy, and ...too weird (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before”

(17). His high school years were no different and were, “a source of endless anguish” and he suffered from being a “social introvert who trembled with fear during gym class” (22).

Oscar’s weight and his subsequent failure to live up to his family and community’s expectations of Dominican manhood are assuaged only by his passion for genre (science fiction, comic books, novels and films) – yet, at the same time, they are exacerbated by this devotion to pop culture. Oscar relates day-to-day experience to the realm of fantasy, developing tendencies that further estrange him from his peers. Kids such as Yuniór, who are representative of “normal” children, “were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brother’s cars and sneak dead soldiers from under our parents’ eyes,” while Oscar “was gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, [and] Burroughs [...] – moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age. [...] You couldn’t have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains” (20). His vocabulary is littered with media references and his word choice is often awkwardly elevated as he relied on “hugesounding nerd words like indefatigable and ubiquitous when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school” (22). Yuniór explains that Oscar “Couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to” (20). This all-encompassing devotion to the language of genre is the factor that isolates Oscar the most from his peers as he allows the fictional worlds to overtake his personality and inhibit his growth as an individual.

These signs of difference are dealt with cruelly by Oscar’s peers. Yuniór likens Oscar to the X-Men – comic book mutant superheroes who live amongst typical

Americans. “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like?” Yuniór asks, “Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto.” Oscar was “[v]ictimised by the other boys – punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses” and, most hurtfully, the objects of his affection, “brand-new books from Scholastic, at a cost of fifty cents each, torn in half before his very eyes.” Even Oscar’s mother, a woman who was similarly susceptible to the pull of popular culture, remains unsympathetic to her son’s emotional pain and “found his preoccupations nutty.” “Go outside an play!” she prompted him. “Portate como un muchacho normal.” (19)<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the social consequences of Oscar’s obsession, the types of films and comic books that he turns to suggest a disturbing depth of anxiety involved with his understanding of the world. His attentions were most often drawn towards stories about the catastrophic, mankind-induced end of the world. “No apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played,” and he held a particular obsession with the post-apocalyptic films “Zardoz” and “Virus” which each posit one individual as responsible for saving the masses from evil (32). In a world where the fukú threatens to attack without provocation, Oscar’s preoccupation with apocalyptic media makes perfect sense. It is a way for him to exhibit some semblance of control over the unexpected and destructive forces unleashed by the world.

Oscar also favored media from the 1970’s of his childhood rather than more current video games, comic books, books and movies. Rather than adapt to the new times (evident via playing “magic” rather than “role playing games), Oscar retreats, believing this was the “first sign that his Age was coming to a close. When the latest

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<sup>41</sup> Translated as “Behave like a normal boy.”



nerdery was no longer compelling, when you preferred the old to the new” (263). This nostalgia for media of his youth brings him back to a time when he was *not* overweight – a time when he had not one but *two* girlfriends – a time when he was a “real” Dominican male – a time when there was still potential for a normal life. At one point, his sister Lola tries to ease his worries with the idea that “There’s nothing permanent in this world.” Oscar, however, responds, “There is in me” (267). Oscar’s retreat to not only the past, but also the to dismal storylines in which he immerses himself are as counterproductive to his development as his dedication to genre because they further reinforce his sense of disbelonging.

While it is true that Oscar’s affections for sci-fi “made him stick out in the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did,” they were more than just a source of pain for him (22). Although he knew they were the source of his problems, and “he’d wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, [...] he couldn’t he loved them too much.” They “helped him get through the rough days of his youth” (19). Oscar’s diet of comic books and sci-fi films sustain him through his worst days. At the same time a cause of his disease, they were also the way he coped with the pain of life. However morbid these influences might be, Oscar maintained the romantic vision that “one day, when the nuclear bombs fell (or the plague broke out or the tripods invaded) and civilization was wiped out he would end up saving [the girl...and ]they’d set out...in search of a better tomorrow” (27).

Diaz explains Oscar’s preoccupations with genre in an interview with the *Yale Literary Magazine*, “Superheroism seems to me a glib adventurous way of marking the pain of those powerless days without having to abandon the hope of real power that the

adult world scuttles the moment we find ourselves in it.” The realm of science fiction offers Oscar an outlet for the imagination and a model for becoming. In such a world, even the outcast, the disfigured or the friendless can live the life of a hero. Science fiction opens a realm of possibility for Oscar by offering a brotherhood of characters with whom he can identify. If the unpopular Peter Parker spends his free time as superhero Spiderman, then maybe there is hope for Oscar to have an alter ego. Anything is possible in this fantastic world where an individual’s imagination is the only limitation in command of his fate.

Furthermore, Oscar’s devotion to science fiction is an area in which he is omniscient. He “could write in elvish, could speak chakobsa, could differentiate between a slan, a sorsai, and a lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee” (20). In his knowledge of science fiction, Oscar feels secure. In fact, it is in this realm that Oscar exhibits the most confidence as he begins to write his own science fiction where he has the power to forge the destiny of his own characters. He dedicates himself to an “obsess[ion]” with “his projected quarter of novels” and remains unafraid to compare himself to the greats, even claiming to be “Dominican Tolkien” (192). Oscar may give up on endeavors he believes are out of his control (attempts at losing weight and refusing to alter his awkward approach to meeting women), however, he *is* willing to pursue agency through his writing.

Even though participating in and creating fiction affords him a sense of agency, as Oscar moves into adulthood, very little changes for him emotionally, physically or socially. For all of the promise suggested by this fantasy world, Oscar is continually reminded that his dreams are delusory. In fact, he seems even *unhappier* because of his

continued inability to initiate a sexual relationship with a woman. His romantic visions of heroism, his dreams of “wandering around the evil planet Gordo, searching for parts for his crashed rocketship,” met the ugly reality that “all he encountered were burned-out ruins, each seething with new debilitating forms of radiation” (268). Clearly, “his secret hero” who was supposed to “emerge and snap necks” was “out having some pie” (297). Relying on science fiction to escape the embarrassment of his body, his longing for sex and the tragedy of his family’s history has done nothing in the long run but perpetuate his alienation. In the end, Oscar commits suicide. Just as Abelard leaves no legacy of his written word, Oscar dies without a trace when his magnum opus is lost in the mail.<sup>42</sup>

According to critics of contemporary coming of age novels, Oscar’s fate is one representative of a new era of such works. The culmination of a character’s formative years in suicide or despair is a prevalent trend in the twenty-first century. Critics agree that these stories exhibit protagonists who experience a sense of malaise less common in previous incarnations of the genre.<sup>43</sup> In *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, Kenneth Millard explains that today’s *bildungsheld* “have adopted a style of nihilistic futility” and fall prey to a “politics of despair” (12; 11). DeMarr and Bakerman argue that interaction with environment, in this case Oscar’s obsession with

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<sup>42</sup> Granted, Yunion has kept a refrigerator full of Oscar’s writings; however, Yunion is the only person who will see this work.

<sup>43</sup> Karen R. Tolchin, in *Part Blood Part Ketchup: Coming of Age in American Literature and Film*, defines them as characters “who turn inward, indulge in self-pity and angst, and experience pain” (10). Perhaps the most apt foray into representations of such disaffected youth lies in Curnutt’s “Teenage Wasteland.” He characterizes fictional youth as “aloof to affect and agency,” claiming that they “constitute a species of walking dead” (94). Curnutt continues that “contemporary coming-of-age narratives do not denigrate adult authority but express rather an overt nostalgia for it” because it is so lacking (101).

popular culture, bears a “pessimistic” outcome on life and “more often than not the result is either a lack of true maturation or a maturation achieved despite, not because of their surroundings” (252). Furthermore, in *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman*, Susan Ashley Gohlman explains that “the hero must either meet a tragic end or he must reorganize his thinking so that he is able to embrace the absurdity of his existence” (6). Abel, Hirsch and Langland agree in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, that the formative years “often culminate [...] in withdrawal, rebellion, or even suicide” (6). This is certainly true for Oscar. Gohlman concludes that the problem is that these characters are unable “to see that bildung is illusory because [...] objective knowledge of reality [...] is illusory” (6). This is especially true when such bildung is based on the slippery foundation of popular culture. Such characterizations of the contemporary protagonist help the reader to understand Oscar as representative of a new generation of young characters. This trend is especially relevant and even more striking when comparing Oscar to a more traditional character like Gogol. While Gogol faces the complexities of life yet gains a greater understand of self in the long run, Oscar faces great emotional, physical and social instability as he loses touch with his conception of self. In the wake of such instability, he cannot survive.

While Oscar’s situation can be understood as a literary trend, it is also the consequence of media and migration. Specifically, Yunior attributes Oscar’s unfulfilled dreams (and those of his family members) to the tragic results of the fukú levied against his ancestors. Oscar’s weight, his propensity for genre, his unfortunate luck with women, his growing unhappiness are all manifestations of this familial fukú, as are Belicia’s bitterness and failing health and Abelard’s subjection to Trujillo.

In order to cope with the curses they believe afflict their lives, Oscar, his mother and grandfather each turn to media. In situations that are, for the most part, out of their control, these characters rely on the only conceivable options: For Abelard, this is a need to create, for Belicia this is a vulnerability to the Hollywood dream, for Oscar this is a vicarious draw to the lives of superheroes and the supernatural. In addition, Oscar and his mother rely on migration as a tactic to elude the fukú. Belicia flees the Dominican Republic to avoid being murdered, yet she is emotionally tortured throughout her life. Likewise, Oscar vacillates between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, thinking a change of setting will erase his problems. However, he is unable to outrun the pain that follows him, and the Dominican Republic becomes the setting of his death. In each case, the character's lack of agency is manifested in an escape rooted in either popular culture or migrancy.

This reliance on escape is the factor that fails each character as they respond to the powerful fukú. In an interview with author Edwidge Danticat, Diaz offers his thoughts on fukú superstition. He explains, "The real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fukú—but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level." Although writing a book about the fukú is exactly this acknowledgement, Diaz seems to emphasize a larger phenomenon within his novel. There is an important symbolic relationship between the fukú and the migrancy and reading, writing and viewing habits that occur in the novel. These tools are essentially used as a "Zafa," the "simple word" that when vocalized combats the fukú. Loosely translated, Zafa means to "change the subject" (Reid). This explains characters' lack of success at using such tactics as remedies to their cursed lives. Such aversive responses

are too indirect to be adequate. They undermine any real agency the characters might have and fail to “acknowledge” the real issues rooted in such a curse. Consequently, each character ends up worse off than he or she started. Abelard and his family meet tragic ends, Belicia dies alone and bitter in the United States and Oscar is so unfulfilled that he chooses to end his own life. Even more importantly, none of the characters left a legacy in their own words. Instead, it was up to Diaz to write their stories.

From Gogol to Oscar’s story, an important shift regarding coming of age is evident. Gogol utilizes the tool of popular culture in his efforts to become the typical American. His struggles deal primarily with his understanding of self. Oscar also relies on popular culture to cope with his issues of generational and cultural conflict; however, he allows the world of science fiction to define him. Because of the ever-changing nature of this fictional world, Oscar is burdened with an unstable sense of identity. In the end, a character like Gogol is able to move beyond the difficulties of adolescence when he learns to appreciate the range of cultural, social, familial and historical influences on his identity in the same manner his father has. Oscar and his family members, on the other hand, are trapped in a web of avoidance as they perpetually try to escape their pain and redirect their attentions toward fictional worlds.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Mediation of Acculturation: Immigrant Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane***

For being a foreigner [...] is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous falling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.

--Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

In the twenty-first century world – the media is often a significant presence in the lives of immigrants as they adapt to life in developed nations. Negotiating the space between native and host cultures is often a daunting task. In contemporary fiction, media forms – television, radio, books, magazines and the internet – are subtle influences that affect how characters identify themselves and how they approach their roles in their host communities.

Migration is most often prompted by the desire to “improve one’s personal, social, and economic situation,” according to acculturation psychologists David Sam and John Berry (Introduction 2). Sam defines acculturation as the effects of “‘continuous,’” “‘ firsthand’” and “‘reciprocal’” contact that occurs to both individuals and communities when cultures meet (“Acculturation” 15). The process not only allows for “adoption” of other “cultural elements,” but also the “‘rejection of’” or “‘resistance to ‘such elements’” (11). The acculturation process is a complex one that success depends upon a variety of factors ranging from “interaction with the mainstream community” to

“language skills” (Gozdziak 242). Mass media is also an influential facet of the immigrant experience. Practical guides that familiarize new immigrants with cultural practices of their host countries emphasize the centrality of mass media in the quest to ease the transition of culture crossing.<sup>44</sup> For instance, *Americanization of New Immigrants* provides a how-to for adapting to life in the United States. In several sections, the guide explains that media have actually promoted immigration since “television, cable and satellites” are factors that “have shrunk the world” (Singh and Gopal 100). “[B]eginning your life in the U.S. is nothing short of a new birth,” the guide promises, and media forms are central to a successful birthing process. “Everyday needs” in this new “beginning” include “television sets,” radio – cited as an “inexpensive source of entertainment” and helpful for “obtaining information” – and movie watching – romanticized as an American “Love Affair” (72; 99; 96). In addition, ethnic news media are lauded as a central link to the immigrant community since they are “an important part of finding jobs,” and “can help [immigrants] stay in touch with news from [their home] country and news about [their] ethnic group” in the host country (94).<sup>45</sup>

Critical attention to the role of media in immigrant communities most often concentrates on *representations* of immigrants in popular media forms.<sup>46</sup> Few emphasize

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<sup>44</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the nation of relocation as a “host” community as per acculturation psychologists David Sam and John Berry *Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*.

<sup>45</sup> Singh and Gopal define ethnic news media as media forms geared toward specific immigrant populations “that may be published in English as well as [the] native language” (94).

<sup>46</sup> In *Beyond the Gateway* “Challenges for the Future,” Gozdzia and Martin claim, “news media significantly influence the popular perception of immigrants, reinforcing stereotypes in some cases while empathizing with the foreigner’s experience



the *interaction* of immigrants with media forms. Of those who do, critics such as Myria Georgiou in *Diaspora, Identity and the Media* acknowledge the role of media to the immigrant experience. Georgiou explains that “media saturate diasporic space” and “suggest new ways of shaping belonging” by “inform[ing] us about what is important, what is fashionable, acceptable and attractive (163). The outcome of the influence Georgiou describes is a one-way exchange where the goal is assimilative emersion into the host community.<sup>47</sup> Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat also views potential in media interaction; in a 2007 interview with *Callaloo*, she describes the outcome as a globalizing force that integrates cultures, making most “villages come closer together” (Mirabel 30).<sup>48</sup>

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in others. Particularly in new settlement areas with little previous ethnic diversity, the arrival of newcomers has attracted substantial news coverage, magnifying their presence [and...] regrettabl[y] coverage of immigrant issues frequently concentrates on moments of conflict btw natives and newcomers” (280).

<sup>47</sup> Sam explains that “uni-dimensional” assimilative exchange intends that an immigrant adapt to the host society by taking on characteristics deemed acceptable by that society, in turn, potentially sacrificing their own “cultural identity” (“Acculturation” 17).

<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Danticat cites the powerful role of the internet to the immigrant experience, explaining that such a medium expands opportunity for agency. “More and more people are able to access information—thank goodness we have the Internet and if you are interested you can find things. Which is different than even 20 years ago. So at least the people who have another voice and people who are interested in other things can have a place to put their information and be heard.” She continues by illustrating the fundamentally crucial role of mass media representation in validating the existence of immigrants from lesser known places such as Haiti (her birth nation). She explains, “People think that there is a country there that these people are only around when they are on CNN. I don’t think that’s limited to Haiti. That’s whatever news topic, whatever political process any country is going through—whenever they are in the news, that’s when they exist. If you don’t see them they don’t exist.” (Birnbaum).

In this chapter, I aim to redirect these discussions to challenge their optimistic conclusions by closely examining the nuances of the interaction between immigrant characters and media forms to show that mass media influence only *rarely* facilitate the “empowerment” or cultural unification described by Georgiou and Danticat respectively. To do so, I will explore Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. Both texts portray the conflicts facing characters who, like the authors, emigrate from nations with a large degree of poverty or political and social strife to more developed Western nations.<sup>49 50</sup> Critical attention towards these novels typically centers on their portrayals of conflict within immigrant communities; however, I will point to mass media as the source of such difficulties in each work. Each text holds subtle yet significant signs concerning the influence of mass media forms upon the acculturation process of immigrant characters. Regardless of how fulfilling or (more often) dissatisfying a character’s experience may be, media act as catalysts for efforts towards acculturation.

These literary examples largely portray immigrant characters as frustrated by experiences in their new cultures since mass media forms typically hinder, rather than assist, their acculturation processes. Immigrant characters with low language acquisition skills find that media heighten their sense of disbelonging to new communities. At the same time, characters who rely on media forms to assist their assimilation are quite often

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<sup>49</sup> Danticat immigrated to the United States from Haiti in 1981 at age 12. At age 4, Ali emigrated from Bangladesh to the United Kingdom in 1971 (“Danticat” *Contemporary*; “Ali” *Contemporary*).

<sup>50</sup> A Reuters Humanitarian Alert cites Haiti as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere while a 2009 study published by India’s government cites that, since 2000, nearly one quarter of India’s population has lived in poverty (“India”).

characterized negatively because they either latch on to cultural aspects which are not respected within their immigrant communities, or they lose important markers of their own heritage as they are absorbed into the majority culture. Those who use media to root themselves in nostalgia for their homelands rather than confronting the often-troublesome realities of their present situations are forever unfulfilled. Characters, however, who rely on media forms as tools to ease their adaptation to the host community and, at the same time, maintain some degree of their native cultural identity are represented as leading more emotionally stable and fulfilling lives. Thus, media do not always alleviate the complexities of transitioning to a borderless global world as Georgiou and Danticat suggest; instead, the novels show that characters must interact with the territories on both sides of the border – their pasts and their futures – if they are to be fulfilled in the present.

### **Separation**

Edwidge Danticat is known for her poignant representations of Haiti's politics and for portraits of what she terms the "Haitian Diaspora" – the generations of individuals who have fled the oppressive Haitian regimes to form communities in the United States (Mirabal 29). In a *New York Times* article, Garry Pierre-Pierre speculates that Danticat's novels were "probably the first to chronicle the Haitian-American experience" and characterizes her as the "quintessential Haitian-American, living in both worlds and speaking flawless American English interrupted with an occasional Creole word. [...] She has blended her two worlds" (1; 3). Critics of Danticat's work most often emphasize the theme of "displacement" and attention to historical detail evident in her

works (Dash 32).<sup>51</sup> In addition, she stresses her goal of “bring[ing] people closer to individual experiences” by representing the “the gray of things, the layers [...] when you’re living between cultures” (Mirabal 33). In a 2007 interview for *Callaloo*, Danticat acknowledges the integral role of media to the Haitian immigrant community. She asserts that “music videos, the computer, the Internet and [...] more access to information about this country” help young Haitian immigrants glean “more information about themselves.”<sup>52</sup> “Globalization” allows for more “exposure” and “exchange” between Haitians and Americans so “[t]here’s not as much foreignness” for new immigrants (Mirabal 30).

Danticat’s 2005 novel *The Dew Breaker*, however, portrays a picture of media influence that starkly contrasts Danticat’s own claim regarding her work. The novel joins the stories of a variety of Haitian and Haitian-American characters dealing with political strife in their native land and the turmoil of emigrating to the United States as political refugees. Kakutani characterizes the novel as “a tale that uses its characters’ experiences as a prism to examine Haiti’s own difficulties in breaking free from a centuries-old cycle of violence and vengeance. [...] becom[ing] a philosophical mediation on the possibility of redemption and [...] the promise of new beginnings held forth by the American Dream” (2). Two short stories in particular, “Seven” and “The Water Child,” emphasize

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<sup>51</sup> J. Michael Dash characterizes “Haitian space as liminal and borderless” and Danticat’s figures as “the displaced victims of the vagaries of history” (41; 40).

<sup>52</sup> Note also that in the novel’s first story, the Dew Breaker’s daughter Ka claims that rather than learning of Haiti from her parents, who isolated themselves out of fear of being identified, she turns to “television,” “newspapers” and “books” (21).

the manner in which media complicate rather than ease the acculturation experience for these characters.

In “Seven,” an unnamed Haitian woman moves to the U.S. to reunite with her husband, Eric, after a seven-year separation. From the moment she sets foot on U.S. ground, this character suffers a sense of alienation in her new home. Customs agents search and dispose of “the few things she’d been unable to part with” upon leaving Haiti (39). As her “mangoes, sugarcane, [and] avocados,” – foodstuffs which tie her to her Caribbean roots – are thrown “into a green bin decorated with fruits and vegetables with red lines across them,” the woman finds that “she had little left” and is clearly confused by the cryptic rules behind her loss (40). Thus, the woman enters the United States without a concrete link to her home country – an individual alone in a new land, “blinking through the nearly blinding light shining down on the large number of people” collected en masse to greet loved ones (40).

Not only does the woman enter the United States nearly empty handed and alone, but she does not speak English and is terrified of venturing out of her husband’s apartment alone to orient herself with her new community. To ease her alienation, the woman turns to a Haitian language radio station for company.<sup>53</sup> Typically, connecting to

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<sup>53</sup> In an interview with E. Ethelbert Miller in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Danticat relates her view on the power of the medium of radio. She responds: “I came here when I was twelve. I adapted. I spoke Creole at home and French at school. I liked to write in English. [...] Writing in any language is difficult. Only about twenty percent of people in Haiti speak French everyday of their life. I've written some stuff in Creole for the radio because radio is a strong medium in Haiti.” Likewise, in an interview with *Free Williamsburg*, Danticat discusses the inspirations for her storytelling, citing movies as a significant influence. She explains, “I like to walk and think things out. That is really inspiring. Also the movies. You really think about the economy about storytelling. Nothing is wasted. Even in the worst movie everything has a purpose.”

the home culture through such diasporic media is a positive influence over an individual, according to Georgiou, since it “reinforce[s]” a sense of “belonging” (11).

In this case, however, the comfort of hearing Haitian Creole lessens as the woman hears listeners call in about the murder of Patrick Dorismond. The America-born son of a famous Haitian entertainer, Dorismond was shot after rejecting a proposition for drugs by undercover New York police officers (“No Trial”). His death resulted in outrage from the Haitian community in New York. Unable to contact her husband at work, the woman hides beneath her bed sheet and “through it listen[s] to the callers, each one angrier than the last” (45). Although the radio connects her to her native community, offers companionship during the long hours when her husband works and allots a regular routine to her new life as she “wake[s] up and listen[s...] for news of what was happening both here and back home,” the medium also introduces her to the harsh realities of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in America. As she learns of the “outrage” of the Haitian American community as they respond to the death of one of their own by authorities, her fear at being an outsider to the American community is exacerbated, and her desire to separate herself from the host culture is reinforced.<sup>54</sup>

A similar sense of alienation is experienced by Nadine, the protagonist of Danticat’s story, “The Water Child.” However, Nadine, a Haitian American nurse, finds that her sense of disbelonging is self-inflicted. Rather than causing her loneliness, her TV simply perpetuates it. After an aborted pregnancy of a child fathered by the married Eric (from the previous story), she cuts ties with him and her parents and continues to

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<sup>54</sup> While the accepted term “host” connotes a desire to embrace immigrant residents openly, this is certainly not always the case. This particular example suggests quite the opposite.

thwart attempts at friendship by her co-workers, women who “knew not to ask any questions about Nadine’s past, present, future” because she was “not a friendly woman” (59). Nadine exhibits signs of remorse for her many broken ties to loved ones. She honors her unborn child and her lover with a Japanese-inspired water shrine containing a drawing of the baby and roses and months worth of unanswered messages from Eric. She refuses to respond when her parents repeatedly contact her; however, she rereads their letters until they become “brittle and fragile,” signifying remorse at her loss (54).

Nadine functions in her self-imposed solitude with a heavy reliance upon television, newspapers and magazines. Upon returning to her apartment daily, she “was greeted by voices from the large television set that she kept on twenty-four hours a day. Along with the uneven piles of newspapers and magazines scattered [...] in her living room, the television was her way of bringing voices into her life that required neither reaction nor response” (56). Other efforts to consume free time “had demanded either too much effort or too much superficial interaction with other people” (56). Nadine’s mediated companionship, however, is an insufficient substitute for connections with loved ones in Haiti and potential companions in the U.S. Instead, media act as a tool of diversion and avoidance – an influence that severs ties to her Haitian roots and thwarts her potential for growth in America by fixing her in an unfulfilling present. As she “collapsed among her old magazines and newspapers, and wept,” Nadine realizes that she has turned to an “unrecognizable woman” (57; 69). Media forms have perpetuated, rather than alleviated, her isolation.

Mass media act as catalysts for Danticat’s characters’ unsuccessful adjustment to life in America. Both characters rely on distance from or avoidance of the host culture,

and Nadine even faces the additional isolation from her native culture. Thus she has neither the Haitian nor American community with which to identify. Lack of language acquisition also hinders Eric's wife's ability to function on a day-to-day basis in the United States. As Eric's wife hides in her bed and Nadine breaks down at the end of her story, the characters exhibit responses emblematic of the risks of acculturation.

Psychologists Huong Nguyen and Alexander von Eye, in the *Encyclopedia of Human Ecology*, define these risks for individuals with low levels of acculturation as "depression," "dissatisfaction with life," "distress," "loneliness and isolation" (5). Their failure to integrate into the host society, often perpetuated by the media interaction they seek, leads to signs of severe emotional distress.

Since these characters' resistance to, at times even a fear of, the host culture guides their experiences and affects their psychological states, the study of acculturation psychology is a valuable foundation from which to better understand the correlation between their interaction with media and the "emotional distress" they exhibit. In their seminal work in acculturation psychology, John Berry and David Sam explain the "acculturation strategies" used by non-dominant ethnocultural groups that form the basis for contemporary studies of acculturation.<sup>55</sup> I find his terminology useful in understanding the characters portrayed in these stories. Individuals, such as Eric's wife and Nadine, who "place a value on holding on to their original culture and [...] wish to avoid interaction with others" rely on what Berry and Sam term the strategy of *separation* ("Acculturation and Adaptation" 35).

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<sup>55</sup> The strategies are a normative basis for most contemporary work in acculturation psychology.



Individuals acquire coping skills (acculturation strategies such as separation), according to Sam, in order to assist their adaptation when they encounter cultural stressors arising from the differences between the native and host cultures. Upon immigrating, individuals experience a variety of “affective, behavioral and cognitive changes” in response to “contact with other cultures” and are forced to adapt to the new culture both psychologically (i.e.: “psychological or emotional wellbeing”) and sociologically (i.e.: “the acquisition of the culturally appropriate skills needed to negotiate or ‘fit into’ a specific social or cultural milieu”) (Sam “Acculturation”16; 17). Berry cites that these skills may either promote “advantageous” cultural changes or “undermine” the individuals’ potential for success (Berry, “Contexts of Acculturation” 36). In *Acculturation and Psychological Adaptation*, Vanessa Castro explains the consequences of negative responses to acculturation: “low-acculturated individuals experience anxiety, isolation, stress, and low self-esteem as a result of difficulties in coping with the new environment and the gradual loss of support provided by the ethnic group of reference.” Unsuccessful adaptation may lead to “debilitating” stress levels, anxiety and depression (48). Psychologist Joseph Trimble agrees that one “by-product of acculturation can be negative, disruptive, and stressful circumstances (acculturative disorganization).” These problems are often due to the inability to “manag[e] everyday social encounters” and the failure to acquire the “culture-specific skills that are required to negotiate a new cultural milieu” (58). In relation to the novels, the separation evidenced in the *Dew Breaker* is “linked with intermediate levels of adjustment.” For individuals who separate themselves from the host culture, the “lack of experience in bicultural or mainstream settings could have negative consequences for the development

of effective cultural and social competencies, including the ability to develop strategies to manage prejudice and discrimination [...] associated with high intergroup anxiety” (Castro 88). Thus, Danticat’s characters’ interaction with media is the source of their inabilities to adapt either psychologically or sociologically. Their acculturation experiences are “undermined” as a result of media influence over daily interactions with the host communities.

The alienation and psychological crisis prompted by media influence in *The Dew Breaker* is further evidenced in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. This novel tells the story of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who immigrates to London with her husband, Chanu. In the Brick Lane section of London, Nazneen bears a son (who dies) and two daughters, begins work as a seamstress, develops an affair with a younger Muslim man and mourns the distance from her sister Hasina who is trapped in Bangladeshi slums because of her gender.

Kaiser Haq characterizes *Brick Lane* as the “first comprehensive fictional portrayal of Bangladeshis.” Even before *Brick Lane* was published, Ali was awarded the honor of being listed among the “Best of Young British Novelists,” compiled by *Granta*, and the novel was eventually shortlisted for Britain’s prestigious Man Booker Prize. Critical attention toward *Brick Lane* most often centers upon the form of the story and the themes of domesticity,<sup>56</sup> isolation and agency portrayed within the novel.<sup>57</sup> Alistair Cormack emphasizes translation as central to the novel and characterizes the work a “realist narrative with a postcolonial story” (695). John Marx cites various other critics

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<sup>56</sup> See also Natasha Walter’s “Citrus Scent of Inexorable Desire.”

<sup>57</sup> See also Benedicte Page “An Encounter With Fate.”

who have pointed out the link between *Brick Lane* and the realist works of authors such as Dickens (Marx 24). Marx emphasizes the domestic realm by concluding that Nazneen finds “self actualization through work” as a seamstress, yet he urges others not to confuse “change” in women’s roles with “progress” for women (18). Jane Hiddleston points to *Brick Lane* as Ali’s effort to “humanize the apparent ‘underclass’ of [Tower Hamlet] residents” and “unveil mysteries of an ‘Eastern’ culture” “expos[ing] the preconceptions informing popular images of the unfamiliar stranger within” (58; 59; 58). In contrast to Hiddleston, numerous reviewers criticized the novel for its unfavorable portrait of immigrants living in the Brick Lane area of London.<sup>58</sup> Critics, however, give only cursory attention to the role of media in the novel.

For the first years of her life in England, Nazneen finds the transition to be a daunting task. Like Eric’s wife in “Seven,” Nazneen speaks no English and does not dare to venture beyond the confines of her apartment while her husband works. Like Nadine, Nazneen finds her new country to be the place where “she had learned first about loneliness” (145).<sup>59</sup> Her alienation causes her to feel “lost in [a city] that would not

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<sup>58</sup> Kaiser Haq cites “The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, an organization that claims to represent expatriate Bangladeshis, wrote an eighteen-page letter to Random House [...] accusing Ali of portraying them negatively and in a distorted manner.” Likewise, in “London, a New East-West Skirmish” Alan Cowell cites a “sense among the area’s Bengali residents and traders that the years of effort that made their neighborhood an icon of east London were now in jeopardy” and quotes a Brick Lane resident as complaining that “‘She targeted our particular community’ of people from Sylhet, he said. ‘For some reason, she said we were uneducated, illiterate, not clean.’”

<sup>59</sup> The alienation of moving to England is reminiscent of that experienced by Ali’s mother when she moved her children from Dhaka during the height of the civil war: “Home, you see, was not as she dreamed it. In London there was no one to meet us. My mother carried us across London on the buses and then got on a train to Manchester. She

pause, even to shrug,” and Nazneen suffers a crisis of identity as she negotiates her roles as Bangladeshi and British (42). Dramatically, Nazneen experiences a psychotic break at a moment when the conflict between her past and present collide. In a discussion sparked by a media-related event (daughter Shahana’s television watching), Chanu first informs his children of his plan “to go back home” (266). That evening, the very real prospect of returning to Bangladesh prompts Nazneen to feel the dis-ease of walking a “tightrope” where the “wind was high and tormenting” (266). Combined with the “worry” regarding the family’s impending re-patriation is a realization of “horror” regarding the impropriety of her infidelity with Karim. Nazneen’s anxieties escalate to hallucinations as her dead mother returns in a vision, warning her “God sees everything. [...] God tests us.” Nazneen’s last memory before drifting off into a days-long-unconsciousness is her mother’s parting words of advice as she succeeds in pulling her daughter to the floor: “You just have to endure” (267). Although Nazneen’s psychological state is not explicitly prompted by mass media in this scene, the catalyst for the event was indeed tension between father and daughter (representative of tradition and progress) regarding the influence of television. Chanu’s worry over the “rubbish” Shahana is viewing signifies his anxiety over the potential influence of British life upon his children.<sup>60</sup> In turn, Nazneen is prompted to confront the discord between the foundation of passivity upon which she was raised and the role of agency she is developing.

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had no money left. My grandfather, who met us at the station, paid the guard. My grandmother was waiting at home. She was very concerned, she said, about how my mother intended to pay back the fare” (Ali, “Where”).

<sup>60</sup> Ironically, it is his wife Nazneen who has been the most heavily influenced by the “rubbish” on television. Thus Chanu is misguided about the threat television serves to his family.

## Assimilation

Although Nazneen faces the consequences of *separation*, *Brick Lane* more often depicts characters' who desire to *assimilate* to British culture. Berry and Sam defines assimilation as when individuals "do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures" ("Acculturation and Adaptation" 297). In such cases, media influence on the immigrant Bangladeshi population in London overwhelmingly is portrayed negatively. Nazneen's husband Chanu repeatedly complains to his children that television is simply a link to low British culture. Ali supports this accusation by linking the sounds of television with the "coughing. [...] lavatory flushing [...] and] shouting match[es]" heard through the walls of the Ahmed's apartment. For this reason, television is linked to an unsavory sort of assimilation referred to as the "rot" (146). Nazneen's friend Razia is the most poignant example of assimilation gone wrong. Early on in the novel, she trades in her traditional sari for a Union Jack sweatshirt and tracksuit pants because she was "tired of taking little bird steps" (73). As she embraces Westernization, later gaining freedom from her controlling husband and beginning to work as a single mother to provide education and goods to her children, she slowly loses control of her family. The coup de grace comes when Razia's son sells the family television set to fund his heroin addiction. This characterization of Razia's son's behavior correlates with the "higher rates of delinquency and deviant behavior [and] family conflicts and difficulty in school" Nguyen and von Eye link to assimilation (320). It is through this absence of the television, a symbol of the rot that permeated Razia's world, that she comes to terms with the negative impact of

Westernization and takes measures to curb her son's addiction and rein her family together.

Mrs. Azad, the Bangladeshi-born wife of a doctor who Chanu holds in high esteem, is another character who exemplifies the "rot." During her first meeting with the Ahmeds, she turns on the television, raises the volume, and "scowls" in an effort to "silence" her guests (85). She is a crass, unloving wife who dismisses traditional morals as she drinks beer, wears short, tight-fitting skirts and allows her teenage daughter to be "free to come and go" as she pleases (89). When Chanu cites "the need to preserve one's identity and heritage" while assimilating to British culture, she refers to his argument as "crap" rebutting that "...we live in a Western society....[T]hat's no bad thing" (89). This negation of her home culture, combined with or prompted by media influence, seems to elicit her uncouth persona.

In these examples, assimilation is not only presented as a means of adapting to British culture but also an attempt to distance oneself from the home culture. Failure to acknowledge one's heritage holds serious psychological consequences for characters. Those who rely on assimilation "compromise their group membership [...] strategy to manage a negative social identity, indicating low satisfaction with the in-group" (Castro 88). Nguyen and von Eye further that assimilation "alienate[s] the individual from his/her supportive ethnic group and give[s] rise to self-hatred and hatred of their ethnic group" (4). The rot invades the lives of these characters because they are unwilling or unable to integrate their adoption of new cultural traits with a healthy reverence for their pasts.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Danticat also muses on the importance of integrating past with present. In an interview with *The Progressive*, she is reminded of the Faulkner quote, "The past is never dead—it's not even past." She responds, "Exactly. Especially in the case of people who

## Marginalization

On the opposite spectrum from examples of assimilation lie examples of characters facing *marginalization* from members of the host communities. For instance, in resistance to this cultural “rot,” Chanu holds books as the penultimate mark of success. He prides himself on coming to England as an educated man of letters and stresses literature as a means of connecting to his native culture, forcing his daughters to learn of their heritage by memorizing lines of famous Bangladeshi poets. His nostalgia towards Bangladesh, however, is pathologized by Dr. Azad as “going home syndrome” (18).<sup>62</sup>

In reality, Chanu’s collection of diplomas and certificates is quite worthless, and his obsession with returning to Bangladesh stifles any potential for successful integration into British culture. The piles of books that crowd the family’s living room contrast with Chanu’s failure to find a job more esteemed than that of a taxi driver. At one particularly low point of Chanu’s unemployment, he lies in bed, surrounded by his diplomas, and has his daughters turn pages for him as he reads. Because Chanu’s ineffectuality is linked to

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have migrated from other places. We try so hard to keep some aspects of the past with us and forget others, but often we don’t get to choose. We try to keep the beautiful memories, but other things from the past creep up on us. The past is like the hair on our head. I moved to New York when I was twelve, but you always have this feeling that wherever you come from, you physically leave it, but it doesn’t leave you” (Barsamian). She also clarifies the link between memory of the past and media: “I think memory is the great bridge between the present and the past, between here and there, even between life and death. It’s what helps us rebuild and start over in another country, to reconstruct our lives. I know many people who would rather forget the past, but even trying to forget is a chore. Some people swear that they will never go back to Haiti because they would rather remember the Haiti they grew up with. [...] A lot of people idealize an older Haiti they still remember and try to pass that idealized vision on to their children, who can’t reconcile the Haiti that their parents are always pining and longing for with the one they read about in the newspaper or see on television (Alexandre).

<sup>62</sup> In an interview with David Boratav, Ali cites this novel as one not only of “identity, loss and longing, the struggle to survive in a new environment, [...] and] the clash of cultures and values” but one of “nostalgia.”

his consumption of books, books are linked with failure to attain the dream of Western success. Similarly, Chanu also ventures into the realm of new media when he buys a computer for his family. This purchase, however, drives the family into debt, remains untouched by Chanu and acts as a precursor to Nazneen's affair when Karim lingers in her home to use the computer.

This characterization makes a significant commentary on the state of the Bangladeshi population in England. In general, sociologists observe that the "departure status" of immigrants "is frequently higher than one's entry status" because an individual's "credentials are often devalued upon arrival" due to "ignorance and/or prejudice in the society of settlement" (Berry "Stress Perspectives" 49). In "Acculturation in the United Kingdom," Lena Robinson cites startling statistics about the fate of the Bangladeshi population in Britain. 35% of Bangladeshi immigrants are unemployed – marking the highest percentage of unemployment in the nation. In addition to the typical decline in status noted by Berry, another reason for this, Robinson argues, is that a "glass ceiling affects all non-white men" who are "substantially under-represented in the most elite jobs." Most commonly, such "prejudice" is directed "against Asians" and against "Muslims" in particular (396). So, while Chanu's education might presume an ease of integration into the British workforce, discrimination based on his ethnicity and religion relegate him to a marginalized position. In response, Chanu increasingly relies upon a cultural nostalgia fueled by the medium of books.

Even more importantly, in a novel set at the turn of the new millennium, mass media is largely blamed for the culture clash between Muslim immigrants and native Brits. The Ahmed family comes together to watch television on only one instance during



the novel: on 9/11. As they view the attacks on the World Trade Center, they witness the “start of madness.” The power held by television is emphasized as they collect in front of the news report in “part reverence, part subjugation,” and are drawn in by the “spell” as the “television shows [the attack] again and again” (304). Further televised news reports highlight racial violence by showing “pictures of hooded young men, scarves wrapped intifada-style around their faces, hurling stones, ruinous with the cars that they set alight. Between the scarves and the hoods it was possible to catch glimpses of brown skin” and newspapers fuel negative stereotypes of the Muslim community while valorizing Western aggression (341; 226). Within the Brick Lane community, the “war” between two local cultural-heritage groups is exacerbated by the distribution of racist leaflets. While the Lion Hearts advertise, “Islam burns with hatred,” the Bengal Tigers counter with leaflets criticizing the lax British morals that “degrade” their culture (210-11).

Nazneen’s lover Karim is a character who feeds off of this culture clash and is defined by his relationship to media. A Bangladeshi-Brit, Karim forms the Bengal Tigers in opposition to a nation that is becoming increasingly hostile towards its Muslim population. Magazines and the internet are the tools from which he fights “to make a place for himself” in Britain, as he acquires information about the Western world’s aggressions towards the Muslim community worldwide. “The internet” in particular “was where things got really radical” (318).<sup>63</sup> Karim relies on Chanu’s unused computer for

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<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note the contemporary relevance of this fictional example. In October of 2008, a U.S. Army Intelligence report entitled “Potential for Terrorist Use of Twitter,” was publicized by a variety of media outlets. The report stresses the radical potential inherent in media services such as Twitter that convey real time information to a mass audience of subscribers. For example, the report cites that the “earthquake that occurred in Los Angeles on July 29, 2008 was reported via a Twitter member approximately four minutes prior to the information being reported by the news and

information to fuel his social ideologies. Karim uses what Berry defines as “active coping” strategies which involve facing acculturative stressors and, rather than dealing with them passively (with “patience and self-modification”), “seek[ing] to alter the situation.” However, he “may have only limited success if the problem lies in the dominant society” (“Stress Perspectives” 47). Similar to Chanu, Karim’s status as a marginalized figure causes his efforts towards social activism to be ineffectual.<sup>64</sup>

While at first, Karim’s passions are an inspiration to Nazneen as she witnesses him fighting for what he believes in and is moved by the emotion he feels when he shows her a magazine article about refugee children in Gaza, she comes to understand, however, that his reliance on media is simply an effort to escape the fact that he “did not have his place in the world” (377). While he fights on behalf of the immigrant population, he was born in London and has never even visited Bangladesh. This sense of disbelonging is supported by the fact that Karim stutters when he speaks both English and Bangladeshi. He develops a relationship with Nazneen because he views her as “the real thing”<sup>65</sup> – a Bangladeshi woman unadulterated by British ways – and believes this reinforces his link

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within minutes there were hundreds of Tweets from people experiencing the earthquake first hand. Twitter has also become a social activism tool for socialists, human rights groups, communists, vegetarians, anarchists, religious communities, atheists, political enthusiasts, hacktivists and others to communicate with each other and to send messages to broader audience.” The internet (including blogs, social groups such as Facebook and Tweets) levels the playing field for political and social resistance by individuals and groups that might not have much political clout. (Aftergood)

<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Haq argues that the novel “underscores the ultimate futility of religious politics” as a whole.

<sup>65</sup> Sandie Byrne explains that Karim “wants to connect to the ‘real’ Bangladesh and its ‘real’ culture and sees Nazneen less as a unique individual whose personality he could love than as a pure, authentic version of the Pakistani ‘village girl,’ in contrast to the hybridized or assimilated women of London's Bangladeshi communities.”

to the Bangladeshi community. According to Karmela Liebkind in “Ethnic Identity and Acculturation,” “studies have shown that questions of acceptance by one’s own ethnic minority group and ingroup hassles may be even more stressful and problematic for ethnic minority members than negative reactions of the majority group.” Liebkind defines ethnicity as “a sense of belonging to a particular (assumed) ancestry and origin” (79). For Karim, interaction with mass media perpetuates his compulsion to “defend” his sense of belonging to the immigrant community as it separates him from a place within the British community (377).

Both Chanu and Karim are affected by what Berry terms *marginalization* since they are individuals who display “little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination)” (Berry, “Contexts” 35). This effect of acculturation is cited as the most problematic because, according to Castro, it suggests an “absence of both [native and mainstream] support systems,” and “psychological distance from both the ethnic group of reference and the mainstream culture is [...] indicative of low cultural and social competence” (88).

### **Integration**

In contrast to the various ways that immigrant characters find their acculturation experiences problematized by their interaction with media, there does seem to be potential for acculturation to promote and bring out “positive change” in an individual’s life as per Georgiou and Danticat’s suggestions (7). In “Social Change and Acculturation,” Trimble cites a fulfilling experience as supported by “cultural knowledge, degree of contact, and positive inter-group attitudes” (53). For Berry and Sam,

individuals who aim to “maintain [their] original culture” with “some degree of cultural integrity” yet “participate as an integral part of the larger social network,” successfully acculturate through *integration* with the host culture (“Acculturation and Adaptation” 297).

Amidst the overwhelmingly negative examples in these novels of mass media prompting characters towards separation, assimilation or marginalization, lies such one example of media assuaging the acculturation process. To understand this example, I must start at the beginning of Nazneen’s transformation. Nazneen is first characterized not only by her unhappiness in her new home, but also as a character steeped in the omnipotent power of fate.<sup>66</sup> From the day she was born as a seemingly dead baby, Nazneen is reminded of the story of “How You Were Left To Your Fate” (4). Her mother opted to let fate guide the child’s destiny rather than allowing modern medicine to intervene, and, as fate would have it, Nazneen survived. She then progressed through life knowing interfering with the mandate of fate (questioning her arranged marriage or taking her sick son to the hospital where he would ultimately die) would thwart God’s plan for her.

Nazneen’s perception is undeniably altered, however, in a single moment of viewing British television. She witnesses the following televised ice skating scene:

A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena.

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<sup>66</sup> Byrne cites “one of the novel's major motifs” as “the acceptance versus the refusal of one's destiny, or the ‘destiny’ that is in fact the imposition of others' will.”

[...] The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out again. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until she would surely fall but didn't. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (22)

The sport of ice-skating introduces Nazneen to new possibilities in life.<sup>67</sup> The female skater is confident, adept, and “triumphant” in her effort to “conquer[...] the laws of nature.” She models a role of womanhood that strikingly contrasts Nazneen’s reliance upon passivity and fate. As Nazneen watches ice-skating on the television, “she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties, and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light, glory” (27).

This experience with television inspires Nazneen towards learning the language that has hindered her integration into her new environs. Modeling the sounds emanating from her husband’s mouth, Nazneen speaks her first English words: “Ice e-skating” and for the first time after years in England claims that she “would like to learn some English.” Meanwhile, her husband fails to understand the significance of Nazneen’s

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<sup>67</sup> Byrne briefly notes “Ice-skating is also of symbolic significance in the narrative, even though it does not appear more than a few times.”

discovery and makes a subtle attempt to relegate her to a traditional role when he explains that she is “unlikely to need these words in any case.” Thus, while the television set was previously just an object that “Chanu liked to keep [...] glowing in the evenings, [...but] mostly [...] ignored,” in a moment it ignites Nazneen’s aspirations towards integrating with British society (22). Berry cites education (in Nazneen’s case – the opportunity to acquire the English language) as a factor that can be, at times, central to positive acculturation experiences. As a kind of “pre-acculturation to the language, history, values and norms of the new cultures,” it may ease the transition between cultures (Berry, “Stress” 49). Specifically, the “language fluency” that Nazneen begins to pursue “bears a straightforward relationship to sociocultural adjustment; it is associated with increased interaction with members of the host culture and a decrease in sociocultural adjustment problems” (Masgoret and Ward 61).<sup>68</sup>

Together, Nazneen’s new language acquisition and understanding of social possibilities create a dramatic change in her character as she first acknowledges having felt “trapped” by her life (56). As this realization strikes her, she at first resists acknowledging “this shapeless, nameless thing that crawled across her shoulders and nested in her hair and poisoned her lungs, that made her both restless and listless.” As it’s power over her grew,

She asked it to leave her alone, but it would not. She pretended not to hear, but it got louder. She made bargains with it. [...] no more dreaming

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<sup>68</sup> It is important to acknowledge the contrast between Nazeen’s education and that of her husband Chanu. While she acquires skills that assist her integration into the community, he ceases the acquisition of skills once he enters the UK. His previous education mars his acculturation because, in his confidence, he devalues British culture.

of ice and blades and spangles. No more missed prayers, No more gossip. No more disrespect to my husband. She offered all these things for it to leave her. It listened quietly, and then burrowed deeper into her internal organs. (78)

Nazneen understands the impropriety of questioning her cultural and familial role, of challenging the omnipotence of fate. She is overcome, however, by the vision inspired by her television, so she begins to pursue a path of independence she never imagined was possible: she searches for fulfillment from an extramarital relationship and ultimately stands up to both her husband and her lover.<sup>69</sup> By the end of the novel, Nazneen has declaring her right to decide the outcome of her own life by refusing to return to Bangladesh with Chanu and denying Karim's marriage proposal.

Nazneen characterizes this life-altering change in perspective as similar to "watching the television in black and white and someone comes along and switches on the color...and then they pull you right inside the screen, so you're not watching anymore, you're part of it" (360). For Nazneen, television's introduction to ice-skating prompts her to acknowledge the emancipatory potential of acculturation to British life. At the same time, though, she never dismisses the significance of her Bangladeshi heritage. Rather than separating herself or assimilating, she continues to don the traditional Bangladeshi dress, the sari, and is repeatedly characterized by her cooking, allowing food to serve as a connection to her culture.<sup>70</sup> She values the roots of her past in conjunction

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<sup>69</sup> Marriage to the 40 year-old Chanu was arranged by her father, so when Nazneen meets Karim, she encounters a passion she has never experienced.

with the future promise of belonging within English society. Nguyen claims that the “rationale here seems to be that belongingness with those in one’s culture promotes a sense of support, identity and mental health” (“Acculturation in the United States” 320).

Castro agrees that integration is the:

[M]ost adaptive strategy because it provides individuals with two social support systems[,] represents the absence of intergroup conflict [...and] can be interpreted as the successful achievement of effective social and cultural competencies when interacting with both the ethnic group of references and other ethnic groups, which in turn provides individuals with a sense of self-efficacy. (88)

Nazneen’s reliance on mass media bears a significant difference to that of other characters illustrated in these stories of immigration. Nazneen seems to revere the role of mass media more than others. It instills in her a sense of awe, and she pays minute attention to every detail of the television show she watches. Furthermore, the show prompts her to action. Not only does the ice skater serve as a symbol of possibilities to Nazneen, but she actually emulates the woman when she stands on her bed, lifts her sari and mimics an ice skating pose. Nazneen quite literally sees herself in a different way. Mass media both inspires her and acts as the catalyst for her gradual efforts toward agency.

In contrast to Nazneen are characters who find their experiences as immigrants stifled by the intrusion of mass media as they aim to prevent facing the often-complex realities of living between cultures. For instance, the passive reliance upon radio,

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<sup>70</sup> Byrne also cites “Food, its preparation and consumption,” as an important motif in the novel.



television and periodicals exhibited by Eric's wife and Nadine exacerbate their feelings of estrangement from their host communities as they build up a wall that prevents cultural integration. Television has the opposite effect on Razia and Mrs. Azad as it is used strictly as a means of assimilation yet ultimately draws them towards a cultural rot. Chanu and Karim rely on books and the internet, respectively, as all-powerful tools of agency and proudly define themselves by their interaction with these forms. They confuse this identification with substance, however, and find their expectations frustrated when media fails to combat the cultural marginalization they face. While media forms might spark a promise of agency in some, as television does with Nazneen, they are only the means and not the end to such agency. A character must act upon this inspiration. In Nazneen's unique case, media forms assuage the process of acculturation only because she has integrated reverence for her past and a dream of her future with the reality of the present.

Together, these stories illustrate the integral role mass media plays in the acculturation process for immigrant characters. When television, radio, the internet, books and periodicals lead these characters to ignore their heritage or to avoid integrating into the host culture it proves detrimental to them and to the culture. But this is not Nazneen's story. For her, television inspires a new and passionate individualism. Between these new aspirations and her heritage, Nazneen finds an important middle ground. Refusing to be imprisoned by fate, she is Bangladeshi and British, wife and lover, daughter and mother, traditional woman and self-sufficient entrepreneur. In her own words she finds within herself, with the help of her television set, the power to "conquer everything" in life. By the end of the novel, Nazneen has succeeded in this

goal; she emulates her televised inspiration and ice-skates for the first time... and she does so while wearing a sari.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“Are you there, the way I’m here?”: Mass Mediated Identity in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition***

In the twenty-first century world, two media reign supreme. Even fifty years after its inception, television continues to captivate audiences as typical households view over eight hours of television per day (*Nielsen Media*). T.V. programming, however, has changed significantly. Today, audiences crave programs that highlight “real” people in “real life” scenarios. Reality shows have taken television audiences by storm since the mid nineteen-nineties and continue to draw in record numbers of viewers. Whether shows are depicting the *Real Life* of college age students living together or the *Flavor of Love* between singles who search for companionship, reality television programming has become an enormous presence in contemporary life. Likewise, the nineties brought the medium of the internet to the world, and the force of interconnectivity has already created a bubble, a bust and a host of new technologies that affect the day-to-day lives of over a billion users worldwide (*Internet World Stats*). Users log on for an average of fourteen hours a week to connect with others on portals ranging from dating sites to loan companies, to learn about the world via wiki encyclopedias and political blogs and to participate in the virtual culture of online music and films (Dawley).

Socio-cultural anthropologist Argun Appadurai explains this phenomenon of contemporary media influence in *Modernity at Large*. He cites “media” and “migration”

as two forces that have led to a “general rupture in the tenor of intersocietal relations” during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Together, “electronic mediation” and “mass migration” affect “modern subjectivity” and “impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination,” “providing resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project” (4). The results of such self-imagining, however, are complicated. He argues that:

With media, each time we are tempted to speak of the global village, we must be reminded that media create communities with ‘no sense of place.’ The world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other. (29)

Appadurai, however, links the “consumption” prompted by the media of a globalized world to “pleasure,” and, in turn, links this “pleasure” to the potential for “agency” since “the imagination is, today, a staging ground for action.” Yet, while this imagination “provokes resistance,” this influence is not “purely emancipatory” (7).

Of particular interest to my study is the “dimension of global cultural flows” in twenty-first century culture that Appadurai terms the “technoscape.” The technoscape consists of all technologies in a global world, “both high and low, both mechanical and informational, [that] now move [...] at high speeds across various kinds of impervious boundaries” (34). If, as Appadurai suggests, the contemporary world exists as a technoscape which associates both “fantasy” and “nightmare” with the pervasive

presence of electronic media, I question the degree that such media influences the expectations and understandings of the global world for the contemporary subject.

If the contemporary world does indeed exist as Appadurai's notion of the technoscape, such a pervasive presence of media technologies begs consideration of the ways in which media such as television and internet affect the lives of viewers and users. What influence do these forms have on their audience's expectations and understandings of "reality," and how is this reality translated to contemporary fiction? In the literature of a globalized twenty-first century, how do these medium shape perceptions of selfhood and agency? This chapter aims to shed light on these questions through consideration of two novels that represent the medium of television and internet: Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*.<sup>71</sup> These works are each ambivalent about the potential for self-determination in the global arena. They both express anxiety concerning the risks of mediation upon the contemporary subject yet suggest that such media do offer individuals in the global arena outlets for agency when viewers and users are willing to distance themselves from their powerful hold.

### ***My Year of Meats***

Although Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* was written just before the start of the new millennium, her story still maintains a definite timeliness appropriate to the twenty-first century as she engages the subject of reality television. Ozeki, a documentary film

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<sup>71</sup> The following works also consider the presence of information systems in contemporary American fiction: Peter Freese and Charles B. Harris' *The Holodeck in the Garden: Science and Technology in Contemporary American Fiction* (2004), John Johnston's *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (1998), and John Johnston and Friedrich A. Kittler's *Literature, Media and Information Systems* (1997).

producer herself, sheds light on the effects of the industry through a novel that uses the guise of meat to discuss a variety of issues regarding the contemporary condition ranging from feminism and globalization to dietary health and consumerism. She ultimately hones in on the manner in which reality television carries the potential to act as a tool of personal empowerment yet also defines a homogenized American identity.

Jane Tagaki-Little is the Japanese-American protagonist who produces a television show, *My American Wife*, for a Japanese audience that spotlights beef in the “typical” American home. The story begins with Jane filming the show featuring traditional housewives cooking their favorite meat recipes with the aim of fortifying Beef Ex, the beef industry’s, weak sales in Japan. As the story progresses, however, Jane begins to understand the implications of such a show as she comes to terms with the horrid reality of the meat industry and the manipulative undercurrent of reality television. She makes a rogue attempt to undermine the show’s aim by including a broader, more representative, yet less traditional subset of Americans such as a Mexican-American family and a vegetarian lesbian couple. By the end of the novel, Jane is fired for her renegade filmmaking, yet the film clips she subversively pieces together make national headlines as an exposé on the meat industry. While Jane’s story unfolds, her Japanese counterpart, Akiko, wife to Jane’s boss, undergoes a parallel transformation in Japan. After years of abuse and infertility, she is inspired by the *My Year of Meats* families’ stories to take charge of her unhappy life and make a liberating move to America to raise her child.

Most criticism of *My Year of Meats* emphasizes the book from feminist perspectives. In “Boundaries and Border Wars,” Julie Sze considers “both [the] freedom

and danger” inherent in the hybrid identities of individuals suffering from DES “pollution” (the synthetic estrogen prescribed to prevent miscarriages in Jane’s mother, yet that caused infertility in Jane) (801). Shameem Black argues in “Fertile Cosmofeminism” that the novel brings to light cosmopolitan “visions of motherhood and fertility,” allowing women like Jane and Akiko power in the “global dream” (248). The novel, she claims, “offer[s] us perspectives, identities, and communities that draw upon the strengths of transcultural alliances” amidst the “dilemmas created by globalization” (227). In line with Sze concerning the potential of “freedom and danger” involved with the scientific advancements detailed in the novel, I argue that *My Year of Meats* illuminates the nuances of two sides to the very complicated issue of media. And, similar to Black’s emphasis on global notions of womanhood, I contend that Ozeki uses her novel as a lesson on how to approach the “global dream” successfully.

At the start of the novel, Ozeki posits television as a benign if not positive influence on both viewers and producers. Jane is characterized as a typical television consumer and a producer who aims to positively influence her audience. She explains that she “had started [her] year as a documentarian. [She] wanted to tell the truth, to effect change, to make a difference” (360). She “wanted to make programs with documentary integrity, and [...she] believed in a truth that existed – singular, empirical, absolute” (176). She has faith in the potential of television and justifies feeling that she is “God” as she edits the footage since “people all over the world should try to lean about each other and understand each other, and that is what [the] television program is about” (103). Ozeki portrays the power of television with optimism, especially in the global

arena where a show like *My American Wife* can act as a force with the potential to unify disparate populations of Japanese and American viewers.

This emphasis on bringing a globalized world together lies at the heart of the novel. Jane, the daughter of a Japanese mother and an American father, is herself a symbol of such a world. The contrast between her Asian facial features and strikingly tall height causes Jane to feel the weight of her mixed race and nationality. “[P]oly sexual, polyracial, perverse,” “I straddle this blessed, every-shrinking world;” “halved, I am neither here nor there” (9; 15; 314). The problematic nature of her hybrid racial/national identity, however, is overcome by her immersion in the world of television. As a result of having “spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race, [Jane] was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to educate. Perhaps it was naïve, but I believed [...] that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth” (27). Television is the means towards this “Larger Truth” – a deeper understanding of globalism – and Jane embraces the medium as a tool towards cross-cultural acceptance.

As Jane continues producing the show, Ozeki begins to make evident just how pervasive an influence television is upon the lives of both American and Japanese audiences. She uses the metaphor of the climbing kudzu vine for this purpose, stressing the fact that “kudzu was predaceous, opportunistic, grew rampant, and was soon out of control [...T]he invasive Asian weed had overrun [...] southeastern United States. It



engulfed the indigenous vegetation, smothered shrubs and trees, and turned telephone poles and houses into hulking, emerald-green ghosts” (76).<sup>72</sup>

This description of kudzu is implicitly connected to the characterization of television offered by Ozeki. Furthermore, the kudzu metaphor is reminiscent of the theory of the “rhizome” described by postmodern theorists Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in “A Thousand Plateaus.” The two offer the symbol of the rhizome to explain how meaning emerges during communication. They argue that the growth of a rhizome offers an apt parallel to the flow of meaning. Meaning can be understood as a rhizome because as multiple growths shoot out from one another, neither point of origin nor end is discernable. Deleuze and Guattari explain that such rhizomic “multiple lines of flight” connect “all manner of becomings” (16). In terms of communication, meaning is not simply a relationship between sign and signifier. Instead it evolves from a web of associations.

On a basic level, such a metaphor paralleling television to kudzu or a rhizome stresses the all-encompassing influence of the medium. Television is *everywhere*. Whether a person is waiting to have a car repaired, checking in for a flight at the airport or entertaining children on a drive home from school, television bombards the day-to-day activities of most Americans. Viewers rely on their sets for a host of shows that help to entertain, provide companionship, or supply information.

Reality television takes this phenomenon a step further. Just as with the rhizome, which is shown to be a combination of influences merging together, reality television

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<sup>72</sup> Sze suggests that kudzu is representative of the “freedom and danger in the flows and movements of peoples, plants, and cultures around and within the world” (801).

blurs the line between reality and fiction. Does reality television simply document real life? Or is it even possible to do so once the Hollywood lights turn on and the cameras begin rolling? Many would argue that the medium, more often than not, bears little resemblance to the typical viewer's life. Some would even suggest that reality television, at times, not only fails to reflect real life but actually begins to dictate reality. Shows like *The Real World* actually define existence as they are watched and then emulated as a model of the social norm by an entire generation of young people. Furthermore, not only is television literally a web of connections similar to the rhizome, it is important to understand the medium is a complicated influence – not simply a beginning or an end. Instead, it is a process that must be engaged with by viewers rather than passively accepted. Otherwise, the medium threatens an invasive effect similar to that of kudzu. It affects individual identity in that it is an agent of our becoming, yet it does not dictate the manner in which we become.

Such influence takes a disturbing turn in the case of Suzie Flowers, a housewife featured on the show. After her episode is filmed and her husband leaves her for another woman, Suzie explains that footage of the show, especially the moment when she and her husband kiss in the last scene, are “all [she’s] got left” of her life (36). Sadly, the kiss was not even a real moment of marital bliss, but instead a pose staged in an effort to portray the “typical” American marriage. Jane comments that the subjects of her shows “lives are sealed in [a] box of tapes, locked away in the van” (36). Later, Suzie muses on the moment in the show when, during a survey, her husband admitted he had been unfaithful. She explains that the “boinnnggg!” edited in to highlight her startled expression was “exactly what she had felt at that time” (359). In fact, soon after seeing

the tape, Suzie's husband asked for a second chance, and "it was just like the show, the way you guys ended it, with a big kiss and everything" (359). Jane understands that "facts have turned right around and aligned themselves with fiction" (360). The "reality" portrayed on the television show begins to dictate the actual lives these characters lead.

This twisted reality where televised depictions begin to affect lived experience can be better understood via the lens of cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra. The simulacra is the point when an image has been reflected, and then copied again and again until any notion of an original disappears. Ultimately, the simulacra "masks the absence of a basic reality." Each place and person begins as a mere reflection of another, yet ends as the "hyperreal" – a "real without origin or reality" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 1). In the case of Suzie Flowers, experience has become, in Baudrillard's terms, "a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared" (7). Because the television show interferes with her life and marriage and Suzie is susceptible to its intonations, mediated experience supplants her original experience. Thus life "is aligned [...] with fiction." In the postmodern world, one where television is omnipresent, the real is "no longer the real." (12). Reality also becomes rhizomic as the difference between life and television fiction is not discernable.

Ozeki complicates this issue by showing that as television influences contemporary life in this way, it does so in a very problematic manner. The "reality" that shows like this produce is just that: a production. Jane begins to understand that, in her role, "sometimes you have to make things up, to tell truths that alter outcomes" (360). Her goal as an editor is "creating a seamless flow in a reality that was no longer theirs

and not quite so real anymore” (179). As the crew strives to maintain “authenticity,” Jane is aware that the scenario portrayed is “not the real thing at all;” “it’s a lie” (30; 29).

Ozeki shows that this simulacrum, sadly, has a damaging effect on the American population. She creates a metaphor between American consumerism, represented by Wal-mart, and reality television. “Wal-mart –,” she claims, is the “capitalist equivalent of the wide open spaces and endless horizons of the American geographical frontier spectacle of raw American abundance” (35). Nonetheless, she continues that:

If there is one single symbol for the demise of regional American culture, it is this superstore prototype, a huge capitalist boot that stomped the moms and pops, like soft, damp worms to death. Don’t get me wrong. I love Wal-mart. There is nothing I like more than to consign a mindless afternoon to those aisles, suspending thought, judgment. It’s like television. But to a documentarian of American culture, Wal-mart is a nightmare. When it comes to towns, Hope, Alabama becomes the same as Hope, Wyoming, or for that matter, Hope, Alaska, and in the end, all that remain of our pioneering aspirations are the confused and self-conscious simulacra of relic culture: Ye Olde Curiosities’n’Copie Shoppe, Deadeye Dick’s Saloon and Karaoke Bar – ingenious hybrids and strange global grafts that are the local businessperson’s only chance of survival in economies of scale. (56)

American consumer culture relies on the simulacra to forge a sense of small town Americana to consumers who are drawn to smaller, independent businesses yet crave the convenience and economy of retail giants. Ozeki is pessimistic about such an effect on

the American homefront when seemingly unique businesses reflect mirror images of others, and her criticism implies a meaningful parallel: not only do global corporations like Wal-mart take away any sense of character from small-town America, but the pervasive influence of television takes away any sense of character from small-town Americans as reality television dictates a false sense of shared experience.

Ozeki criticizes this culture under the spell of the television simulacra, claiming that “Middle America is all about drift and suspension. It’s the pervasiveness of the mall-culture mentality; all of life becomes an aimless wafting on currents of synthesized sound, through the well-conditioned air” (162). She argues that Americans have become “faux dumb [...] politically, ethically, aesthetically” (224). Ozeki blames her diagnosis of the contemporary American condition on:

Media attention [...] coming at us like this – in waves, massed and unbreachable – knowledge becomes symbolic of our disempowerment – becomes bad knowledge – so we deny it, riding its crest until it subsides from consciousness. I have heard myself protesting, “*I didn’t know!*” but this is not true. [...] I knew a little. I knew enough. [...] I chose to ignore what I knew. [...] Ignorance is an act of will, a choice that one makes over and over again, especially when information overwhelms and knowledge has become synonymous with impotence. I would like to think of my “ignorance” less as a personal failing and more as a massive cultural trend, an example of doubling, of psychic numbing, that characterizes the end of the millennium. If we can’t act on knowledge, then we can’t survive without ignorance. So we cultivate the ignorance, go to great lengths to

celebrate it, even. The *faux*-dumb aesthetic that dominates TV and Hollywood *must* be about this. Fed on a media diet of really bad news, we live in a perpetual state of repressed panic. We are paralyzed by bad knowledge, from which the only escape is playing dumb. Ignorance becomes empowering because it enables people to live. Stupidity becomes proactive. A political statement. Our collective norm. Maybe this exempts me as an individual, but it sure makes me entirely culpable as a global media maker. (334)

Ozeki characterizes contemporary subjects as so blindly reliant upon television that they “cultivate ignorance” and become “psychic[ly] numb[...]” rather than making the “choice” towards knowledge. Furthermore, beyond the psychological state that the current world of global consumerism and T.V. fetishization causes are a wealth of what Ozeki refers to as “‘diseases of affluence’ – the heart attacks, strokes, and stomach cancers caused” by irresponsible consumer habits (206). There is a striking sense of anxiety forged here when one realizes that eating, like buying goods and viewing television, must be limited in order to sustain the health (mental and physical) of the individual. Yet ignorance is commodified, and Americans are often unwilling to analyze the effects of their viewing and consumption habits. Without such attention, the simulacra attains an unwieldy power over their existence.

This message is the heart of Ozeki’s statement regarding the effects of television on the individual. Again, she returns to the kudzu metaphor; however, she emphasizes the line between viewing the plant as an “invasive weed” versus a “prized crop” (75-6). Not only is kudzu a sign of globalization, originally growing in Japan and later

introduced at the Philadelphia exposition, the crop is oft “touted as [a] miracle plant and praised for versatility, hardiness, and speed of growth” (76). It earned the esteem of the nickname “Dixie Savior” as it promoted fertility in nutrient poor Southern soils. Ozeki suggests that, like kudzu, television is not inherently insidious, although if handled irresponsibly or imprudently it promises devastating effects.

Viewers and creators of television shows, like farmers, must understand that sometimes “you had to look at things from another angle” (83).<sup>73</sup> Instead of tearing down the weed, you should begin “researching the various uses [...] and perfecting recipes [...]” as Vern, one of the *My American Wife* guests, did. “With a little ingenuity and a few pointers from the internet, [he] was certain he could find a way to turn this old weed into a solid cash crop” (83). Just as Vern’s new understanding of kudzu leads to “high hopes of [a] winning [recipe] at the state fair,” a fresh perspective regarding the medium of television, one that involves research and foresight, suggests an optimistic attitude towards the contemporary technoscape.

There are two moments at the end of the novel when this new perspective towards television is evident. The first involves Akiko. Finally pregnant after years of infertility and beaten for the last time by her abusive husband, she is inspired by the characters featured on *My American Wife* (which she is forced to watch, judge and emulate nightly by her husband) to flee to America to test her independence. Television is the means of her knowledge of the outside world and her introduction to the options available. At this point, while considering that her “baby-to-be was full of promise,” she makes one all-

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<sup>73</sup> Black acknowledges a similar point, arguing that the novel mediates the threat of “corporate-controlled visual media” with the “assert[ion] that some dreams are worth pursuing and paying for” (248).

important step. “Akiko didn’t turn on the television, not even once” (317). While the medium did have the potential to empower her, it was also a tool of her husband’s dominance over her as he forced her to view the show. Her burgeoning sense of identity (coupled with the hope of producing a new life who would not be limited the way she was) takes precedence over her reliance on the medium that was forced on her by John – who is a symbol of a media mogul. She is truly free for the first time in her life.

Jane comes to a similar understanding of her responsibility to free herself from the constraints of the medium. She refuses to concede to her superiors’ desire for the “authenticity” of the perfect, white, upper-middle class family (64). Instead, she produces renegade versions of *My Year of Meats* that include families who she believes better represent the true American population. She begins to realize that “at the cusp of the new millennium,” those stories “that threaten to slip through the cracks, untold, out of history” are the truly “authentic” voices of America (360; 336). Attempts to muffle them are the root of the pervasive dumbing of a globalized society, so she must wake from the television haze and do her part to nudge her fellow viewers from their sleep.

### ***Pattern Recognition***

William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* is the author’s first novel dealing with the realities of contemporary life rather than the science fiction imaginings of a future world. Gibson began the novel before the 9/11 attacks, yet re-wrote the work after the events, knowing that a “very scary and serious thing” had significantly altered his perception of the world (“William Gibson” 208). The timeliness of this novel, one marked by a



defining event of the pivot into the twenty-first century, suggests *Pattern Recognition* as an especially worthy specimen for the study of the new millennium.

The story centers around Cayce Pollard, a “coolhunter” who spends her workdays searching for the next new trends and her leisure time surfing the Internet on the Fetish:Footage:Forum (F:F:F). While on a business trip in London performing research for Blue Ant tycoon Hubertus Bigend, Cayce and her friends begin to investigate the origins of a mysterious series of hundreds of fragmented film stills called the footage that have surfaced piecemeal on the Internet. Gibson offers little information about the footage until the end of the novel when we learn that each fragment features a computer-generated human figure compiled from a variety of digitally remastered photographs. As Cayce and company follow clues to uncover the “maker” of the footage, traversing the globe from Britain to Japan to Russia, their efforts are complicated. Rival advertising exec Dorotea Benedetti seeks to sabotage Cayce’s position at Blue Ant and her search for the “maker” of the footage by playing on Cayce’s extreme anxiety of corporate logos (the Michelin Man in particular) and hiring a pack of goons to shadow Cayce on her quest.

Much criticism of Gibson’s work lies in the realm of science, technology and popular culture since the author has made a name for himself as a ground-breaking science fiction writer. Thus, because it is a novel regarding present day exploits rather than futuristic endeavors, *Pattern Recognition* has elicited less critical response than many of Gibson’s other novels (particularly *Neuromancer*).

The criticism that does exist, however, typically centers upon reading the novel as some blaring sign regarding the twenty-first century. In *New Literary History*’s “Recognizing the Patterns,” Phillip E. Wegner suggests that *Pattern Recognition* is

primarily a 9/11 novel. He explains that the novel aims to “map out the parameters of a newly emergent global order, and to come to grips with the consequences of 9/11 for this new world” (196). He urges readers to “Recognize the patterns!” – that is recognize the real meaning of 9/11 and the direction of the present before we commit ourselves to a course of action from the ‘gray muck and bones’ of which we may not be able to extricate ourselves for a long, long time” (198). Kim Yeoman focuses on issues of “nature and human nature,” amidst our contemporary “technocratic culture,” arguing the “ecocritical need to be aware of the danger of virtualized and dehumanized society” (1). Dave Langford writes in the *New Scientist* article, “Garage Kubrick,” that “Cayce is the true denizen of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” arguing that “future shock overtakes the present” as people “don’t just use but inhabit the net” (1). In “The Femininization of Globalization” from *Cultural Critique*, John Marx approaches the novel with an eye towards Cayce as a representation of women in the new global order. He argues that “whatever changes may appear in the public sphere, women will still more than likely find their stories resolved only when they find themselves embroiled in the usual comforts of private life” (15). He argues it is a “mistake for investment in progress to displace necessity of analyzing change” (23). Lisa Zeidner observes in her *New York Times Book Review* that “Gibson nails the texture of Internet culture,” while showing that “if our new century is unsettlingly transitional, it becomes even more difficult to fix an individual identity within it – especially given the fear that [...] there will soon be no national identity left” (7). Asking whether “our technology really produce[s] a cataclysmic shift, or is human nature immutable?” she concludes that “the right answer isn’t necessarily either/or. It may well be both/and” (7).

Gibson has created a text that boasts flashes of digital culture and vivid pictures of the global world, and each of these critics, regardless of the direction or theme of their analysis, point to a common message. Readers are called on by Wegner to “recognize,” by Yeonman “to be aware” and by Marx to “analyze,” as these critics characterize the twenty-first century as “a newly emergent global order,” a “virtualized and dehumanized society,” and, more simply, a significant moment of “progress.” This consensus is valuable, yet I would like to emphasize the centrality of the internet to the transformative twenty-first century. My argument suggests the inextricable effects of internet culture by contending that attention to the subtle changes in our contemporary world (rather than simple reverence for global progress) is essential if contemporary subjects are to “extricate” themselves from what Wegner terms the “muck and bones” that threaten the age.

At the heart of this hip novel is a significant, albeit subtle message concerning the effects of media upon people like Cayce. However, the medium of the Internet does not simply affect character identity. Much of the novel deals with Gibson’s characters’ search to understand the mystery of the footage which itself serves as a symbol representative of character identity. Interest in the footage can be read as a metaphor for the existential quest of individuals in a mass-mediated twenty-first century world. As Cayce follows clues to uncover the “maker” of the footage, an important message about the consequences of Internet-spawned globalization and individual identity formation results: The intrusive nature of technoscape poses provocative challenges to the potential for individual agency.

Gibson's novel is set in an era marked by globalization, and, on the surface, he characterizes globalization optimistically. In his 2007 study of globalization, *The World is Flat*, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Thomas Friedman explains the twenty-first century world – the setting for *Pattern Recognition*. He suggests that the internet ranks highly among a number of factors that have influenced the global “flat[ening]” of the world. Interestingly, in 2003, Gibson also described the effects of the internet as having “leveled the playing field [of the contemporary world] in a very interesting way” (“William Gibson On the Spot” 70). Friedman terms the flattening phenomena as “Globalization 3.0” and observes that “it just happened – right around the year 2000” (10; 11). He explains that the “convergence of the personal computer,” allowing individuals agency over their own “content,” along with the “fiber-optic cable,” allowing global digital access, and “work flow software,” provided for worldwide collaboration between individuals and caused the “flattening and shrinking” of the world (10; 11). The medium of the internet is shown as an all-important tool in the global world, for speed and distance of information movement is essential. Thus, globalization and the *world wide web* are inextricably linked.<sup>74</sup>

Just as the racially hybrid Jane physically bears the signs of a flat world, Cayce certainly seems to exist in such a “flat” world - the virtually borderless world characteristic of the twenty-first century – and the theme of globalism is manifest throughout the novel. While pursuing the trail of the footage, she is able to board a plane and within hours change continents, traveling from New York to London to Tokyo to

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<sup>74</sup> Note that I will rely extensively on this link in this section, first discussing the impact of globalization shown in the novel and then relating this to the influence of internet culture.

Moscow. She is representative of the global subject since she never actually resides in her own home throughout the novel, yet she easily adjusts to each new setting in which she finds herself.

A variety of factors seem to ease this transition from place to place for Cayce. She appears comfortable with this culture-crossing since, interestingly, language (a factor typically characteristic of regionality) is somehow never a barrier. Either locals in her foreign environs speak English, a friend translates for her (such as the emails translated to Japanese by Parkaboy's friend) *or* spoken language does not seem to be a necessity (such as in her dealings with Taki, where computer-altered photographs and the language of love seem to need no translation).<sup>75</sup> Additionally, in each foreign land she visits, she finds her way to a stable locale – either the local pilates studio or the local Starbucks (both signs of the global consumer market) – where she is able to read the familiar signs around her. Furthermore, just as Friedman argues, Cayce is able to form worldwide connections via her computer. She maintains contact with her coterie through her laptop – her internet mediated link to the world. No matter where she goes, she has a nearly immediate link to her life at the opposite end of the world. Regardless of which continent Cayce visits, the intricately networked global village in which she resides usually assuages the potential burdens of travel.

Appadurai explains the optimism of this phenomenon, citing the “technoscape” as promising “new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds” (3). For instance, the creator of the computer-generated dream

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<sup>75</sup> Parkaboy is the username for Cayce's cyber partner. Taki is the Japanese character who is manipulated by Cayce and Parkaboy into a faux cyberspace relationship with the fabricated cyber-girl, Keiko.

girl Keiko relies on Internet communication to bring his construction to life.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, the makers of the footage rely on the Internet to create their virtual reality. Mediation and this global shift “mark the world of the present” as “the work of the imagination” which “can become the fuel for action” “provok[ing ...] agency” as a “key component of the new global order” (4; 7; 31). Just as both Jane and Akiko rely on the technoscape of transnational television broadcasting as they make choices and changes which both positively alter their lives and affirm their independence, Cayce embraces the technoscape of the contemporary world for its liberating potential.

Although Appadurai suggests a definite agency resulting from the increasingly networked aspects of globalization, I find it necessary to question this link and to acknowledge the challenges it presents. Can the freedom associated with mediation in the global world be equated with self-determination? Early in the novel, Cayce comments on “the hectic speed” of the forum, “plus the feeling that everyone is talking at once, at counter-purpose” (4). It seems that she, as an individual in this new world, is somewhat unprepared for the changes and difficulties it brings. One factor, in particular, regarding this speed clearly hinders Cayce’s traversal of national borders and hints at a sense of foreboding regarding the potential of such a global community: her soul never travels as quickly as her person.

Cayce explains her friend Damien’s theory of jet lag: “her mortal soul is leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical down the vanished wake of the plane [...] souls can’t move that quickly, and are left behind, and must be awaited, upon arrival like lost luggage” (1). Cayce’s belief that jet lag is actually the momentary “soul

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<sup>76</sup> Keiko is a cyber-girl used to attract Taki into divulging secrets.

delay” of travel as the physical Cayce is able to be transported more quickly than the spiritual Cayce results in what she terms “soul-displacement” (194; 166). Cayce’s observation makes a striking point about a globalized world: she begins to understand that “lost” is an existential state in which she “lives” – where she finds herself more often than not (166).<sup>77</sup> The global world hinders the security of a fixed sense of belonging.

Furthermore, as Cayce travels between nations and living spaces, she finds herself adopting other people’s spaces as her own (Damien’s London apartment) or adjusting to anonymous living spaces (hotel rooms). Cayce holds no control over these surroundings (she uses Damien’s computer rather than her own); they bear no markings of her personality (her abodes are generically decorated hotel rooms or match the aesthetic of the owner); there is no sense of belonging upon entering these spaces (she is forced to move as soon as Damien returns from his trip). Furthermore, as Cayce travels, she spends less and less time in her own “home.” Not only does she simply minimize the time spent in her New York apartment, but she consciously begins to distance herself from the primary marker of her origin: her mother, refusing to connect with her via telephone or internet because evidence of “home” breeds a sense of unease in Cayce. In essence, she becomes the ultimate wanderer as she strips herself of any signs of origin or belonging.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> In *Information Multiplicity*, John Johnson explains that “mass media [...] renders [...] the experience of the individual consciousness not only transient and arbitrary but also fragmentary and incomplete” (12).

<sup>78</sup> Freese and Harris, in *Holodeck in the Garden*, explain “in such a global network, [...] the local will seem to lose its importance and may appear to serve primarily as a point of contact with the global” (54). Poster argues that “digital subjects are solicited not to stabilize, centralize, and unify the territorial identity that [...] is given by

Gibson suggests that there is a soul at the center of the individual – a soul that is at risk in such a world where a sense of belonging disappears, where a homogenized global identity threatens individual identity. In a 2003 *Newsweek* interview, he explains: “The world today seems to consist of squirming fractal bits. Everything is so fluid” (Mnookin 1). This applies to the soullessness experienced by Cayce during her travels. Cultural theorist David Harvey’s theory of time-space compression in *The Condition of Postmodernity* helps to shed light on this notion. He explains that the “modern” world is “characterized by ephemerality and change” (10). This is the factor that so affects Cayce. With increasingly rapid transit, with the globalizing of the world in the later twentieth century, the importance of place is replaced by a need to recognize *space*. Harvey argues that “the interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds [...] in the same space and time [...] it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin” (300). Since place is often linked to individual identity (nationality, regionality, locality), a “crisis of identity” results when “no one ‘knows their place’ in this shifting collage world.” In other words, Cayce is living in a new world where she can no longer rely on a sense of place, a sense of home or, as Gibson suggests, the “trace of [her] origin,” to define her identity (Mnookin 1). Instead, she simply moves from space to space, and as the markers of place diminish, she begins to feel the slightest hint of existential disorientation.

Furthermore, life in such a world becomes confusing as “everything [...] is to some extent a reflection of something else.” As with *My Year of Meats*, Baudrillard’s

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birth or social position, but to invent and construct themselves in relations with others. In the digital medium, subject formation becomes a task inherent in cultural exchange. And it does so at a planetary level” (43).



theory of the simulacra comes into play. Each place and person begins as a mere reflection of another, yet ends as the hyperreal. Cayce's description of place often evolves this way. She explains London as a "mirror world" of the U.S., where characteristics of each nation reflect each other identically. The only difference is that people drive on different sides of the road. Eventually, however, each city she visits is a "mask" of the others, and ultimately, there is nothing hidden under the mask. For instance, just as Jane notes the Wal-mart-induced similarities between Hope, Alabama and Hope, Alaska, Cayce notices an "Italian looking establishment" in Russia and finds herself "doing the but-really-it's-like thing" when she travels, as she thinks "but really it's like Vienna, except it isn't, and really it's like Stockholm, but it's not, really" (310; 276). Cayce's world has transformed into one giant simulacra.

Cayce's reaction to the homogenizing effects of the global world as evidenced by her response to the global consumerism of fashion and marketing evidences this. Cayce's success as a "cool hunter" suggests that her ability to find the next new trend is actually more of a knack in determining the difference between the hackneyed aspects of highly popular products and the inherent coolness of yet undetected styles and products. For instance, her dislike (bordering on fear) of popular logos displays an aversion to consumer mass-culture. While she shudders at the puffy horror of the Michelin Man, she breathes a sigh of relief upon identifying the perfectly unique new corporate logo. This tendency to resist popular culture is most evident in Cayce's clothing choices. She would prefer to wear her nearly-impossible-to-find Buzz Rickson's bomber jacket, unmarked by name brands and with an enduringly cool aura about it, than the designer fashions

fleetingly popular in the major cities she frequents.<sup>79</sup> She cloaks herself in a simple, timeless wardrobe that defies the limits of high fashion and the marketing ploys that bombard her daily. In essence, she aims to set her self apart from the crowd through this lack of cultural branding, to exist as a unique individual in a world that has begun to lack the distinctive markers of place and individual. Just as Akiko found a sense of freedom outside her role of traditional heterosexual housewife, Cayce relishes the opportunity to exist with a fluid sense of identity in a world that is increasingly homogenized.

Harvey and Appadurai both offer explanations of the mass consumer phenomenon to which Cayce reacts. Harvey argues that fashion “cultivates a sham individualism” that “combines ‘the attraction of differentiation and change with that of similarity and conformity’” (26). Appadurai defines it “fetishism of the consumer.” He explains that when modern consumers are affected by the “media-scape[...] of advertising,” they transform “into a sign [...] that] mask[s...] the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer of the many forces that constitute production” (41). Rather than an “actor” in the process of creating identity, those susceptible to the ploy of advertising remain “a chooser” in globalization’s primary “instrument[...] of homogenization” (41). Cayce is only human, and her reliance upon iconic corporations such as Starbucks displays a susceptibility to the draw of global consumerism. Even so,

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<sup>79</sup> Design historian Victor Margolin argues in his *Print* review of *Pattern Recognition* that these “consumer products and their brand identities” act “as a form of power” in the novel (54). While agreeing that Gibson “recognize[s] the way that design [...] has insinuated itself into the global consciousness,” Margolin argues that the author “doesn’t thoroughly explore” the “social control” inherent in the “search for patterns” and “offers little insight into global advertising”(54; 349; 350). Conversely, I believe that Cayce’s fashion choices and aversion to mass consumerism, however, suggest that Gibson is indeed formulating a very poignant message via Cayce’s character regarding the level of control available to citizens of the twenty-first century world.

she acknowledges (whether consciously or not) the threatening loss of individuality inherent in a globalized consumer world, thus, in her aversion to fashion, she resists this position of “chooser.” At times she fights and wins; at other times, she embraces her opponent. To do otherwise, Gibson shows, is an impossibility in this new world.

As a subject in a globalized world, Cayce seems to remain fairly aware of the factors that threaten her conception of her existence. In response to such perils, the internet acts as a haven safe for her. This space adopts an enormous significance throughout *Pattern Recognition* as it replaces the traditional “home” Cayce has eschewed. As she sheds ties to life in New York, she fortifies her reliance upon the connectivity of the internet. It is in the forum, in particular, that she feels “at home” (4). She explains that “this second home” “has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones” (65; 4). As she connects to the forum multiple times daily, from various locales across the globe, and communicates with personalities she has only encountered online, the forum begins to co-opt the space of Cayce’s traditional “home” in New York. It is here, in this space on the internet, that she socializes, that she gleans information, that she belongs. Wegner describes this “subcultural belonging” as a response to the “weakening of older national and regional borders, coupled with the explosive growth of new instantaneous communication technologies.” He explains that this “cult” is “unlike the dominant forms of communal belonging” in that it is “no longer limited by culture or geography, becoming truly global in nature” (190). It is this space upon which she relies for comfort, for security, for knowledge typically provided by home and family.

The forum, furthermore, is a space of anonymity. There is no leader to guide or hold users accountable to the forum. The community of members relies solely on usernames and some, like Mama Anarchia, who is really a disguised Dorotea, have devised alter egos for their online personas. Users' double lives offer them the freedom of masks. Thus, just as with her clothing choices, the draw of Cayce's online haven seems to reside in her ability to transcend all markers. She relishes the opportunity to exist in a world where a fluid sense of identity is possible – where individuals are not constructed as fixed subjects.<sup>80</sup> This potential is akin to that assumed by Akiko when she begins to question her sexuality after viewing the episode of *My American Wife* featuring the lesbian couple. There is a certain liberation available to both characters when they find they are able to step outside the cultural norms.

Like the forum itself, the footage makes a significant statement about the importance of origin. Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the footage proves "impossible to trace" (21). It bears neither markers of era nor place. "There is a lack of evidence," in the fragments, "an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful" (23). Its indeterminable origin is especially impressive to Cayce as it has "a way of cutting across boundaries, transgressing the accustomed order of things"

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<sup>80</sup> In *The Self Wired*, Lisa Yaszek explains this result of human/media interaction. She explains that the influence of "advanced technologies" "transform[...] the body into a conduit between external forces and the internal psyche. [...] The body becomes a kind of permeable interface, technological mediation seems to replace direct organic experience as the subject's primary source of information about itself and the world. [...] Thus, providing an opportunity to explore new modes of identity and agency" (1; 3). Likewise, in Mark Poster's *Information Please*, he asserts that contemporary mass media allow "more persons in more parts of the world to consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. (35). At the same time the internet offers an increased potential for individuality in self-determination, it also increases the risk of homogenization.

(as she does when she travels) (20). And, like Deleuze and Guattari, who appreciate the benefit inherent in such a structure, Cayce finds a certain beauty in the footage's ability to subvert the powerful hold of origin. Its unique aura allows it to transcend both time and place offering almost an air of freedom to the footage.<sup>81</sup> If viewers can't identify the fundamental characteristics of the footage, if they can't understand the message it holds, then they can't control it. In a critical article regarding the novel in the *New Left Review*, Fredric Jameson explains Cayce's draw to the footage in that "its utter lack of style is an ontological relief, like black-and-white film after the conventional orgies of bad technicolour, like the silence of solitude for the telepath whose mind is jammed with noisy voices all day long. The footage is an epoch of rest, an escape from the noisy commodities themselves" (114). Thus Cayce emulates the lessons learned from the footage as she distances herself from links to her own origin.

Cayce's curiosities regarding the footage are not unique, and other internet users flock to it. Popularity about the footage grows exponentially as it travels across space from the Forum through home computers and onto major news stations. As Gibson characterizes the pervasive nature of the internet, he also offers a brief moment that bears a subtle, yet important significance – especially combined with Ozeki's use of kudzu as a metaphor. In an aside to herself, Cayce imagines her father's farm in Tennessee, thinking there is "something like kudzu" there. "No, she corrects herself, it probably is kudzu,

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<sup>81</sup> The footage displays no sign of nation or era just as an individual in the global arena finds it increasingly possible to shed markers of place, just as the curta calculator – an outdated piece of technology sought after by a collector in the novel – is argued to be a "step forward" by virtue of its timeless aesthetic appeal, just as Cayce does with her attachment to her Rickson's jacket and fascination with non-descript, yet hip clothing (230). The goal in this age of conformity is to remain an individual who is as timeless – like the footage.

kudzu is where it comes from. Kudzu at home” (162). The notion of kudzu suggests the all-encompassing nature of the footage. As word of the footage grows, viewership literally attains global proportions, marking the footage as a sign of the globalized world.

With this link to kudzu, the theory of the rhizome is again especially pertinent to understanding the medium: with the internet, an infinite number of links form connections between sites, so there is literally no beginning or ending to the associations created. Users can backup, go forward, return home (a dynamic place that a user may alter with the click of the mouse) or jump from link to link, actually moving in a non-linear manner. Because the internet is literally a web of connections similar to the rhizome, it is important to understand the medium as we do the rhizome – not as a solidly beneficial or threatening form – neither a beginning nor an ending. Instead, it is a process that must be engaged with.

This rapid growth in popularity of the footage cannot be viewed blindly as a benefit to mankind or a harmless facet of contemporary life. It also holds more threatening tendencies. Once the footage has been disseminated, there is no means of controlling the way it is understood or used. The footage, like kudzu, is infectious by nature.<sup>82</sup> Like a weed, it spreads with abandon, and like the foliage that succumbs to this weed, individuals are powerless to its grasp. For instance, Cayce is subject to Dorotea’s espionage after her computer is hacked and Dorotea infiltrates the forum. Similarly, Taki is tricked into falling in love with the computer-generated Keiko he meets online. While at the start Gibson provides an optimistic message about the influence of globalization

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<sup>82</sup> Johnson characterizes the “viral power of information” in contemporary twentieth century fiction (3). Likewise, in Poster argues that media forms “travel across the continents, proliferating and disseminating like viruses” (35).

and the internet, his ultimate message includes a fundamentally pessimistic warning. The forum is used as a tool of deception and theft in much the same way the Internet is a likely haven for predators of the young or naïve. Thus, in addition to the existential potential held by the internet, *Pattern Recognition* begins to explore a significant message about the anxieties associated with the medium. Although it spreads globally, bringing people together in ways similar to the television show of Ozeki's novel, Gibson highlights that it does so with certain existential risks.

If the footage is a metaphor for individual identity, its lack of origin is complicated as the fragments are “endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators, [and] have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction” (24). The film stills fail to maintain a discernable identity. As viewers grapple with the various possibilities regarding the “maker” of the footage, several potentials arise. The “completists” “are convinced that the footage is comprised of snippets from a finished work, one whose maker chooses to expose it piecemeal and in nonsequential order” (46). The “progressives” “assume that the footage consists of fragments of a work in progress, something unfinished and still being generated by its maker” (46). If the completists are correct, and each fragment is actually a piece of a larger, already constructed work, then Gibson's is a pessimistic message regarding the bleak potential for individuals who seek to hold an active role in their identity formation. Destiny trumps agency when man's identity, like the footage as a whole, is already constructed for him.

Caution is further emphasized when Cayce begins to speculate that the footage might be watermarked. Traditional watermarking typically serves as a visible identifier of

a paper material's authenticity that prevents unauthorized copying. As a symbol for identity, this type of watermarking would serve as the ideal Cayce strives for – the potential for the “authenticity” Jane struggled for. Digital watermarking, however, is the *invisible* id code placed onto digital sources which typically bears information of origin such as copyright. Ideally, this watermark cannot be removed no matter how many times the digital information is moved or altered, and only the skilled technician is able to uncover the information. Cayce parallels herself to the footage as she imagines bearing such a digital watermark. “She finds herself imagining a symbol, something watermarking the lower right-hand corner of her existence. It is just there, just beyond some periphery, beyond the physical, beyond vision, and it marks her as...what?” (78). She understands that this watermark is actually an identifying pattern designed to subtly mark a source, in this case her identity, for its life. Cayce defiantly rejects such patterns throughout the novel because she identifies their potential to thwart her efforts towards agency. Patterns, if uncovered, may be copied and are thus enormous threats to notions of individuality.

The pattern evident in the watermarking fortifies the emphasis on apophenia, seeing patterns in random things, throughout the novel. From Cayce's job “recogniz[ing] a pattern before anyone else” and the “EVP freaks” who listen for “voices of the dead” in strings of audiotape to the death of Cayce's father on 9/11 and the desire to uncover patterns in the footage, Gibson shows that you must “recognize that [you were] only a part of something larger” because “it was probably an illusion that you were ever in control in the first place” (86; 115; 124; 197). This lesson that “[w]e are most often cogs in larger plans” suggests a limited agency for individuals' identity formation (341).



While Gibson repeatedly reminds of such threats, the ultimate message is only illuminated at the end of the novel once Cayce uncovers the makers of the footage. Cayce's letter to the maker highlights how she views her place in the twenty-first century world and why she finds the footage so appealing. She explains, "*We're out there, seeking, taking risks. In hope, [...] of bringing back wonders.*" She characterizes herself an "adventurer" who traverses the medium, attempting to understand her place in the twenty-first century world with the all-important question, "Are you there? The way I'm here?" (254).

The novel responds to these existential questions by uncovering the two sisters who create (Nora) and disseminate (Stella) the footage, illuminating the influence of such a medium on those who view it. Their names, Stella meaning "star" and Nora meaning "light" suggest the potential for promise to accompany the medium of the internet. This is a potential akin to that of kudzu. In fact, there is a potential to that of the atomic bomb – an enormous technological advancement and sign of military strength that also killed the sisters' parents and caused Nora's nearly catatonic mental state. With every technological promise, however, just as with the effects of kudzu and the devastating bomb, lies an invariable threat.

Nora's situation, however, much like Jane and Akiko's, offers Cayce some practical advice to consider when interacting with this all-powerful medium. Nora already has a "t-shaped fragment" from the bomb that killed her parents embedded in her skull. She can never avoid this influence – a symbol of the threat of such technologies. She is able, however, to take some degree of ownership over the effects of this fragment. She relies on her mental state, first of all, to "use the equipment. To edit. Recut" the stills

until she has created a fragment of footage (288). She acts as Appadurai's notion of an "actor" as she manipulates scraps of video with a "roving, darting cursor" (305). In fact, Stella speculates, "perhaps one day they speak – her characters" (302). This possibility shows that, through her actions, Nora will offer agency to others. The foundation for such feats of will in the internet age, however, involves embracing the markers that Cayce typically rejects. In order to create, Nora must be sequestered from the globalizing world around her, safely tucked in the essential Russian setting: a Cold War era barracks – a sign of both her nation and her origin.

While it is impractical if not impossible to follow Nora's model of isolation, Gibson insinuates that although the global world bears a heavy influence over the contemporary subject, even a small effort to formulate one's identity on one's own terms can have remarkable effects. The finale of the novel makes this point clear. The turning point of Cayce's conception of her own identity occurs when she finally understands the implications of her reliance upon the internet. "Something huge has happened," she explains, "but she can't define it" (292). Using Nora as a model, Cayce ultimately makes some subtle, yet all-important changes to her life. As she and her beau Peter, formerly Parkaboy, forgo their jet setting and online relationships to settle in one spot together, she muses that "she still has the ibook but never uses it for email. [And her] Louis Vuitton attaché causes her no discomfort at all." In fact, she's in no hurry to return to work, and Peter comments that they are doing something he has not done in years: taking a vacation. He acknowledges the transformation that takes place by the end of the novel that he, like Cayce, "was someone very different" now (355). While neither rejects

outright the complicated factors of the twenty-first century world, they are certainly suspect of such influence.

This resolution leads Cayce to “weep[...] for her century, though whether the one past or present she doesn’t know.” She is fulfilled by this realization, however, for her soul “has returned, at least for the meantime, reeled entirely in on its silver thread and warmly socketed” (356). She does indeed stay plugged in, but does so with an awareness of the risks associated with the medium.

Considered together as literary representations of twenty-first century life, *Pattern Recognition* and *My Year of Meats* converge on a central message. To begin with, the world is already a globalized place where nations are inextricably linked. Whether the markers of such a connected sphere are hybrid race or transnational travel, the point is clear: turning back the clock is an impossibility. While acceptance of the state of the world is both practical and necessary, viewers and users must navigate such a world carefully. Like the metaphor of kudzu used in both texts, reliance upon media is ambivalent. The outcome depends upon the approach of the individual. Because the media of television and internet pervade our lives to such a degree that they begin to dictate our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, both novels agree that the most effective way of successfully maintaining agency is to slightly distance oneself from these media forms or reverse the way we passively accept their interference in our lives. Like Jane and Nora, we must learn to take active roles in editing our lives. Most importantly, we must pay credence to advice given by Jane, “some things we can control, some we can’t.” In the world of mediation, “nothing is simple. There are many answers, none of them right, but some of them most definitely wrong” (372).

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