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The Children of Reagan: Troubling Pleasures for the Era of Privatization

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THE CHILDREN OF REAGAN:

TROUBLING PLEASURES FOR THE ERA OF PRIVATIZATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2012

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The School of Graduate Studies and Research
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Title: The Children of Reagan: Troubling Pleasures for the Era of Privatization

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The majority of the class of 2011 was born in the year 1989. Sharing a birth year with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* means these students do not know of a time before the Neo-liberal push towards privatization. In recent years, the radical restructuring of public and private life that began with the Reagan Administration has gone largely unquestioned. The result has been a collapse of the previously separate public and private spheres, resulting in a new understanding of how we relate to others. Using critical theory, this study examines how consumer pleasure affects the content and interpretation of texts, literary and otherwise, signifying a shift away from enlightenment values concerning freedom to a privatized, consumerist notion of the role of the individual in society. This study begins with the pre-Fordist era and will examine works from the 19th to 21st Centuries by Horatio Alger, August Strindberg, Theodore Dreiser, Betty Friedan, John Cheever, Douglas Coupland, Hanif Kureishi, and several pop culture texts including *The Da Vinci Code*, *Fight Club*, and *Hostel*. Pedagogy is also a prominent concern, and applying critical pedagogy when working with post-Reagan youth often means searching for a language within a discursive vacuum created by a system where, according to Slavoj Žižek, the predominant societal imperative is towards enjoyment, as opposed to other possibilities. In order to understand this shift and the pedagogical challenges it has created, this study will undertake a historical tracing of how different texts portray the cultural codification of pleasure. The accompanying notions of

privilege and entitlement that flourish under a system of privatized consumer pleasure have been spread by globalization, creating new battlegrounds for and against privatization. Practitioners within the contemporary English classroom are representing an increasingly shrinking public space within a context defined by privatization. This situation removes the humanities from its once privileged position and into a spectrum of competing pleasurable and profitable interests. Ultimately, this study attempts to re-define the English classroom as a place for the formulation of a critique of privatization and consumerism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would be remiss in writing a dissertation that is partially about the need for community without giving much deserved credit to everyone who helped me along.

First and foremost, the most important and heartfelt thanks goes out to my domestic partner Danelle Conner. Without your support and encouragement this would not have been possible.

For my committee of Dr. Mike Sell, Dr. Susan Comfort, and Dr. David Downing, thanks for thinking this was a good idea and thanks for helping me work though my idiosyncrasies as a writer and scholar. Perhaps my greatest virtues as a writer are also my biggest vices; thanks for accepting the bad and the good with equal enthusiasm.

Thanks to Dr. Robert Alexander, Catherine Houghton, and Dr. PK Weston for giving me a chance in this profession at a time when I thought I would never get one.

Also, I would not have been able to accomplish this without the friendship and guidance of my fellow graduate students: Dr. John E. Dean, Dr. Claire Norris Cain, Dr. Amy Hagenrater Gooding, Dr. Irene Keller, Dr. Mais Qutami, Dr. Mary Grace Gainer, Lisa Beiswenger, and Tony Burfield. You all made me a better person and professional by your presence. Thank you all for paving the way and being kind enough to reach a hand of friendship back to help me along. Extra special thanks goes to Dr. Heather Duda, I could never possibly repay the debt that I owe you as the friend who became my mentor.

And finally, I want to say thanks to my faithful dog Cheever, who patiently spent many hours next to my office chair, waiting for me to finally toss the ball.

Truly, it takes a village to write a dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PRIVATIZED PERSON
AND THE CHILDREN OF REAGAN

Every autumn, Beloit College publishes its famous "Mindset List" as a means to remind the lifer members of the academy just what year the typical freshman was born and just what transpired prior to that year. The wording of the list is always a bit curious. All too often the list is pun heavy, with plenty of zingers that play on the innocence and ignorance of youth as well as the discomfort that comes from acknowledging the passage of time for the list's older intended audience. However, as a tool for reminding us of the passage of time, the mindset list is particularly useful for contemplating the passage of recent time.

Someone once told me that I should not fear death because, while we lament the eventuality of missing events after our demise, we rarely lament our inability to witness events that occurred before our birth. Therefore, we should not fear death because in death we return to a state like the one before our birth, and since we rarely worry about the consequences of our pre-life stage, the identical state of post-life is no sweat. It's now a few years later, and I'm still not quite sure what to make of this explanation. Certainly, any historians who might read these words would be aghast at the reliance on willful ignorance. However, this argument reveals an important point. It takes a tremendous effort to recover and repair our understanding of the past. Entire university departments are dedicated to this pursuit. However, worrying about understanding and fully experiencing the future seems self-evident. After all, how many universities offer majors in Futurism? We all seemingly have a stake in the future, but the lessons of just how we got to the present are often removed from our field of vision. This project, like

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the Beloit Mindset List, seeks to uncover the ways in which the passage of time, most notably the world that was dead to young people, has shaped the understanding of the world for everyone alive at this historical moment. For example, the Beloit list released in the Fall 2011 has such pithy entries like: "'Don't touch that dial!' . . . What dial?"; "They've always wanted to be like Shaq or Kobe: Michael Who?"; and "Refugees and prisoners have always been housed by the U.S. government at Guantanamo." Granted, that last one has some bite, but in juxtaposition to references to *Seinfeld* and New Kids on the Block, the critical possibilities of the list are lost. The Beloit Mindset List does not claim to have any ideological bent or even a thesis really. The Mindset List is merely a collection of witty observations about the way technology has changed, what pop culture has been forgotten, with the occasional mention of what important historical events now occurred before their birth. This project, however, wants to look clearly and closely at the political decisions made during and in the shadow of the Reagan Revolution, and just how those decisions have helped to form the young people we find in the classroom. We are going to look at the damage these changes have occurred, but also the possibilities for positive change.

Starting with the traditional-aged students who walked for graduation in the Spring of 2011, the young inhabitants of academia have not lived in a world before the legacy of Ronald Reagan was cemented as political dogmatism. Reagan ushered in the Neo-liberal era in the U.S. a few years after Thatcher in the UK, and decades after the military dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile. The Reagan Revolution marked the beginning of the end of The New Deal and The Great Society programs through self-imposed austerity measures in an attempt to limit the power of government. What it often took

decades of struggle to build was eliminated in a few lines of legislation. The belief

behind this new political direction is, with the notable exception of security and defense,

that the government of and for the people is not to be trusted with anything. Privatization

was seen as the answer to society's problems, if such a thing as society even existed. In

the years since, the Neo-liberal notion that the government is the problem, not the

solution, has gone from a radical, unthinkable campaign idea from a dangerously

reactionary former B-movie actor to an unquestionable ideal. Even Democratic

candidates have to somehow offer a watered-down version of privatization. Bill Clinton

ran in 1992 under the idea that he was a "new Democrat," meaning he was influenced by

the Neo-liberal mindset that governmental systems should be replaced by market-driven

private systems. However, what is lost in the new political common sense that is Neo-

liberalism is some notion of just how the changes ushered in by Reaganomics have

changed us and determined the lives of those who are next in line to inherit the world.

David Harvey classifies Neo-liberalism as a utopian project, though few Neo-

liberals would consider themselves as being utopian in their thinking (*Brief History* 19).

Neo-liberals sought to dramatically re-arrange society around a new idea, creating a new

order. At the core of Neo-liberalism is the belief that "market exchange is an ethic in

itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously

held ethical beliefs; it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the market

place" (*Brief History* 3). This should be done by shrinking the commons through

privatization. Public spaces and public institutions were sold off, diminished, or

eliminated completely. Without the commons, democracy was expected to continue

without traditionally democratized institutions. An important point should be made here,

distinguishing Neo-liberalism from traditional Liberalism. Liberalism is the belief that social systems, like a constitution or government, can solve problems, and through the reform of those institutions, through amendments to the constitution or less comprehensive changes to policy, society can be bettered. One can, in fact, be a conservative in the school of Edmund Burke and still believe in systems and social contracts that preserve society under Liberalism. The commons still exist under this belief system, even for conservatives. What distinguishes conservatives from liberals under Liberalism is the degree of tinkering that should be done. Neo-liberalism at its core is a radical opting out of these systems, opting instead to surrender the fate of all to free market forces. For Harvey, this also leads to Neo-conservatism, which he describes as an attempt to re-stabilize a social reality destabilized by the whims of the free market (*Brief History* 81). Likewise, Harvey attributes the rise of religious fundamentalism as a response to "proliferating job insecurities, the lost of other forms of social solidarity, and the hollowness of capitalist consumer culture" (*Brief History* 171-2). The sum total of the shift to neo-liberalism has been a radical re-negotiation of our social contract. Like the antiquated TV dial and the once ubiquitous Michael Jordan joked about in The Mindset List, the old terms of our social contract have been lost to history.

What has also been frequently lost to history is the violent aspects of Neo-liberalism. I will be spending the vast majority of my time in this study exploring works that, like the Beloit Mindset List, are focused primarily on Global North and, more specifically, North American citizens. The history of Neo-liberalism in the Global South is a history of violence and overt struggle. Works like Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive*, Arndhati Roy's *An*

Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire, and Mohammed A. Bamyeh's *The Ends of Globalization* serve as a stamp on the rather weighty package of important work being done to chronicle the violent expansion of Neo-liberalism in the Global South, as well as the struggle against it. I should not mention these works without a mention of gratitude and respect to Dr. Susan M. Comfort, who introduced me to these works and whose voice echoes throughout this study and in my classes whenever I challenge the widespread belief that "the other-half" live in poverty elsewhere in the world simply because they are incapable of doing better for themselves.

My aim in this dissertation is to explore the world that has been created for those who know nothing else, perhaps more for the sake of those who have forgotten everything else. The true "child of Reagan" as far as this study is concerned is the person who seems to be both the most comfortable and confused by this system. This is a person who is imbedded within the trappings of the social order brought on by Neo-liberalism, yet still cannot fully articulate what has gone wrong. Children of Reagan have grown up within a social system that is sold as a pathway to freedom, but as this project will illustrate, severely limits the possibilities for the very people it supposedly benefits. The symptoms and signs of this new social order are all around us. Public spaces and public institutions have been radically devalued. For young people it starts with the dumpy public playgrounds that are not as nice as the ones in McDonalds, and the fact that everywhere outside their house is full of "stranger danger." For them, it evolves to a school that's under-funded and, like many public institutions under Neo-liberalism, downright hostile to the population that they serve. Whenever I bring this idea up in class, I sense a palpable hunger for understanding from my comfortable but confused

younger counterparts. Rather than being an institution that cares for people and enriches their lives, school today is about stressed-out teachers, standardized testing, crumbling buildings, and foul lunches. In spite of the fact that I grew up in a suburb, my schooling experience featured such aberrations as food poisoning from the cafeteria lunches, heat that frequently went out in the winter, and a chronic shortage of basic supplies like paper. However, when I hear my students talk about their schooling, I'm glad I went to school when I did, before the post-Columbine metal detectors and No Child Left Behind.

The signs of Neo-liberal austerity are everywhere. I teach in a city where students commute across structurally deficient bridges, sometimes utilizing a transit system that provides what can best be described as "intermittent" service. Other systems that once provided care for people are themselves degraded. Anyone who has been in a hospital or has had to manage the care of an elderly parent knows that a few lines have been eliminated from the Hippocratic Oath. As I write this, the future of the U.S. Postal Service, the most seemingly stable and ubiquitous of all public utilities, is in jeopardy. These are the kinds of encounters we have with public institutions every day. For young people, brushes with the police are common, as one out of every three young people is arrested before the age of 23 ("1 in 3"). Much of this is due to the new focus on zero-tolerance policies that severely punish students for having things like aspirin and nail clippers in their possession. Recently, a library in Massachusetts sent the police after a five-year old who had some overdue library books (Glynn). What can be said for the mindset of an individual, or a generation for that matter, for whom one of the first encounters with civic engagement involves handcuffs and/or the threat of severe punishment? This, of course, assumes that the police are willing and still capable of

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providing service.   Several times since I moved to this city, the police have lacked

enough money to maintain a fleet of functioning police cars. We are, however, better off

than Highland Park, Michigan; we can still afford to keep the streetlights turned on

(Davey).

Young people who grow up in rural America have their own tales of structural

poverty and communal austerity, those who are left anyway. If the distinction of

"frontier" were still part of the U.S. Census calculations, 56% of the U.S.'s land mass

would have so little population they would be considered frontier lands (National Center

for Frontier Communities). Those left behind, have their own tales of abandonment to

tell. All of the grievances listed here are due to a series of dramatic shifts that have

occurred in the last few decades. Our willingness to forget history, even recent history

means we are more than capable of normalizing even some of the extreme examples

listed. The sum total of this is the creation of a new mindset, for which young people

have very little empirical evidence to serve as the basis for questioning. The important

thing to keep in mind is the question of whether these conditions are part of some sort of

slow-motion human-made disaster or the inevitable outcome of history?

Neo-liberalism turns over the keys for all human endeavors to the "invisible

hand" of the market, and with this comes a kind of grim determinism.   It is not the place

of the state to meddle in the affairs of, well, just about everything. Privatization means

turning the keys of the commons over to persons and organizations who, through

ownership, can do what's best. It's like how Harvey explains in *A Brief History of Neo-

liberalism*, the market has replaced all other ethical systems. The only agency one

possesses is one's purchasing power as an isolated consumer of goods. In spite of the

dynamic nature of global capitalism, the outcomes of the supposed "invisible hand" anoint a manufactured status quo as the natural order of things. We can recognize injustice, we can bemoan its existence, but all too often the subjects of Neo-liberalism merely throw up their hands in mild despair. Recently, I showed my Contemporary World Literature class a segment of the documentary *Life and Debt* as a means of providing some context for Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven*. *Life and Debt* chronicles the devastating effects of austerity measures imposed on Jamaica by the International Monetary Fund. The documentary greatly angered my students for two reasons. The first is obvious; *Life and Debt* chronicles injustice and human suffering caused by a catastrophe created by the poor decisions of powerful people. The second cause for anger was surprising. As one student put it, "It's like one of those goddamn depressing Sarah McLachlan commercials for the ASPCA with the sick and abused animals, only there's no number to call to help!" Judging by the reaction in the room, he was speaking for a lot of his fellow students. I should point out that the student who said this is no amoral dolt. And while he didn't always do all of the assigned readings, he is a conscientious and inquisitive young person with a deep and passionate concern for our world and for others. His anger was the anger of being faced with injustice without any visible means to combat it. A generation of conscientious young people has grown up under the reign of this grim determinism. I took this opportunity to remind the class that even unpleasant information about seemingly impenetrable problems can still change the decisions we make for the better, and that President Obama had signed several free trade agreements in the previous week. My students often express a feeling of paralysis in the face of the seemingly insurmountable problems that are the product of the invisible hand

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that rules the world. In the face of these kinds of frustrations, Neo-liberal thinking often leads to a focus on the empowered individual (Harvey, *Brief History* 177). However, exchanges like this illustrate the limitations of the empowered individual. Neo-liberal thinking has become common sense at this moment of history. I will argue throughout this project that we are all in some way haunted by the specter of Neo-liberal thinking, and it creates artificial barriers to critical inquiry. "What can we do?" is a common response in the classroom when injustice is revealed. It is the purpose of the latter half of this project to turn that defeatist rhetorical question into a heuristic of genuine inquiry.

However, before we get to action, I would like to take some time to explore the effects of Neo-liberalism as it posits itself in uncanny ways. In the media, the vast majority of the rhetoric surrounding the effects of economic policy tends to be focused solely on numbers. What is funded? How much growth is there? What are the latest job figures? These are the questions that determine public policy. Recently, I was watching a local evening news broadcast on a day when a hint from the Federal Reserve prompted a several hundred point increase in the Dow Jones industrial average. The anchors conveyed this news enthusiastically, complete with fist pumps, in a suspension of journalistic objectivity reserved usually only for local coverage about the Steelers. Occasionally, there are reports of growing poverty and the increasing gap separating the super wealthy and everyone else. Reports on the Occupy movement portrayed the protests as this alien thing that sprung from nowhere and no one understands. As a whole, economic growth has come to symbolize all manners of good over the course of human affairs, yet another specter of Neo-liberalism finding its way into our collective unconscious.

Throughout this project we will be looking at the ways in which neo-liberal ideas influence some of our most invisible and intimate understandings of ourselves and what our lives should be. In the first chapter of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton and Rose Friedman make the argument that economic and political freedom are intertwined. Freedom is a lofty and rare human achievement, and in the moral world of the Friedman's one cannot have political freedom without economic freedom. So, every good economic indicator is like a touchdown for the home team that is the human race, or so we are lead to think. There is an incredible sense of freedom that comes while shopping. Truth be told, this project could not be possible without my fair share of "breather" trips to the used record shop. These trips are a kind of exploration. There is a sense of possibility in the seemingly endless stacks and satisfaction when something cool is found. There is an intoxication to knowing one can have something new and exciting thanks to the money one has. Likewise, there is something to be said about the products and possibilities that can be delivered by global capitalism. The Friedman's speak dismissively of "intellectuals" who "tend to express contempt for what they regard as the material aspects of life" (8). However, my focus is to do just that and explore exactly what has been lost in the marriage of economic and political freedom.

Again, the terms of neo-liberalism have gone from groundbreaking radical academic idea to political common sense. It is the purpose of this project to explore not only the effect of these ideas on texts but also on how they influence the lives of those in the classroom. I am currently an adjunct instructor of English and professional writing tutor at a university in Southwestern Pennsylvania. This job affords me the opportunity to work with traditional age students and returning adult students. My students come

from the city, the suburbs, the country, and overseas. My students aspire to be ballerinas and CIA agents. I've had students be late for class because anything below 20°F was just too cold to go outside so early in the morning, and I've had students leave class early because they need to meet with their parole officer. I deal with them as a professor in the classroom and, when tutoring as, the companion in learning who helps to interpret the directives of others. These perspectives have allowed me insights into the lives of literally hundreds of people. It is not uncommon for me to catch a student in a fib about a late paper, nor is it uncommon for me to put a paper down for a moment because it contains a shocking personal confession. I think about the changes I have witnessed in my lifetime, and I often wonder about the world I am helping to prepare my students for. I also wonder about the validity of my efforts to prepare them for the world.

In my years of working on this project and with my students, I have come to the conclusion that the political decisions based on the "common sense thinking" that is Neo-liberal dogma has unleashed a kind of slow-motion disaster that is sweeping up the lives of the young people I work with. Because it is a slow motion disaster, it is difficult to recognize and, worse still, it's a disaster that is normalized as it progresses. If a virus were to quickly sweep across the globe wiping out an entire generation of young people's ability to have a happy and prosperous life, we would immediately recognize it as a disaster, complete with celebrity telethons. However, what I am talking about is a slow, meticulous, institutionalized, and human-made disaster.

To be my age today is to have seen things fall apart, to be younger than me is to perhaps not know things used to be better. On one hand, young people today are used to struggle. Many who want to dedicate themselves to the arts or to service of others expect

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poverty as part of the bargain. Musicians I know gladly play for $50 a night (that's for the whole band not each member) and often gladly give the music they worked so hard and sacrificed so much to create away for free just for the sake of being heard. Many of my students dream of unpaid internships, and who doesn't check their work email from home when they are off the clock. On the other hand, the ever expanding world of commerce puts forth an image of what life can, or rather should, be. In this world, success is easily attainable, and if you're not successful it's your fault. Success opens the doors to a bright and glittery world of new and exciting things, a fantasy world you too can live in. We all live somewhere between these two planet poles, in a kind of dialectic between our hopes and realities.   Neo-liberalism informs the decision to go to college in the first place. Students often come to college to earn rather than to learn. In an attempt to outflank the deskilling of labor and suppression of wages, today's college students initiate a cycle of debt by taking out loans so they could get a job to repay the loans they took out so they could get a job.

Throughout the course of this project, we are going to look at how lives are determined by the conditions of success. The kinds of success that my students strive for are often measured in material terms. A great deal of quality work has been done on the ways marketing has influenced our decision making process. While I will be discussing some works of marketing, I want to discuss how the values of all manner of clever marketing schemes have intruded themselves into texts that are not blatantly commercial. It becomes clear when we look at the novels and movies that explore and reflect the movement of capital into and against the state and the public sphere, privatization shrinks the scope of our imagination. After all, what can we imagine for a government that

governs best when it governs least? We also live in an era described by famous Neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama as "The End of History." The idea behind this belief is that, after capitalism defeated communism, there would be no major conflicts or crises, only the expansion of the best possible system, capitalism (xi, xiv).   In a 2011 interview with Al Jazeera TV, radical Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, someone who has made a career out of attacking Fukuyama, admits, "We were all Fukuyamaists. Even radical leftists were not thinking about what can replace capitalists" (Žižek and Ackerman). Under privatization, the responsibility for the negative effects of our economic system is in the hands of individual consumers. This means that the human-made disasters of global capitalism are made by billions of hands repeating the same gestures countless times over. I would like to look at the forces that guide these hands—and the way that literature and films can make visible those invisible hands.

Privatization has renegotiated collapsed the role of the public sphere, and it has greatly restructured the private world as well. Throughout this project, we will explore the way in which privatization has influenced some of the most intimate understandings of the self for Global North subjects. The fear and anxiety created by the pressure to keep up in a world of no security manifests itself in the pedagogy of debt, body image issues, the fear of others, a pervasive sense of terror, and an intolerance of human frailty that is both external and highly internalized. From this, we see a portrait of the kind of person created by privatization. A major component of the argument in these pages is that these intimate understandings have extracted a significant toll on those who supposedly benefit from privatization. As mentioned earlier, The Friedman's speak rather despairingly of intellectuals, such as myself, who aspire to things outside of market

values. However, The Friedmans had the benefit of writing in a time before his ideas became ubiquitous.   I might never have the benefit of living in such a time. I can only report the ways in which I see the things that previous generations once benefited from, that I benefited from, fall apart. Those whom I work with are recognized as being "in the prime of their lives," yet they themselves often have a sense that they showed up to the party late. This is not to say that all hope is lost. Students are eager to understand just how their world came to be, and better yet, just how to change it. There is also a vital secondary thread to our contemporary culture, one where the specters of Neo-liberalism can be exorcised, unlearned though the portrayal of alternative models and value systems. Even for the privatized person, there are contradictions, aspirations, and possibilities for something better, something healthier.

 According to the works of Zygmunt Bauman, whom I rely on heavily throughout this project, for citizens of the Global North, the building blocks of identity are provided by global capitalism. According to Bauman, we make ourselves through our shopping habits. The subjects of the liquid modern world of constant change are stripped of stable identifiers of personal identity. Rather than inheriting and/or being stuck with who one is, identity can be changed through the tools provided by the market. With an array of commodities comes an array of possible personal alignments. Brand positioning is a matter of concern for both marketing professionals but for everyday people who wish to be seen well in the eyes of others, or even think well of themselves. Fads, fashions, and functionality change rapidly, meaning those who are trying to build a sense of themselves are caught chasing moving targets. These themes appear throughout his later works and this project as well.

Another important theoretical lynchpin to this project is the works of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek's delicate interplay between Marx and Lacan serves to illustrate the mental world that has been determined by capital, the mindset of the privatized person. Žižek's work is also crucial to this project because, while Bauman speaks of the marketplace of products and their effect on people, Žižek goes steps farther by discussing the ideological role of the design of those products. Traditionally, the Western mind has inhabited a morality of sin and redemption. Now, thanks to a little creative engineering sin and redemption go down as easy as diet cola or fat-free potato chips. It is possible to ignore all kinds of consequences and malevolent qualities. Worse still, the world of marketing defines the societal imperative into one that promotes enjoyment, as opposed to other models that stressed prohibition. Žižek's underlying thesis for all of this is an understanding that this moment in history, this moment of globalized capitalism, has created new mindsets. In particular, Žižek concludes that consumerism creates a series of strange paradoxes that are believed in un-ironically by those who believe they are above ideology. Most notable of these is the paradox where consumerism is both the source of ambition and discontent for the subjects of global capitalism (Žižek and Ackerman). This tension will be explored throughout this project.

Furthermore, privatization influences how individuals define and move through space. Privatization shifts the pinnacle of all human endeavors towards notions of control through ownership. Public space, public institutions, and the public itself for that matter are not to be trusted. Therefore, the subjects of privatization are forced to retreat into the private sphere of home, where a lack of substantial and meaningful human contact can create not only a distorted picture of humanity, but varying forms of unhealthy behavior.

First, this project will explore fear and its ubiquitous role in the lives of the privatized person. Subsequent chapters will explore how the mirror set up by marketing and media influence our understanding of ourselves, as well as how we define and enjoy success. We will explore just how the public and private spheres have collapsed into one another. While our goal is to expand our private sphere through purchasing and consumption, we are slowly creating lives for ourselves where nothing is private.

What emerges from my inquiry is a portrait of a privatized person. This privatized person lives according to values that deny them some fundamental human needs such as companionship and connectivity to their environment, while replacing them with a consumerist notion of pleasure defined by market forces.   The privatized person pays a tremendous human toll for this shift to a consumerist value system. The consumerist value system has hijacked pleasure and re-defined it to be a solitary pursuit centered around the accumulation of manufactured goods and escapism through blockbuster entertainment. Furthermore, this "pleasure" of accumulation becomes deeply imbedded within someone's sense of self and personal worth. Some people simply see themselves as somebody because they have the latest cell phone or other product. This creates a tremendous problem for people trying to find themselves in a system defined by constant change and a series of images unnatural in their perfection.

However, this problem is not transparent, and recognizing its existence requires a careful examination of familiar texts in some new ways. It also requires problematizing consumerist notions of pleasure. The rewards for this value system are found in the consumerist pleasure that speaks to us from every advertisement and every storefront. While I argue throughout these pages that privatization extracts a human toll, it is hard to

resist because of the grim determinism of the invisible hand that guides the world after

the end of history locked together with the predominance of the consumerist definition of

pleasure that is constantly being sold to us. I too have some nice things that I enjoy.

Consumerism is a way of existing in the world built around the enjoyment of consumer

goods. In this respect, shopping and happiness are synonymous with each other.

However, consumerism is a worldview that depends upon chronic dissatisfaction. Those

who become permanently satisfied with their shopping opt out of consumerism. The

vaguely dissatisfied keep plugging away, even sometimes after their financial resources

have been depleted in search of ever newer, ever better objects of desire. For millions,

this is the new normal and the only thing to disrupt this state is a threat to one's financial

wellbeing.

Consumerism is a system that does not expect much from its subjects. It limits

pleasure to notions of convenience, acquisition, efficiency, and, perhaps most

importantly, personal fulfillment. Neo-liberalism all too often limits its definition of

pleasure, and the larger human experience for that matter. There are other definitions of

pleasure, other possibilities for human fulfillment. However, the pleasures of

community, activism, and non-commercialism are not being sold in the typical market or

promoted in our political discourse.

There is sometimes a distinct pleasure to be had in bad times and misadventures.

There is also something to be said for the pleasures that arise from putting aside one's

own immediate desires and working with others to pursue a larger goal. These

possibilities for pleasure have very little voice within the world created by privatization.

Furthermore, when the pleasure of pursuing the larger goal involves active resistance or

changing the system, those pleasures can be seen as downright criminal by law enforcement and abjectified within the media.

Later on in this project, I discuss a line in Bill McKibben's *Deep Ecology* where he discusses how often college educated adults carry a torch for their campus day's not for a profound love of their coursework but for the sense of community they felt living on top of one another (109). I can relate. In spite of the fact that graduate school coursework is a pressure cooker that frequently makes one resentful of the particular way a classmate breathes, the absence of the sense of community and common goals is something I fear will haunt me for the rest of my life.

All too often, human ambivalence, which is not convenient or efficient, does not have a place in consumerism. For the young people I work with, and the adults as well, there is a tremendous anxiety and fear over maintaining the undefeated season of youth. Any flaw, any blemish ruins this supposedly perfect time in life. What privatization creates is an utterly unrealistic standard by which the privatized person must live their lives. There is a heavy psychic toll to be paid because of this scale, for both those who have chosen this path for the world, but also those who were born into a brave new Neo-liberal world.

We will explore the world of the children of Reagan in three steps:

First, in Chapter 1, we are going to look at the personal toll paid by privatization through looking at some very popular texts that reinforce the negative concepts of privatization. Texts like *The Da Vinci Code* and *Fight Club* make the intolerance and fear of others look quite cool. In particular, Chapter 1 explores the anxieties of the privatized person. Both being in the world and on the college campus are defined as

dangerous places for those who can not yet own it all. Education and travel are two experiences that resist some of the values of privatization even as they are becoming privatized, and what resists privatization can only be seen as agents of fear. By looking at the interplay between popular mythologies and the values of privatization, we can see just how our world has changed according to privatization.

Next, Chapters 2 and 3 undertake a historical tracing of just how we got to a world of a consumerist pleasure populated by privatized persons. Chapter 2 explores the rise of consumerism and the way in which success is located in the private lives of the successful. More specifically, the way in which the private sphere is a kind of public performance is explored.   Horatio Alger Jr. has become a metonym for a particular capitalist model of success. Through the exploration of the dream of success, as well as tales of the failure of successful people in *Miss Julie* and *An American Tragedy*, a portrait of how the privatized person is stuck in a delicate interplay between private life and public performance emerges. Furthermore, this chapter touches upon our public fascination with discovering the private lives of others along with the sensation of sharing one's own private life. This is important for the confessional informational age. By correlating historical texts to contemporary odd behavior, we come to see just how public and private spheres have collapsed into each other. We are alone, but being watched. The weirdness chronicled in internet and media culture is perhaps not an aberration but a kind of perfection of privatization's unintended social consequences.

In Chapter 3, we explore the expansion of consumerist notions of pleasure in the middle of the twentieth century. John Cheever and Betty Freidan wrote of upper middle-class dissatisfaction and failure. The way in which market forces intrude into the

identities of the people they wrote about provides parables for chronically dissatisfied privatized persons today. Chapter 3 is the chronicling of the rise of the kind of consumerist pleasure that seems to pervade life in the Global North. The expansion of consumerism channels and re-defines the idea of pleasure and enjoyment under very personal, particular, and rather unrealistic terms. The fallout from this definition of pleasure is the fear and anxiety discussed one way or another throughout this entire project.

Finally, Chapter 4 and the Afterword explore exactly what we can do to resist privatization's intrusions onto our personal lives as well as on campus. Throughout this project, a great deal of effort is put into reading between the lines in order to expose the influence of privatization. At the end of this project, the focus shifts to reading in order to uncover texts that exhibit values that are not privatized or consumerist in nature. This part of the project looks towards notions of community and responsibility as alternative paths to fulfillment, as well as the value of the college English classroom in resisting privatization. Chapter 1 profiles contemporary texts that reinforce the values of privatization. Chapters 1 to 3 discuss how privatization influences private practice. Chapter 4 explores texts contemporary texts featuring alternative values and alternative definitions of pleasure. The Afterword discusses how privatization has redefined the profession and is a plan for driving privatization out of professional practice.

Ultimately, this project is about the influence of global capitalism on middle-class Global North citizens, the very people who are supposedly served by this system. Working as a professor and tutor with young people who have grown up in this world has taught me, anecdotally, that global capitalism does not serve this population. If anything,

global capitalism's influence on the lives of even comfortable people is at best

ambiguous. Global capitalism extracts a heavy price from very many people for the

benefit of only a few. By challenging the idea of success as it is defined by Neo-liberal

global capitalism, I hope that the absurdity of the system as a whole becomes transparent.

Many of the students I work with have nice products they enjoy but are utterly lost,

measuring their lives by a completely unrealistic scale. In many instances, they know the

scale is indeed unrealistic, but have a hard time constructing alternatives. It is as if

Francis Fukuyama is in our heads sometimes, whispering, "This is it, the end of history.

Resistance is futile." However, resistance is happening, and the Humanities can be

utilized as a platform for re-imagining our present and our future. I speak a lot

throughout this project about the problem with our idea of pleasure. It is not that I am

some kind of masochist. Rather, I seek to challenge the idea of what life should be that is

sold repeatedly to us everyday through marketing. The aim here is to explore the

possibilities for the pursuit not of a pleasurable life, but of a good one.

CHAPTER 1: THE INFINITE TERROR OF COMFORT AND SAFETY:
BUYING AND SELLING THE CULTURAL REINFORCEMENT OF
PRIVATIZATION

On the morning of April 16, 2007, I was continuing my adventures in the world of adjunct life. My task this morning was to prepare for a discussion about higher education, based upon material chosen by the students, for the next day's Freshman Composition II class. We began the semester in January by talking about higher education. My hope was that a topic of immediate concern would provide a model for how academic work can lead to a critical engagement with civic life. The primary focus for working with this group of students was to emphasize how a freshman composition course could be an exercise in the purposeful critical engagement with the world and not just a perfunctory requirement of the core curriculum, with the hope that by making the core curriculum a worthy subject matter the core curriculum would itself become worthy. Their eagerness to return to this subject matter justified, in my mind at least, my pedagogy and gave me some small reason to believe that I had made some significant progress with them. However, the events unfolding three hundred miles to the south were making both my good feelings, as well as my nearly completed lesson plan, irrelevant.

Events like the Virginia Tech Shootings are events both defined by and, in some absurd way, tailor-made for coverage by the twenty-four hour cable news cycle. Like millions of others, my cultural memory of the event is indelibly intertwined with the voice-over work of talking heads and perpetual loops of video clips less than an hour old, some of which was taken by VT students with their cell phone cameras. This coverage was also accompanied by a scrolling fact ticker and a sophisticated graphics package.

One such image was a bullet list of other campus shootings, subtly reinforcing the notion that the boundary between similar unfortunate events and recognizable trends is often hard to distinguish. While watching CNN that afternoon, I could not help but recall the dozen or so anecdote-worthy conversations I have had with everyone from close family members to complete strangers, including a retired corrections officer, who all expressed some version of an idea that I had chosen to enter a rather dangerous profession. In response, I try to explain that higher ed is a people business, and I have learned to like people I teach very much and that this perception is very wrong.

My students live in a world where terror dictates common sense. This terror is both a controlling factor in their lives and often about them, informing the popular opinion about young people. A high degree of anxiety is so commonplace it is unnoticed. Even if we do notice, all too often there is a grim determinism and a "well . . . what are you gonna do?" defeatism that accompanies any realization of where we are. For my students, children of the post-Reagan Revolution years, this is the only world they have known. For those of us who are a bit older, it's hard to remember outside the boundaries of nostalgic simplicities just how we got here and if there are any other possibilities as to where we are going. Working with young people has made me aware of the difficulties they face in their historical moment. They are in, what is supposedly, the halcyon days of their youth; however, my experience has taught me that something has gone terribly wrong. Some choice was made on their behalf or some choice was made they didn't even know they could make. The halcyon days of youth are not what they used to be. This has led me to think critically about just how both popular culture and canonical literature has reinforced a certain value system, one commonly accepted as good but may

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not be good for them. As students and consumers of popular culture, they are exposed to certain standards and values. These standards and values are read, re-read, and seep in and out of our consciousness. What I am proposing to do is explore a particular reading of these texts for how they represent the ideology behind privatization to the best and the brightest and sometimes most anxious, miserable, and lost people I have ever met. On the way, we will look at some popular thrillers and horror movies that subtly re-enforce the feeling of terror, a terror rooted in the side-effects of an economic policy. My purpose in this chapter is to explore some popular texts that appeal to the supposed winners of the global capitalist game in order to uncover the ideological blinders of the new normal. Ideology allows individuals, even entire societies, the ability not to see all that is happening at any particular historical moment. The Reagan Revolution has changed national policy to a plan of privatization and austerity that diminishes the role of public institutions and, theoretically, increases wealth; what I would like to explore is how our private lives, how we see ourselves, and how we perceive our place in the world has changed because of the economic policy of privatization.

In the midst of all of the coverage of the shooting, and in typical twenty-four hour cable news fashion, an expert from the world of private industry entered the conversation, not to transparently sell the services of their profession but rather to provide "insight" as to how their profession will solve a public problem. In the case of the Virginia Tech shootings the expert, Aaron Cohen, was from a private security firm that trains SWAT teams. The "insight" offered was of the trite "the world is full of dangerous people" variety. And in a manner typical of a twenty-four hour cable news anchor, in this case CNN's Don Lemon, a leading question with a predictable answer was posed to this

expert: "Does it appear we're moving toward a place where we're going to have airport-type security before you can enter a college campus with metal detectors and screeners and what have you?" To which the expert, without stopping to contemplate the consequences both financially and culturally to his answer said, "I don't see why not." However, he also pointed out that there are better and more thorough ways to physically check people, reminding all of us in the midst of national tragedy that perfect security is something we must perpetually strive to achieve (Lemon). In the moment and within our larger cultural understanding of public space, the reflexive ease of this answer speaks volumes of our understanding of the campus as public space/terror space.

The shift towards increased campus security began before the Virginia Tech shootings and since the shootings campus security has expanded. According to one trade journal, colleges account for "at least $100 million a year" in expansion of the surveillance/notification market. Even Blackboard, the company that provides campuses with virtual classroom spaces, gradebooks, and ways to make photocopies in the library without pocket change, has decided to expand into the video surveillance marketplace (McCafferty). During this same period, my Franciscan Alma Mater joined several other colleges run by "peace churches" or religious orders, such as Quakers and Brethren dedicated to peace, in making the decision to arm their campus security forces (Nelson). In 2011, the school where I teach added an armed security force, in spite of the fact that there have been no major incidents on campus. In an article in the campus paper that implied the student body was very much against the idea, the head of security sited 9/11 as part of the justification for this decision (Weis). There is a one-two punch of paranoia and profitability driving this massive expansion in campus security, and as we will

explore, the relationship between market values of accumulation and personal fear allow profit and paranoia to feed on one another, overriding other possible values and value systems. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, some "peace church" schools were willing to debate, even reject armed security on the grounds that it would violate the school's mission statement (Nelson). However, for most schools not founded upon such traditions and without the word "peace" in the mission statement, the temptation to pack heat often proves too difficult to resist (Ebbert).

Popular publications such as *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest* have run major reports rating and evaluating campus security (Fox, James). The *Reader's Digest* survey of 135 campuses rated schools by criteria including whether or not security carried fire arms and the percentage of campus covered by surveillance cameras and emergency phones. For the record, 40 % of campuses surveyed by *Reader's Digest* had a positive answer to that question. Many colleges report that, in the post-VT world, questions about reverse-911 alert systems and campus emergency lockdown plans have become standard perspective student campus visit tour fare (Ebbert; Fox, James). A 2008 poll of perspective students revealed that seventy-two percent of applicants rated "campus safety as 'very important' in selecting a college" ("Law and Order"). I work on a campus with 400 security cameras that are monitored 24/7 ("Campus Security"). This fact is advertised on the university's own web site. However, unlike something like Take Back the Night, security is not communal or something the students themselves were invested in. Here, security is both all encompassing and external, as is the unnamed, unspecific threat. The war on campus crime is also a psychological war; at a time of shrinking institutional budgets the year 2008 has seen one-third of campus counseling centers

adding staff members, including psychiatrists, and 15 percent of campus counseling

centers receiving larger budgets (Fox, James). All of these efforts quietly ignore the fact

that the Virginia Tech Shooting occurred during a decade-long decrease in campus crime,

and according to US Department of Justice statistics, with the exception of sexual assault,

the nation's "[c]ampuses are safer than the general population" (Nelson).

It should be no surprise then that the world of reality TV has capitalized upon this

perception and trend. Cable network G4's series *Campus PD* is an academic community

version of *Cops*. A standard episode will feature the aftermath of a fight, an underage

drunken female coed trying to lie/flirt her way out of revealing her identification, that

same coed (who happens to usually be wearing revealing summer clothing) in handcuffs,

and a student so inebriated that they wear a bodily fluid or two on the outside. Segments

of *Campus PD* are shot and edited in the same way as *Cops*. Upon coming back from a

commercial break, a shot of the city skyline and tagline lets the viewer know where they

are, but unlike on *Cops*, instead of jumping right into the patrol car for insight of what

law enforcement is about, *Campus PD* tantalizes viewers with a montage of inebriated

looking students playing it up for the camera. Next, the viewers find themselves in the

patrol car and listening to words of wisdom such as "It's a generation gap…They think

they can do what they want…They've been coddled." The point of all of this is that, like

the "bad" parts of town and their objects of scorn and ridicule inhabitants on *Cops,* the

campus and its inhabitants have become the voyeuristic space where the viewer can see

how "the Other half" lives, all from the safety of home, of course. I can think of no

clearer example of the way in which college students are quickly becoming in the minds

of many a newly criminalized population. This is a proposition that I simply refuse to accept.

As a space of freedom and redefinition through personal discovery the college campus fits well into Bakhtin's notion of carnival, the feast of fools where a society's norms are shed and anything can happen. *Campus PD* plays right into this. The web site for the show features the tag line "When college life gets **out of control**" ("G4-Campus PD"). It should also be noted that, aside from being in bold, the words "out of control" are animated, flashing, and shaking. Just below this is a running police log of campus incidents to accentuate the sense of urgency and uncontrollability of the situation on today's campuses.   This prevailing sense of the campus as the grounds for new possibilities is of course even now part of how the college experience is sold. As Bill Readings points out, the college experience is one of self-accreditation for the future entry, or re-entry in the case of continuing education students, into the job market (138). And as much as the consumer of the university concerns themselves with the possibilites of the future, the university is imbued with a sense of nostalgia and history (Readings 129).

It is within this space of "past-ness" and seemingly limitless future possibilities that the inhabitants of the university must construct a present from these mythologies. College is then perceived as an exotic getaway, complete with all of the colonial sensibilities/ possibilities for the pursuit of profitable and prurient interests. College students are, after all, primarily the "girls" in the *Girls Gone Wild* soft-core pornography DVD series. It should be noted that the most famous/infamous incident of the *Campus PD* series involved two young women on the University of Cincinnati campus who did

not take kindly to a Christian fundamentalist preacher/protestor's critique of the revealing nature of their wardrobe. The girls then, as if on queue, "went wild" in a TV-14 appropriate sort of way.

The perception of college as an open experience whereas one could be free of the constraints of the domestic sphere can be a decidedly positive thing.   After all, the call to a new start and a new and better way of working is part of the beginning of the semester in my freshman composition courses. Increasingly, however, the romanticized notions of increased freedom, potential romance, and mild peril have been gradually replaced by a very urgent sense of danger. To ask a question about increased security as a violent act is unfolding and the final "death count" is still rising is, of course, to solicit an obvious answer. Furthermore, to ask this in the shadow of a horror such as what occurred at Virginia Tech is to further instill notions of danger amongst a criminalized population. But the fact that an answer about increased security measures— one that invokes notions of backpacks passing on conveyor belts and students being herded through metal detectors, or even worse, the "digital strip search" machines being employed at some airports— could be so firmly rooted in common sense, so in the moment, and whose logic is almost unquestionable suggests that a pervasive ideological shift has occurred. This shift, via privatization, has left us deeply anxious and afraid of other people and the non-domestic spaces they inhabit. Anxiety is part of life for the privatized person. The popular works I will explore in this chapter, like *Hostel*, *Fight Club*, and *The Da Vinci Code*, play upon this new dynamic.

Campuses are, by their very nature, "worlds apart" from other cultural settings. But all too often campuses are seen as the repositories of "abnormalities" such as

diversity, knowledge, liberalism, etc. The campus is also a site for narcissistic self-discovery and career training: a place where a young person can be free from the confines of home but in a safely pre-ordained, highly familiarized, and ultimately purposeful manner. In the midst of discovery and training comes a social orientation or stacking up of abilities and expertise. And, of course, in the midst of this ranking comes what, for many young people is their first real experience with disappointment. What was once a simple grade appeal/explanation process has evolved into experiences with students going into meltdown over B-plusses.

Coupled with the mild hedonism that also accompanies campus life for some, this leaves many with the impression of campus as a space which is somehow both wild but familiar. Its citizens are both wholesome "good kids" preparing for the future and suspicious unnamed extras in *Animal House*. Its residents are both freer but carefully cared for by security guards on bikes and a variety of student services. It is a space of both high hopes and high anxiety. These are of course "the best years of your life" and mild peril is at times part of the romantic notions of how our culture sees campus life as a space apart, a four year vacation of sorts. And as with any romantic getaway to a new frontier, it is a space where our fantasies of infinite comfort and infinite terrors can come to life.

The airport is perhaps surpassed by only a luxury skybox in a publicly funded stadium as an exemplary model of development for the Neo-liberal age. The airport, skybox, and, perhaps, the campus are spaces created by the public trust, but only accessible to paying ticket holders. The campus ID as it now functions is a gateway to spaces, library books, and even discounts, but it threatens to become more like an airline

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ticket. If the campus ID were to conform to this model and become like an airline ticket a symbol of mobility, prestige, and class then the campus would become a space that was once open and presumably belonging to the public but now the private domain of the upwardly mobile (bad pun only partially intended).

In the shadow of the Occupy movement, my own school took steps to limit student access to the lobby of the largest building on campus. Citing concerns for the well-being of the furniture and the artwork on display, the administration sought to limit the availability of campus organizations to spend time in one of the few indoor open spaces on campus (Bliss). A few years prior, this space was remodeled in order to create more open space. Now, it had seemed that this new open space was far too open, especially if it could be filled with students looking to make a point.

This notion contrasts sharply with the idea of the university as it was developed in the middle of the twentieth century. It was during this period that a shift was made to democratize access to higher education. Local and national policies such as the GI Bill, Title XI, the expansion of community colleges, and open enrollment initiatives made it feasible for populations to enter the world of higher education. Stephen M. North refers to this period as "the great expansion" (43). And while the effect of these efforts on enrollment numbers is easy to quantify, the social effects of and the philosophy behind such a movement is less transparent. Previous models of higher ed sought to limit access. For example, in the 1870s, freshman composition was created and instituted with entrance examinations at Harvard in an effort to limit access (Fox, Tom 18-28). Mid-twentieth-century movements to expand access were for the purpose of facilitating class mobility, the democratization of culture for the welfare of the nation state, Vietnam-era

draft deferrals, or a part of a larger equal and civil rights agenda (Shaughnessy 292; Readings 62-88; North 42). Add onto this the idea that a campus can also serve the surrounding community and we have a model of education that is a service to both those who are enrolled and those who are not. What is now at stake is the question of whether or not the university is a public institution, with access for citizens who contribute to the public trust with tuition and fees, or if the university is now a private enterprise, accessible only to ticket holders, and like so many other Neo-liberal enterprises, subsidized by the state.

An example of the "ticket holder" mentality can be seen in Robin Truth Goodman's *World, Class, Women: Global Literature, Education, and Feminism.* Goodman recounts a student reaction to the break-up of a sit-down type demonstration at Florida State University. After campus security forcibly removed the tent city that students had built on the campus green, Goodman "overheard two students talking. One of the students said to the other that the 'tent city' students should be allowed to stay on the green, because they 'owned' the green. In other words, these students could not think of political action as outside of private rights" (19). Under this mentality, tuition buys the ticket, and that ticket conveys the rights and pleasures of ownership, including apparently the right to peaceably assemble.

The dynamic we see at play here is the shift from, as Zygmunt Bauman describes it, the society of the citizen to the society of the consumer. For Bauman, citizenship is a lifelong commitment where one's social imagination places oneself within standing arrangements and undertaking the negotiations necessary to thrive within such an environment (*Does Ethics* 190-1). Under this understanding, the campus green is a

space, like Habermas' definition of the public sphere, that must exist in order for meaningful political/social interaction to occur (11; 27; 56). Under Bauman's view, in the society of consumers, "No lasting bonds emerge in the activity of consumption" (*Consuming Life* 78). Social negotiations do not occur within the structure of lifelong agreements but rather the immediate whims of the market. The green is not a standing arrangement, but the domain of the ticket holder. Throughout the remainder of this study, we will be looking at the changing arraignments under which these negotiations take place.

With airports, as with other spaces of restricted access, there is a very strict notion of class, duty, and, most importantly, who belongs where. After all, it is at the airport where class distinctions are highly transparent. In some airports, a first-class ticket or American Express card earns one access to a separate waiting lounge, and, in the case of the airport in Newark, NJ, that exclusive waiting area distinguishes itself from the main terminal by not smelling vaguely like pee. Pilots are not to be confused with baggage handlers or janitorial staff. In the age of terror, we are also reminded that those who gain access to but do not belong in spaces of restricted access are up to no good. For this model to be imposed upon the campus environment, notions of who belongs where are visibly imbued with notions of safety but invisibly bound to notions of class and privilege.

It is hard to argue with the notion that architectural spaces are products of belief systems as much as they are made of mortar or steel. A cathedral is the product of one system of beliefs and a downtown skyscraper is the product of another. My argument here is that the stereotypical campus as we know it is a consciously created space, created

from a belief in open space and institutionalized disciplines of knowledge. Furthermore,

changes are afoot, and while these changes are subject to fitting aesthetically into the

notions of nostalgia Readings talks about, after all a recent visit to quite a few college

campuses reveals the trend to build new buildings so they look like old ones, some very

different beliefs are afoot. According to *CR80News*, an official trade journal of "campus

cards, college and university identification and security,"

> If you think that campus ID programs aren't using smart cards, think
>
> again. More than 200 universities have signed on to work with Banco
>
> Santander's University Smart Card program. The massive financial
>
> institution based in Spain [with 90 million customers globally] has issued
>
> more than 4 million smart cards to the university ID cardholders for secure
>
> contactless access to facilities, online access to computer networks,
>
> payment in campus eateries and vending machines, storing grades and
>
> personal documents, and more. Optionally, the card can be linked to a
>
> Santander bank account and function for EMV payments as well. [sic]
>
> ("Four Million").

An EMV is a card with a computer chip in it that can be read by special machines that

dispense sodas and unlock doors. An EMV card with an image of some old-looking

architecture, like my graduate student ID does, is the perfect blend of aesthetic and

ideological sensibilities.

Those of us who teach in northern climates are painfully aware of the level of

enthusiasm of our students on a cold, gray Monday morning in February. Under these

circumstances, the climate does not facilitate a problem-posing pedagogy, and this

situation already accentuates the negative power dynamics of higher education for students of the No Child Left Behind era where the basic assumption is "the teacher teaches and the students are taught" (Friere 73). As is, students feel much put upon by their current and former educational institutions and in many cases with good reason. Imagine that same classroom on a Monday morning in February on a militarized and increasingly privatized maximum security campus where students are painfully aware that they themselves are the objects of fear and scrutiny. In order to gain access to their coursework, students would have to wake up even earlier in order to allow time for the indignities of airport-style security. And after having their person and belongings rummaged through under the threat of increased personal violation, students would then arrive in the classroom. Imagine their level of enthusiasm as well as their willingness to engage in a dialog with, challenge, or question a professor who—if some members of the pro-gun lobby have their way— may or may not be packing heat (Harnish).

Those of us who are lifers at institutions have a clear understanding of the intricacies of the university institution, complete with an intimate knowledge of its professional distinctions and the turf skirmishes that occur across the boundaries of those distinctions. After all, no one ever wants to sit and have lunch with us "theory people." Students of course become savvier as they acclimate to the workings of the university Keebler tree and the workings of its elves; however, before this experiential knowledge is gained students usually see us lifers as all playing for the same team. After all, students are more likely to say, "I hate this place" than they are to mirror the language from the annual issue of Modern Language Association's annual state of English studies tome, *The Profession*. The concerns may be, and in my experience quite often are, exactly the same,

but the knowledge of professional distinctions and the philosophical gulfs between them often not as transparent to those who only populate our world for a few semesters as we think they are. The possibility of Freire's concept of a teacher who is on the same level of the student and engaged in a mutual endeavor is lost in situations where the ivory tower is replaced by the secure perimeter. Of course, the values of a Freireian pedagogy rarely are part of popular discourse, and how could they argue against the supreme value of safety even if they were?

Public space is the most fruitful domain for terror alerts; we move through it out of dire necessity and in great trepidation. The space that is not owned is an uncontrolled space, a space for the criminally insane to go shooting or the innocent to be shot at. After all, terrorists could just as easily blow up the Holland Tunnel as they could Grand Central Station, but in the popular imagination, Grand Central Station is more frightening as if it's impossible to imagine being violated in the safety and sanctity of a private automobile. The best way to ensure safety is to restrict access as much as possible. Only those with a boarding pass are allowed in the terminal, and, under this model, the assumption is that those who can afford to buy a ticket and/or stay under the radar of the Homeland Security no-fly list are safer bets than what could drift into an unrestricted, unowned space. The public sphere is no longer the space where our social reality is structured; rather it is the location of terror and terrorists. The joys and privileges of ownership as well as safety from criminals and terrorists trump any bourgeois notions of democracy, equality, or class mobility, even within spaces created for the public good and funded by the public trust. So, yes, it is possible to imagine an era of "airport style security" on campus.

My purpose here is to explore just how our notions of control through ownership have trumped all other possible social concerns, an issue with particularly dire consequences on university campuses. Privatization is a political agenda born out of shopping culture at a moment when the very ability to shop was threatened and consequently it is a shopping culture borne out of a political agenda. The solution to the economic troubles of the 1970's was seen as the dissolving of stable institutions, usually public institutions, regulations limiting corporate activities, and the break up of the occasional "Ma Bell" monopoly. What these institutions had in common is that they were large enough or controlled enough that they could resist certain market pressures. The opening up of these stable influences to the whims of the market economy, making those whims the organizing force of all human action (Harvey, *Brief* 3). Our "common sense" has become tightly focused upon values related to the pleasures of acquisition and the safety of continuing ownership (Harvey, *Brief* 39; 116). What has happened is a radical redefinition of public and private life.

Our spaces and ourselves are being redefined according to the terms of privatization. My purpose here is not only to explore the effects of this change, specifically in the classroom, but also the way in which this change has been incrementally sold to the global population through texts that reinforce the values of privatization. These values equate safety and prosperity through ownership, while imbuing a deep sense of fear of others and open spaces, as well as the general muting of other possible values like dignity, intimacy, privacy, etc. By exploring several highly popular texts, my hope is to reveal the myriad of ways in which privatization manifests itself within our culture to reveal some of the worst ideological tendencies of

privatization. These texts, the torture porn films *Hostel* and *Turistas,* along with *Fight Club* and *The Da Vinci Code,* appeal to the children of Reagan because these texts are imbued with notions of ownership and accumulation. These highly popular, though occasionally critically lambasted, films are all products of the Hollywood Studio system, a system built to reach wide national and international audiences. For this chapter, I would like to limit myself to the modest goal of addressing the ways in which these films speak to and for an audience of young people at a stage in their lives when they are quite literally attempting to find their place in the world. In the torture porn films, ownership and accumulation is akin to safety, but these notions are also exploited as the foundation for infinite terror. Those who can afford nice accommodations would probably spend themselves away from danger; the victims in these films travel on the cheap and expose themselves to extremely violent acts. *Fight Club* is a tale of privatized identity and resistance. In both the film and the novel, the "middle children of history" displaced by changing economic and gender roles challenge previously held notions of privilege and agency while offering little else in terms of tools for the rebuilding oneself within this new order (166). Through the subtle reinforcement of accumulation and ownership as primary values the idea of an ideal citizen emerges, or at least an ideal academic, in the form of *The Da Vinci Code*'s Robert Langdon. Dan Brown's imagining and Ron Howard's imaging of *The Da Vinci Code* allows Langdon, and the viewer vicariously, to negotiate through shared spaces and common intellectual traditions within a fantasy that allows for the ownership of such places.   Mainstream popular culture is the cultural reinforcement of the political project of Neo-liberalism, determining both the mental, and sometimes the physical, landscape for young people.

Contemporary college students are products of the post-Reagan world, as most members of the class of 2011 were born after 1988. Therefore, we must acknowledge that our students have no memories of life before the Neo-liberal project of privatization began to redefine the world. Their dreams and popular media fantasies contain the possibilities for the reinforcement of this world view, as explored in this chapter, or they can become the fertile soil for new possibilities, as explored in Chapter 4. For those born after 1989, the changes that have transformed our world over the past three decades are simply that which has always been. For those born before 1988, "Neo-liberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey, *Brief* 3). Privatization, the ideological construct where the only worthwhile human endeavors occur through private ownership, has, like all other social engineering projects, created some unintended consequences.

Neo-liberalism and its project privatization began as an economic solution to 70s stagflation. The central premise was that the free market would liberate all individuals totally by liberating them economically. However, as David Harvey points out, Neo-liberalism rarely creates wealth. Rather, it redistributes wealth through globalization and speculative bubbles, and as a result, "[w]e have to pay careful attention, therefore, to the tension between the theory of Neo-liberalism and the actual pragmatics of Neo-liberalization" (*Brief* 159; 21). Each belief system creates new ideas and possibilities while eliminating others. Under this system, the culture industry perpetuates belief in privatization, including the abjectification of public space. A collectively owned public

institution is the enemy of privatization and therefore a suspicious light is cast upon public institutions. This was recently evidenced by the 2007 decision of the Pittsburgh Public Schools to briefly remove the word "Public" from its name in an attempt to improve popular opinion towards the system (Kalson). "Public" is all too often equated with "poor" both in quality and intended user, and while some, arguably many, public institutions are terrible, the point here is that the very logic behind their existence in any form is itself being silenced. That which is free to the people is generally seen as being worth its upfront cost. For educators, this means that education, unless it is in the form of personal capital accumulation, is devalued and gazed upon with suspicion.

Under the prospect of privatization, all actions are defined by their ability to fulfill individualized needs. Freedom has become synonymous with purchasing power. The only notion of freedom that is portrayed in the popular media, in particular in the thousands of advertising messages the average person sees in a day, is the freedom of consumption. By assuming this freedom, we are forfeiting the language to articulate our relative non-freedom (Žižek, *Welcome* 2). It is under the banner of the notion of "freedom" that a vast majority of or public and private decisions are made, but little, crucial attention is paid to just how we define this word (Harvey, *Brief* 184). We are "free" and all too often that is all we need to know. However, the freedom of access to clean drinking water is different from the freedom to use one's Visa at the Visa-sponsored Olympics. Both are freedoms of access. One is vital; one is desired, but which one takes more space in the collective consciousness? Students are born into this arrangement and many see consumerism as the only road to individual freedom, a freedom that they highly prize and will vehemently defend the notion of, even as they

almost uniformly wear blue jeans to class every day (Kasser, *High Price* 73).   The

consumer subject looks out into the world of possibilities, of the performances of

communities portrayed in the world of media and advertising with a keen eye on how to

internalize those public performances though the act of purchasing, and thus privatizing

those performances through personal ownership of them (Bauman, *Modernity* 206).

Even when outside of the home, technology such as the iPod and the credit card

mean that public space becomes internalized when a soundtrack is imposed and an

increased sense of mobility is positioned onto public life making all endeavors in the

public sphere private endeavors (Chambers 49–53).   The deployment of this technology

signals a massive re-definition of public space and a new social contract to negotiate

interaction within this space.   It is my point here, and my steady drumbeat throughout this

manuscript, that this new arraignment does not fulfill some very important, very human

needs for all involved.   And in my experience, whenever this subject matter is raised with

my students a palpable hunger for understanding is felt in the room.   There is an inherent

understanding that something has gone terribly wrong and that there is a lack of a

language to even articulate the questions to discover what it is.   This is important for

understanding the anxieties of our students as they attempt to internalize the college

lifestyle and as they sit and watch the movies that I'll discuss in these pages.

Indoctrinating the young people of today into the ideology of privatization is seen

not only as an important step towards the proliferation of privatization, but the basis for a

significant portion of the global economy.   Books like Martin Lindstrom's *Brandchild*

explain that children *need* to be subject of some of the most sophisticated and expensive

marketing efforts because they not only account for 300 billion dollars in direct purchases

but also influence another 1.88 trillion dollars of their parents' shopping habits on everything from automobiles to cell phones [emphasis mine] (2). According to Lindstrom, "Over the past ten years, we have observed the number of marketers competing for kid's attention. In particular, car companies, airlines, hotels and financial services are competing with traditional kid marketers to establish a relationship with young consumers" in the hopes that childhood brand identification and loyalty will influence a lifetime of consumer behavior (46). Due to the efforts of marketers like Lindstrom, researchers have concluded that children as young as three "start to believe that brands communicate their personal qualities" such as strength or intelligence (Schor 19).

As a result, young people of today often have no memory of a life outside of consumerism and privatization, since consumerism and privatization help define their earliest memories. This is having a profound effect upon their wellbeing. According to Juliet B Schor, author of *Born To Buy*, "We have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume" (13). For students raised in the suburbs, a model of development built upon the twin axis of domestication and privatization—and even for those who don't, but are subject to the main stream media which portrays suburban life as the only safe, reasonable way to live in the modern world—to leave the safety of the domestic, private sphere is to expose oneself to the dangerous influence of others and to the indefinable and the un-commodify-able. For its subjects, this condition has created both higher levels of anxiety as well as new things to fear.

In a 2000 study entitled "The Age of Anxiety?", psychologist Jean Twenge compared the levels of self-reported anxiety in college age students in 1957 and 1993, and found that what constituted an average level of anxiety in 1993 would have placed that same person in the top 15% of respondents in 1957, warranting a diagnosis that in 1957 could require hospitalization. One of the theories advanced in this study is that increased privatization and commercialization of the lives of young people has resulted in greater levels of anxiety due to a significantly decreased level of social connectivity and other communal elements necessary for one's psychological well-being.   It is no wonder then that test anxiety has become a subject of much concern and research. How could it not be? While talking shop with a colleague of mine at another institution, it came up that at her institution there is a phenomenon of students with test anxiety so severe that the mention of an upcoming test triggers an immediate emetic response.

Likewise, Tim Kasser has contributed to the mounting body of research that suggests that an increasingly privatized society results in increasingly high levels of anxiety and depression, especially for young people trying to find their place in society. One such study conducted by Kasser concerned primarily business students in order to question the assumption that privatization creates social isolation by exploring an environment where the values of privatization, consumption, and personal accumulation unify the educational community ("Materialistic Values"). He wanted to explore the possibility that the communal reinforcement of these shared values may help counteract the socially isolating affects of the values in question. The opposite proved to be true; students who most internalized the values of privatization exhibited a proportional increase in their levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychological ailments even in

an environment that openly celebrates the values of privatization and rewards its accomplishments (Kasser, "Materialistic Values"). The result of all of this substantial body of research suggests that the neoconservative project of privatizing the world is not beneficial to the psychological wellbeing of those who participate in this project. The student who panics after receiving a B-plus is the product of a privatized society where the only hope lies in self-promotion where, in the words of one psychologist, "We have made it clear that our kids are only as good as their last performance" (Levin, Madeline). I would suggest that similar anxieties fuel the love of those same kids for films like *Turistas* and *Fight Club*.

Under privatization, the self has become commodified, an object to be improved or possibly ruined, and this drives the fear of torture in popular culture. Under this arrangement, the Doctor of English is not much different from the doctor of "aesthetic medicine." Most students seek out higher education for the same reason they may look for plastic surgery, out of a desire for self-improvement based upon feelings of insufficiency and insecurity. College advertising slogans such as my current employer's "Get There," and my undergraduate Alma Mater St. Francis' "Reach Higher. Go Far," subtly reveal this relationship between student and institution of higher education. Both slogans are imperative sentences, the subject "you" is implied.   Furthermore, certain assumptions about the subject are likewise implied; namely, that you have not already "gotten there" nor have you "gone far", and where you are is obviously not where you want to be. The speaker of this slogan, the university brand, is then seen as the facilitator for overcoming this seeming lack of personal progress. Under these conditions the role of the doctor is to then inject knowledge or botox into the part of the self that is lacking

(Bauman, *Modernity* 200-6). This helps to explain the student who melts down in a dean's office upon receiving a B-plus, for they have been either found seriously insufficient or their personal perfection has been ruined by an outside agent who assigned the mark of insufficiency. While the university is an institution wherein students can accomplish great things and where mettle is tested, the social contract is changed. A syllabus is a contract detailing mutual professional obligations. This new arrangement de-legitimizes them. A grade shifts from an assessment based upon the traditions of a discipline and buoyed by complex, reasoned philosophical beliefs to a de-historicized brand. Likewise, the student with a legitimate concern about the violation of a professor's professional obligations can just as easily be branded as a "whiner." On either end of the spectrum, a B-plus can no longer legitimately speak for itself.

The world is full of bad people and they can strike at any moment, and when the primary goals are perfection and ownership, there is much to worry about. The intellectual exploration of terror, what terrorizes us, and our way of dealing with that terror is important for understanding the new dynamics of the college campus. Terror structures our social reality as both the basis for political action as well as a form of entertainment. We are seen as living in the state of exception, where danger temporarily suspends the law and as a result anything can happen to anyone, resulting in a permanent state of emergency (Agamben *Homo Sacer*; *State* 168-9). The dynamics of that classroom are defined by the social conditions created by privatization, and films such as *Hostel* and its Brazilian doppelganger *Turistas*, form the horror genre known as torture porn, speak directly to a student body that is the product of the social conditions of

privatization, in particular a commodified notion of the self and the belief that undomesticated space is to be feared.

Torture porn, the briefly über-popular, genre of films where young early-twenty-somethings get slowly and meticulously hacked to bits, plays upon the fears generated by the commodified vision of the self, and the subsequent view of youth as a time to invest in that commodity. Torture porn has raised the bar for cinematic terror beyond the typical "crazy person in the basement with a weapon" antics of such films as the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* franchises. In these films, killing is quick or even unseen and often accompanied by quick cuts, partially obscured shots of gore, and screechy violins. In torture porn, death is slow and meticulously documented, often by close-ups. Torture porn films are made cheaply and are extremely profitable; a film that cost 10 million to make can easily earn 50 to over 100 million dollars (Brodesser-Akner). And while Edgar Allen Poe's infamous utterance, "The death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world," reveals something about prurient interests and how they intersect with horror, market research reveals that over 50 percent of torture porn's fans are young women, revealing something about the appeal of torture porn in a narcissistic age (Poe 548; Plumb).

Torture porn plays on the anxieties of the privatized person, especially concerning the way Neo-liberalism has recalculated the way we think about space. Their popularity can be used to gauge just how much our understanding of public space has shifted. We just looked at how our understanding of the campus as a public space has been shifted; now, we are going to look at the way in which the rest of the world fares as non-domestic or domesticated space. Films like *Hostel* and *Turistas* are films for and about young

people. For these two films, the characters change, but the basic story arc is the same.

Young people go out into the world, and no one looks a day over thirty. In *Hostel*, the

destination is Europe; in *Turistas* its South America. They meet other young English-

speaking people who are also trying to see the world on the cheap, bonds are forged,

norms are cast off, and misadventure ensues. In *Hostel*, the protagonist is named Paxton

and his sure-to-die best bud sidekick is named Josh. In their travels, they meet other

Americans and other people who speak English most of the time and will die, as well as

some people who speak something other than English most of the time who lead almost

everyone to their deaths.   In *Turistas*, two siblings, Alex and Bea, travel with Bea's best

friend, Amy. Guess who dies.   They meet some other people who speak English most of

the time and will die, and then those who speak some other language most of the time and

lead almost everyone to their deaths. In true horror movie form, the plot is merely a

serviceable device that gets the viewer to the action.

While the purpose of the plot and the fate of the main protagonists versus the fate

of the minor characters are typical of the genre, in torture porn the difference is in the

portrayal of the danger. In the genre of torture porn, personal mutilation is portrayed as

worse than death. This assumption takes Erich Fromm's explanation of the fear of death

for the commodified individual one step further. Fromm explains that the fear of death

for the commodified individual "is not of dying, but of *losing what I have:* the fear of

losing my body, my ego, my possessions, and my identity" (*To Have* 126). In torture

porn, death and mutilation are piece-by-piece affairs, literally deaths by a thousand cuts.

There is an added air of disposability to the self, since the loss of one commodified part

ruins the commodified whole. Quite simply, who would we be without our more

admirable traits? Within the meticulous cutting apart of torture porn, we see

attractiveness thwarted. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, disposability of things, and

ultimately of people, is crucial to the ideology of consumerism. Consumers keep buying

to fulfill ever expanding categories of wants; those wants are provided for by a corporate

economy that keeps costs down through temps, buyouts, and outsourcing balanced with a

careful selection of the most valuable "zero drag" individuals.   Shows like *Survivor* and

Big Brother are, in his words, "public rehearsals" of the disposability of human beings

(*Consuming* 9-10; *Does Ethics* 56). This plays well in a world where, again, "we have

made it clear that our kids are only as good as their last performance" (Levin, Madeline).

The disposability of human beings, even the self, is perhaps best evidenced in

Hostel by peripheral character Kana's vanity suicide after being rescued by Paxton.

Paxton and Kana escape the torture chambers and embark upon a desperate scramble to

get to safety. They pause for a minute on a train platform, and immediately upon seeing

the reflection of her ruined face, Kana opts for death by jumping in front of a train, rather

than going on having lost a part of herself.   She has survived the torture chambers, but

survival with a ruined body is simply not worth it. In *Turistas*, we do not see the female

victim of torture expire; we only see the removal of her internal organs while she is still

alive, as if seeing the actual moment of her death would be somehow anti-climactic since

she was already ruined. The first image of violence in *Hostel* involves the removal of a

pedicured middle toe; here we see vanity and disposability on display. Careful vanity is

thwarted by an even more meticulous destruction of beauty. However, the best example

of the terror of the torture of the commodified self occurs in the crematorium scene in

Hostel, where the protagonist Paxton finds himself alive and surrounded by the mutilated

corpses of other torture victims. He manages not to outwardly panic when he sees the

sheer volume of the carnage around him, nor does he panic when he sees the violated

corpse of his best friend, or over the prospect of being noticed by the undertaker, but he

does grope desperately on the floor as his severed fingers roll away. The dramatic

tension of the scene is then heightened as Paxton stretches desperately on the floor

because both protagonist and sympathetic audience realizes that time is running short; he

must abandon his fingers and flee the crematorium before it's too late.

The university campus and the tourist destination are unfamiliar spaces to which

the individual comes with certain expectations, desirous of certain new, yet pre-ordained

experiences. As purchased and consumable experiences college and most vacations — as

well as films, especially those which promise to show the unshowable—offer a "safe"

venture outside of one's "comfort zone" with the distinct possibility to indulge in

appetites not normally satisfied at home. The campus, unlike torture porn, is where one

seeks to add value to oneself. When Paxton tries to convince his friend Josh to have sex

with a young woman at the hostel he says, "When you are writing your dissertation, *this*

will be what you think about." At this point it should be noted that, by applying Bill

Reading's brilliant critique of the simulacra university, we can easily see the collegiate

experience as a tourist experience, complete with the Disneyland-style souvenir shop that

occasionally sells textbooks. As mentioned earlier, the university as an institution prone

to nostalgia, just like other sites imbued with a sense of the past, students purchase "the

signs of symbolic belonging" as if to say, I have been there (11). An organization called

Campus Continuum has begun plans to build on-campus retirement condos at several

universities so the over fifty-five set can purchase the college lifestyle. Furthermore, the

construction of new dormitories is not based upon the traditional model of dormitories, but rather on the model of the hotel room, complete with single occupancy and a private bath. The university, like the tourist destination, is a purchased experience, one where the consumer is supposed step outside of their comfort zone in a highly codified almost ritualized manner as to be exciting but not too dangerous. Or as in the words of the character Chef from the show *South Park*: "There is a time and a place for everything, and it's called 'college'" ("Ikes").

In both *Hostel* and *Turistas*, the terror begins to creep in as the shabbiness of the protagonists' purchased experiences is revealed. This is never more dramatic than on the bus ride at the beginning of *Turistas*; the bus is portrayed as dirty, hot, full of weird locals, and ultimately unsafe. The characters loudly express their fears and bemoan that they have not purchased the more expensive, comfortable, and exclusive plane tickets. This is the first instance in *Turistas* of Arndt's Terror Management Theory (TMT) principle that, when faced with terror, a consumerists' desire to consume increases. Work in the field of TMT reveals how when reminded of death, people are more likely to deal with terror in a manner familiar to and consistent with (and ultimately serving to reinforce) the values of their society. For our society this behavior involves going shopping (Arndt). The moral for *Hostel* and *Turistas* is not a lesson of survival or human dignity fighting back against the evils of torture; the moral is to make good shopping choices. Predictably, the bus in *Turistas* wrecks, placing the tourists in even greater peril. The tourists are now alone in a world that might not take American Express. Likewise, the characters of *Hostel* would not be in their final predicament if they opted for, or could afford, the more expensive option of a hotel instead of the cheap hostel.

In both films, the descent into terror begins through a misunderstanding of the local culture that leads to an argument with someone who does not speak English, and of course the ignorance of the tourists from the States is portrayed in a sympathetic light. The tourists of *Turistas* don't know that the Brazilian locals are speaking Portuguese, not Spanish, and I suspect that the majority of ticket and Blu-Ray purchasers would not know what Brazilians speak, either. Throughout *Turistas,* the subtitles are turned on and off when the natives speak. The subtitles are on when the information being relayed is important to the audience's understanding of the plot: when the information is not important, the subtitles are off. This is done to add to the feelings of disorientation and fear that mark the colonial sensibilities of the film. By depriving us of dialog, the filmmakers are attempting to show how helpless the tourists are. They cannot have full knowledge, and I would argue ownership, of the situation. Ambivalence prevents them from privatizing the situation. This plays on Bauman's notions about the threat ambivalence plays on modern order since the indefinable cannot be successfully dominated (Bauman, *Modernity*). The ticket-buying audience is supposed to own the experience through a controlling gaze that owns all by seeing all that is within the proscenium arch of the screen; their bad vacation becomes our intentionally frustrating movie going experience.

This condition also plays upon colonial sensibilities. Be it Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* or Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place,* critics have problematized the travel and tourism experience. The tourist experience reduces and simplifies a space into an "ideal construction of particular motifs" (Pratt 45, 48). The people who live, work, and play within spaces do not get a say over the definition of their own home. This dynamic

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is replicated with the subtitles of *Turistas*. The space itself becomes unconquerable. Under the old colonialism the desire for resources dictated action. Natural resources are still important under the new order; however, we should think about how consumerism's proclivity for making things as resistance-free as possible. Any obstacle to a perfect experience is a serious affront. This is something educators should keep in mind whenever they encounter a student who seems to be actively resisting the process of their own education. We live in a world where seemingly everything should be easy, unchallenging, and non-threatening. After all, we live in a time where being asked to wait for five minutes in a retail or restaurant experience can solicit a public meltdown. Here entitlement is coupled with terror.

After the killing begins in both films, we soon learn that the carnage is for the sake of consumption. The Hostel in *Hostel* is really a trap to lure young bodies into an exclusive pay-to-torture club. In *Turistas*, the bar by the beach is a trap for an organ stealing operation. The portrayal of torture here is not an issue of justice or human dignity, rather competing privatized consumerist interests. Zagmunt Bauman argues that, due to privatization, we are all consumers, but some individuals (namely criminals) are merely seen as "broken consumers" who cannot fulfill their needs within the normal boundaries of the market (*Consuming* 124). In both movies, the tortured are commodities, and the torturers are then "broken consumers." This notion is further enforced in *Turistas* by the Doctor's anti-globalization rant as he is removing one of the character's liver and kidneys. By refusing to believe in transnational capital, his needs cannot be met by the market. This makes him the model broken consumer. But then the

victims themselves would not have entered the torture arena if they had the capital to avoid it, they too are "broken" even before the first finger is sliced off.

The selection of the victims for the torture is reminiscent of Georgio Agamben's explanation of the biopolitical condition in *Homo Sacer*. Whereas an individual can be removed from society to be killed but not sacrificed, he uses the systematic removal of the Jews from Nazi society to explain how the process of removal dehumanizes and creates the possibility for the extermination of human beings (9). According to Agamben, the Nazis could not begin the final solution with the death camps. It was simply too much of a leap to send the upstairs neighbor and the shopkeeper around the corner to their death. The ghetto provided a physical space by which the previously integrated Jewish population could be re-imagined, without their humanity. By entering undomesticated space apart, the victims of torture porn allow themselves to not only be captured, but they allow the audience to voyeuristically enjoy the portrayal of the results of this capture. For films that promise to show the un-showable, in the shadow of Abu Ghraib, black sites, and waterboarding, these films allow the audience to watch from a comfortable distance.

In the post-9/11 mindset, the victims in these films are violated on both a physical and philosophical level, one which plays on interests ranging from nationalism to consumerism to even prurient interests. In the wake of the images of sexual humiliation from Abu Ghraib, one could argue that torture porn is an attempt at catharsis. Prior to the War on Terror, I would argue that most Americans did not contemplate the idea of torture as a national problem or something that could ever happen to them. Those shields have now been removed, and people are left to deal in any way they know how. In Jasbir

Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*, she states, "Terrorism has long been articulated as the foe of tourism, the former breeding intolerance and hatred, while the latter is constituted as a democratizing and liberating venture that embraces pluralism" (64). Under this symbolic order, the tourist is the first-world exceptionalist bringing the civilizing mission to the "reductive, incomplete beings" known often as "natives" or "locals" who are "suffering from the inability to have become what Europeans [or other First World Citizens] already have" (Pratt 152). In the wake of the U.S.'s willing participation in the act of torture, these dichotomies have collapsed into one another; tourist and terrorist can be shackled to the table. No one is safe and, in a privatized world, we are the only ones responsible for our safety.

When Josh pleads for his life in *Hostel*, he does not make a plea for mercy based upon sympathy or human decency; rather, he attempts to convince his torturer that he could pay for his freedom. This scene is reminiscent of the scene in *A Clockwork Orange* where Alex pleads to be released from his "reeducation". However, it is very different in that the default discourse is not an appeal to human dignity, but instead is a financial transaction. *A Clockwork Orange* and *Hostel* are both incredibly violent films; the difference between them is the deficit which leads to violence. In *A Clockwork Orange,* it's a deficit of understanding, solved by a forced adoption of the rules of enlightenment humanism. Those things are also absent in *Hostel*; however, in a moment of terror, the last desperate plea is not for human dignity but financial liberation. This more than anything else exposes the shift to a privatized world. Ultimately, Josh does not have the capital to successfully make a transaction in this market. Homo Sacer in this case is not determined by ethnicity like with the Nazis institutionalization of anti-Semitism, but by

its credit score. Though, it should be noted that in the torture chambers victims from the U.S. cost more than victims from other nationalities.

It is important here to note that the socially isolating aspect of consumerism that must be dealt with here is the lack of compassion that comes from this lack of social connection. A certain lack of empathy is necessary to watch these films. Yes, the audience is rooting for the protagonist, but in both films there are only one or two survivors. The audience's sympathy has to be selective. Further, the films clearly up the ante on the idea that we get pleasure from seeing pretty, stupid people who can't control their desires die spectacularly. Unlike the slasher films of the 1980s, where sex was generally the issue, here the stupidity is the stupidity of bad consumption—a generalization of the anxieties about pleasure. According to Agamben, the notion of the camp, meaning the concentration camp, has displaced the city as the model for developing and conceptualizing the world. The camp is the state where the individual is removed from normal society; those who transcend this space are reduced from sovereign beings to bare life, bare life not being afforded the political agency that comes with being human. As inhabitants of the camp, especially for those who know other lifestyles, we imbue notions of safety to our situation and allow anything to happen to inhabitants of the other camps (*Homo*). In light of my reading of the way in which public space has been re-arranged and stripped of its social context, we are left with the disturbing question of whether or not the camp is no longer a space apart from civil society but rather everywhere, including the spaces we call home and in the institutions that were founded for the purpose of taking care of us.

The readers I am obligated by my employers to utilize for Freshman Comp II (Barnet and Bedau's *Current Issues and Enduring Questions* and Rottenberg and Winchell's *Elements of Argumen*t) both feature readings about torture. *Elements* features Michael Levin's "The Case for Torture," and *Current Issues* features the Levin piece as well as arguments by Alan Dershowitz and others. The Levin and the Dershowitz dovetail together. Levin presents the "ticking time bomb" scenario right out of an episode of *24*, (though one could just as easily argue that *24* got its ideas from Levin),and Dershowitz explicates the pro-torture argument to include constitutional rights of due process and governmental transparency. These readings spark spirited debate in my class perhaps more than they did in the media, but this debate is not framed around the paradoxical nature of torture's role in the war on terror as, according to Žižek's brilliant analysis, the ultimate degradation of human dignity in the supposed defense of human dignity (*Welcome* 83-111). To be fair, both readers more generally provide little argument of the "human dignity" and "values of the enlightenment" variety. Rather the debate is framed around the convenient nature of torture. Torture is good because it's a quick way to get valuable information, and perhaps a means to get the best possible information. But torture is bad because an innocent person may be tortured, which is decidedly inconvenient for both the tortured and torturer. Under this argument valuable time, not dignity, is wasted. The moral compass, or lack there of, of privatization makes this a college textbook worthy argument.

The final chilling and totalizing conclusion of both *Turistas* and *Hostel* is that the way out of the condition of privatized terror is seen only through the condition of privatized terror. Since these films are both works of post-9/11 fantasy, we could

reasonably expect one to call in the Marines to save the day by re-establishing American supremacy and the birthright of Americans to use the world for their pleasure. However, no such gesture is made. There is no police action, and no calls to the embassy are made; the public sphere is silenced. At the end of *Turistas*, the survivors are dressed in fashionable clothes and are boarding a plane; behind them, tourists are debating the merits of taking the plane over the bus because, according to one of the tourists in line, on a plane one does not get to see an unfamiliar countryside or interact with the people. At this point, the male survivor, Alex, turns around and says confidently, "Take the plane." Revenge is carried out privately without any outside public assistance. In this fantasy of neoconservative privatization the best solution is the personal, socially isolating, and most expensive solution. In the end, consumption is the only imaginable solution.

Fight Club, like *Hostel* and *Turistas,* is a film that banks upon violence as an aesthetic in order to appeal to an audience of privatized persons. However, *Fight Club* distinguishes itself from the other two films in that it leaves the possibility for social commentary open, though, as we shall see, *Fight Club* is the tale of an incomplete revolution. Its enduring popular appeal is due to the fact that it challenges the current world order from a position that is wholly within the position of the current world order. As torture porn films reveal the way in which privatization has changed the way in which we think about the self by confronting a new narratives of threats to the self, *Fight Club* reveals that alternatives are difficult to imagine, even in a text which purports itself to be counter-establishment.

Briefly, *Fight Club.* is the story of a protagonist, unnamed in the novel, played by Ed Norton in the film, and often referred to as "Jack" by fans. The film differs slightly

from the novel in terms of details, but the basic plot is unaltered. The Jack character's primary work is for a company that assesses the risk of car manufacturing defects. His assessment is not of danger but of the cost of law suits versus the cost of a recall. Again, like with the subject of torture, the human is removed from the decision-making process and replaced with questions of expenditure. *Fight Club* is a tale of transformation. Before, Jack shops, mostly from IKEA to display his hip-ness, in an attempt to make his unfulfilling life fulfilling. His life is boring and typical, dominated by the accessible bohemian aesthetic. In his travels, he meets Tyler Durden, played in the film by Brad Pitt, and Marla, played in the film by Helena Bonham Carter. Both of these relationships unlock possibilities for Jack to step outside of his place in hegemony. He eventually starts fight club, delves deeper into subversion, and quits his job as a professional risk assessor in order to fully embrace taking risks. Jack is initially enthralled by Tyler and repulsed by Marla. These responses eventually reverse. Jack and Tyler begin fighting for pleasure. They move in together. Jack's life is gradually transformed, he becomes less capable of existing within polite society. The fighting turns into a group activity known as "fight club." That group activity evolves from a club to a terrorist organization called "Project Mayhem." Beyond being merry pranksters, Project Mayhem engages in culture jamming and bombings, culminating in a plot to blow up office buildings everywhere to set the debt records to zero in order to give the Earth time to recover. In the end, Jack and the audience learn that Jack and Tyler share many things, like the same body.

In Giroux's reading of *Fight Club* in *Public Spaces, Private Lives* he states,

Ostensibly, *Fight Club* appears to offer a critique of late-capitalist society and the misfortunes it generates out of its obsessive concern with profits, consumption, and the commercial values that underline its market-driven ethos. But *Fight Club* is less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with Neo-liberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency…In this instance, the crisis of capitalism is a crisis of masculinity. (59)

It is hard to argue with his logic. *Fight Club* is a tale of masculinity and notions of male identity that were once defined by the qualities of manufacturing such as physical strength and trade skills, but have been replaced by the domesticating, feminizing tendencies of the new economy. After all, Jack's initial obsession with Tyler is that Tyler represents an alternative to Jack's domesticated world. Before he "met" Tyler, Jack's defining strengths and skills are his adeptness with the IKEA catalogue. In his professional life, Jack works on a computer not a jack hammer. In one scene from the film, Jack and Tyler are in the bathroom together. Tyler is in the bathtub when they both begin to discuss their absent fathers. Jack concludes, "I can't get married; I am a thirty-year-old boy" to which Tyler responds, "We are a generation of men raised by women, I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need." The next secne is Jack and Tyler in the kitchen together. Jack is making coffee and fixing Tyler's tie. Jack's narration, "Most of the week we were Ozzie and Harriet." This fem-free domestic bliss is shattered when Marla enters the picture. But for the time being, the alternative to this

feminized, domesticated masculinity of the new economy is a good old-fashioned

heteronormative ass kicking, with some womanizing to keep things interesting. Both

pursuits are Darwinist in nature. The film portrays fighting and seduction as pursuits of

the strongest, fastest, and smartest, easily aligned into the value system described earlier

where everyone is a product and responsible for their own wellbeing. Both the film and

the novel have this ironic, self-reflexive narration. Jack knows all, or at least that is what

we as reader/viewer are expected to believe, and he conveys it with a voice of cool

nonchalance even in the face of bodily harm. However, as the story unfolds the secret

Jack has been blissfully ignorant of is revealed to protagonist and audience at the same

time. Jack is Tyler Durden. Any authority figure who threatens this new order is

threatened with castration, literally. The irony is that Jack meets space monkey Robert

Paulson, played by Meatloaf, while crashing a support group called "Remaining Men

Together" that is for men who lost their testicles to cancer.

However, the incompleteness of this revolution is most importantly a testament as

to how much privatization has limited our possibilities. As much as the story

purposefully sets us up to be unaware of the supposedly hip and intelligent Jack's secret,

my point here is to suggest that the story also shields the audience from possibilities

while at the same time making them feel hip and intelligent. By working safely within

the limits of popular ideology goes to the very nature of the film's enduring appeal. The

"crisis of masculinity" portrayed in the film is solved by a hybrid hyper-masculinity

which also encompasses traditionally feminine domesticity. And in the scene entitled

"Human Sacrifice," detailed in a few short pages, it is through schooling and labor within

the boundaries of new economy, men are liberated. Otherwise, Jack and Tyler

"moonlight" in low-paying service industry work that can be done by anyone. Their "professional slumming" however, affords them the opportunity to be saboteurs when they are not fighting. At Jack's real, professional, place of employment, everything is muted in comparison to fighting or making gourmet soap out of liposuctioned human fat.

There are two important distinctions that must be made between the book and the film adaptation of *Fight Club*. While the book contains a few "first novel" mistakes, most notably a clunky and overcomplicated plot structure, the streamlining done to the story for the sake of the film also de-emphasizes two important qualities of the story: the homosocial/homoeroticism of Tyler and Jack as well as the text as a reaction to the disposability of things and of people. As an incomplete revolution, *Fight Club* resists feminization with bromance and the commodification of masculinity. Violence, especially the destruction of attractive people, is the film version of *Fight Club*'s most easily sellable commodity, second only to the Jack/Tyler dramatic tension. It resists the disposability of individuals with the erasure of personal identity. Tyler preaches about being left behind by history, but recruits to Project Mayhem must lose their names. These "middle children of history" start as nobody and join a movement where they are anonymous. Young people who like the film tend to be themselves caught between conformity and liberation just as they are between the desire to adhere to progressive, tolerant social roles and the fear of violating traditional social roles because to do so "would be so gay." These same, supposedly overly individualistic young people, when asked to do an introductory speech at the beginning of the semester begin with an apology for the lameness of their hometowns or the banality of the life story they are about to relate. Like Jack and Tyler, privatization has left us in this netherworld between

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what we could and should be, as well as what we aspire to be versus who we are. *Fight Club* is not a subversive tale of rebellion; it is a tale of the triumph of hegemony.

Giroux is right for saying that *Fight Club* responds to feminization by offering a hyper-masculine alternative. The fight club in *Fight Club* is a boys-only institution. In both film and novel, it is Marla's presence that first drives a wedge between Jack and Tyler, for those who do not already know that Jack and Tyler are the same person. In the film, this comes across as intense jealousy. Marla is the new masculinized woman: she is bossy and assertive. They meet at the same self-help groups for the same reason: they use them to overcome the social isolation of their consumerist lives. They are self-admittedly broken people/products who enter the public sphere to rebrand themselves. She intrudes into this public sphere and demands her space in it, thus ruining Jack's public persona as a member of several self-help groups. Tyler, who is really Jack, has sex with Marla while Jack, who is Tyler, sulks in another part of the house. Marla is then repulsive yet desirable. Marla's character drives the plot and makes the "women, you can't live with 'em," adage palatably cool to a new generation.

Marla's intrusion into their domestic sphere also leads to one of the most poignant scenes of the novel that did not make the film. Jack and Tyler find themselves spending Saturday night in a beater '68 Impala on a used car lot. They are afraid to go home because she might be there: outside terror has again threatened the safety of home and the pleasures of ownership. The car is itself symbolic of the disposable nature of consumer culture. All the cars on that used car lot and the neighboring lots are "[c]ars that people loved and then dumped. Animals at the pound. Bridesmaid dresses at the Goodwill" (87). This theme appears several places throughout the novel: stuff that we love becomes

stuff that we later dispose of when its luster is lost, when its cost of ownership becomes too great. Two pages later, Tyler implores Jack, "If I loved him, I'd trust him" (89). In the novel, they meet on a nude beach and ultimately Tyler is something that Jack cannot shake. In the film they meet on a plane, the homoeroticism between them is far more subtle, and Tyler is done away with.

In order to make the film more palatable to a mass audience, their "love" must diminish, and Tyler must become like the Impala or the Christmas puppy that goes to the shelter in February. It is as if the depths of the bond between Tyler and Jack, as well as a deeper critique of consumer culture, are a little too hot to handle even for a film that is supposedly edgy. It is also important to note the falling skyscrapers at the end of the film appear two years before 9/11, so it's also terrorism before terrorism became seriously uncool. One could only wonder how the film would have been made only a few years later or even if the film could have been made at all. What could have made the final scene safe enough for a popular audience?

The incomplete revolution that is *Fight Club* reveals itself further as the anti-effeminizing consumerism terrorist organization Project Mayhem is revealed. Project Mayhem's missions include attacks on coffee and computer retail spaces thinly veiled as Starbucks and Apple Stores. On the surface, it seems as though the big mission is to provide an ecological, anti-globalization alternative to the consumerist malaise; however, Project Mayhem is a delicate balance between correction and propagation of the problems at this moment in history. On one hand, Tyler says, "For thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and crapped on this planet" (124). On the other hand, Jack says, "I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd ever have. Burn the

Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers" (123). Within the Jack/Tyler split, comes the common goal of Project Mayhem: "We wanted to blast the world free of history" (124). Yet their motivations are distinctly different. This delicate balance, this logos of "we must destroy the world to save it, we must replace all we know with what we know," is the delicate balance we must all strike at this moment of history. This ambiguity of *Fight Club* is perfect for an age of ideological paralysis where zippy little hatchbacks will undo the environmental damage caused by cars.

These contradictions continue as Project Mayhem offers liberation and at the same time is highly authoritative. After all, "The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions" (122). This is also the second rule, and the fifth rule is, "You have to trust Tyler" (125). Again, the grim determinism and the ideological paralysis of the post-Reagan Revolution era reveal themselves. There are possibilities for resistance and for transgression; however, it's unclear just what they are. As distinctly unfree as Jack feels at the beginning of *Fight Club*, he must sacrifice his freedom to be liberated. "The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history," but a few lines before, "Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people" (122).

Project Mayhem is a group endeavor and, through the group, individuals find agency, yet Tyler interprets the movement by devaluing its members for personal reasons. In the film, the character Bob, whose enormous steroid-blossomed bosom we find Jack nestled up in at the beginning of the film, gets his brains blown out while trying to destroy a franchise coffee shop with a piece of corporate art in operation "Latté

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Thunder." Jack is horrified as Bob's body is brought into the house on Paper St. The other members of Project Mayhem see Bob as incriminating evidence. Jack sees him as his friend. Jack tries to explain, "This is a person. He has a name." Jack is reminded, "In Project Mayhem, we have no names." This contradiction is solved when the members of Project Mayhem realize that it is in death that they get their humanity back. This highly contradictory nature is where the profound incompleteness of the revolution in *Fight Club* both reveals itself and accounts for its popular appeal. The revolution will be privatized.

Giroux argues that *Fight Club* acknowledges the situation caused by the new economy but does not acknowledge its causes: "Tyler hates consumerism, but he values a 'Just do it' ideology appropriated from the marketing strategies of the Nike Corporation and the ideology of the Reagan era" (*Public* 68). This double bind reveals itself within the "human sacrifice" intuitive of Project Mayhem. In both the film and the novel, Tyler accosts a convenience store clerk. He demands his wallet, but instead of robbing him of his cash, Tyler demands, under threat of death, that the victim ditch his unsatisfactory life and go back to school in order to become a veterinarian, to be liberated from a negative role in the new economy by acquiring a positive role in the new economy. The ability to negotiate a space for oneself in the new economy is not a critique of the system, but rather a critique of the individual. Entrance into the professional-managerial class never seemed so inviting or liberating!

Students often come to the manufactured college experience to be free from members of the conformist professional managerial class, i.e. their parents, in order to themselves become liberated members of the professional-managerial class. The appeal

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of *Fight Club* is that it challenges a social order by offering a better, cooler notion of that very same order. As revolutionary as Project Mayhem is against socially isolating effects of consumerism, and it does so by creating an army of nameless individuals who were angry about being nameless individuals. It is as if Project Mayhem's slogan should be the U.S. Army's current "Army of One" slogan, which sells service and self-sacrifice as a project of narcissistic self-discovery. Tyler's maxim is "Self-improvement is masturbation," yet *Fight Club* ultimately is a tale of self-improvement. Jack might not be cured, but he has undergone a learning experience. His scars are marks of distinction; his pleasure is rooted in personal injury. Granted, it's self-improvement through scarring, but it's a self improvement yet the same. In the film, the genesis of Project Mayhem begins with Tyler delivering a speech lamenting the unfulfilled potential he sees at fight club.

The ultimate site for resistance in *Fight Club* is not the outside world; it is not the falling skyscrapers outside. The film ends before the new social order can begin, yet another alternative that fails to be clearly articulated. The practical concerns of survival and the founding of a new social order would be a drag on the narrative, and a non-consumerist anti-privatization future would seriously hamper the commercial appeal of the film. The terrorist attack is quite literally merely the backdrop for the domestic drama between Jack and Marla. The ultimate sight of resistance is deep within. Recruits to Project Mayhem must stand outside for days without food, water, shelter, or sleep in order to prove they are worthy of joining the revolution. To be good at fight club is to be able to manage pain and deny desires for a comfortable life. Both the film and novel feature scenes where evidence of Jack's extracurricular activities appear at work. This is,

of course, a sign of rebellion to the corporate world; the way to resist the corporate world is to alter the way in which the self enters that world. Furthermore, his root of escape is through beating himself up, not fucking up the system. This is the privatized solution; the self is the battleground much in the same way that the fatigued worker must overcome their weakness of body and of position in order to solve the problem of working more and harder for less money. The market provides solutions, he or she who is overworked can power up with an energy drink, preferably the one that gives the most bang for the buck, to work through the night and then find a better job in the morning. Questioning the labor system is no longer reasonable; it is up to the individual worker to create their own personal liberation.

For children of the Reagan era, a similar mentality becomes a motivating factor in campus life. After all, what would campus be without an outlet that specializes in legal liquid stimulants? Narratives of self-reliance and personal achievement determine the place for some within a learning community. Aside from the campus coffee shop and cans of Red Bull in the bookstore, the college student is implored to work harder to overcome their past and create their future; failure is on the student. Deficits in funding, ability, and/or pedagogy are all located within the student. As a result, students look out into the world with the same emphasis on self-reliance even in the face of complicated social systems and problems. Making a better world, or a better campus for that matter, seems an impossible task for the rugged individual standing before a seemingly immovable object.

A good example of this mental trap is a persuasive speech a student of mine once gave about puppy mills in the state of Pennsylvania. Until 2008, Pennsylvania had an

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agriculture policy that was very friendly to inhumane dog breeders. An agriculture inspector could view conditions such as dogs confined in extremely small cages, stacked on top of each other, but was powerless to reprimand the operator (Barnes; Hurdle; Ward). In the midst of the debate in the statehouse about changing the law, this student was giving a speech about puppy mills. The assignment was to orally present a persuasive argument. The topic was of the students' choosing, total academic freedom but extensive research required. She graphically detailed the cruelty of the operations, had statistics to prove that Pennsylvania has a disproportionate number of large puppy mills, but she forgot to mention the bill.

The offered solution. the assignment demanded that all speeches must offer a solution to the problem in question, was to only shop for puppies from an individual breeder, chain stores being out of the question. In the Q&A, I pressed her on the issue in an attempt to get her to explain to the class about the puppy mill bill being currently debated. I was perplexed that she had done extensive research about this current event but failed to mention the bill that made the issue a newsworthy current event. I gave her ample opportunity to mention the proposed new law before I gave up and mentioned it myself. It was during this exchange she finally exclaimed, "I don't see how making something illegal stops anything. Just don't shop at Petland!" The privatized market solution is the only feasible, conceivable one. And if one cannot purchase their way out of injustice, I am afraid that there is probably only a sense of helplessness in the face of wrong.

For the privatized person there is, quite literally, nothing worth having beyond one's personal space. Everything else is terrifying or hopelessly devalued. The profound

silence of the public sphere in this incident will continue to echo throughout this project. What a book and film like *Fight Club* prove is that even supposedly counter-cultural texts can be imbued with the values of mainstream economic thinking, which, among other things, makes them significantly less cool. I will argue later in this chapter and in Chapter 4, it is perhaps necessary for a text to have Neo-liberal values in order to become popular in the first place. It is with an implicit ideological understanding of privatization that students often enter educational institutions for privatized reasons. They are buying middle-class status with full knowledge that the interest on their student loans might keep them in debt forever. The system can be beat only by beating the system on its own terms, like the Project Mayhem recruit who must conquer their own biological necessities in order to reach self-fulfillment. In the case of education, best education leads to the best job. Fatigue is not a factor, even for the student taking 21 credits and working part time. And when that student breaks down during a tutoring session because they are being pulled in too many directions to be good at any of them and actually quotes their student loan principle through their tears because they can't pay the loans with out the degree—and yes this actually happens—the common sense advice is to just work harder. What we are left with here is a situation where common sense is totally fucking bat-shit crazy. Knowledge in the information age is fast and disembodied (Harvey *Brief* 3-4). *The Da Vinci Code*'s Robert Langdon is arguably the world's most famous academic, and as we shall see, he perfectly fits this redefinition of academia.

For the sake of you lucky souls unfamiliar with the greatest selling novel of all time or with the popular film staring Tom Hanks based on said book, *The Da Vinci Code* is the story of a Harvard Symbologist named Robert Langdon. Langdon is a world-

renowned expert on symbols. He can reveal the centuries of history and layers of meaning behind any sign in seconds. Because of this uncanny ability, he gets called in to assist the police as they investigate a bizarre murder at the Louvre. From here, Robert Langdon falls into a complex multi-national, multi-millennial conspiracy, and finds the Holy Grail.

The fact that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is the greatest selling novel of all time means that these are trying times for anyone in the Humanities. Its central character, Robert Langdon, is the anti-humanities Humanities professor. The success of *The Da Vinci Code* lies in the fact that it belongs to the easily recognizable sign system of a dominant order that has tried to redefine English studies away from a problem-posing pedagogy back to the pedagogy of the oppressor. Under the problem-posing model, education liberates the individual by giving them the epistemological tools in order to create the knowledge pertinent to their immediate experience. Langdon provides only answers; knowledge is set, often literally, in stone. Memorization is the only way to knowledge, and knowledge is beyond critique and context.   Give him a number two pencil and he would most certainly do well in any standardized test. The travesty that this book has captured the imagination of so many people coupled with the inability for many of us to express why it is such a gloriously bad book is a testament to the marginalized position of college English and that, as a society, we have drastically re-defined the Humanities, and therefore our profession, into something decidedly inhumane.

The workings of this system of the dominant order entail a diminished sense of ourselves and our public institutions through the ideology of consumerism. "For many

young people and adults today, the private sphere has become the only space in which to imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility. Market forces focus on the related issues of consumption and safety. Reduced to the act of consuming, citizenship is 'mostly about forgetting, not learning'" (Giroux, *Public* xiv). A critique of *The Da Vinci Code* is therefore not only a critique of a consumerist system that prizes private consumption, convenience, and conformity, but an attempt to reintroduce the humane into the Humanities.

There are two major objections to any critique of Brown's novel. The first being the "at least they are reading" response; the second being that one is simply being an elitist by offering a negative critique of such a popular novel. However, the phenomenal success of *The Da Vinci Code* is a symptom of a much larger societal problem, one that these two responses cannot explain away. To say "at least they're reading" is, of course, to be an elitist. This response means that the masses are so illiterate that any act of stringing letters together to construct coherent thoughts is something worthy of praise. This "let them eat cake" gesture means that not only are we as a discipline stuck in the ivory tower, but that tower has a moat and perhaps cauldrons of boiling oil perched atop our spire. To believe this is to leave us with only one more major curricular decision: quarter-inch or half-inch, the thickness of the plywood that should be nailed over the windows and doors of our offices and classrooms, because we are now irrelevant and might as well just go home. Furthermore, this response means that the act of reading is inconsequential, since anyone can encounter any morsel of culture without there being any notable impact upon that person, and half-inch plywood will keep out the rats better. To be an elitist is to enter into the daily transactions of our profession with the

assumption that our status and knowledge separate us from the illiterate masses and only a lucky few may climb their way into our distinct position. Therefore, to be an elitist is to assume a position of ultimate irrelevancy—just pass some nails and a hammer. The elitist approach also allows one to simply dismiss *The Da Vinci Code* as a bad novel embraced by the semi-literate masses. This is a sweeping gesture of energy conservation, dismissing that which is difficult in favor of an easily applied label as opposed to diligently engaging with this troubling condition.

It is also easy even for fans of *The Da Vinci Code* to dismiss it as flippant fun. The novel is, after all, a conspiracy thriller, a genre determined to entertain and be forgotten. People like me pour over piles and piles of the stuff at library fundraiser sales while digging for a mythical caché of rare New Directions trade paperbacks from the mid-'60s. As of 2009 in the United Kingdom, *The Da Vinci Code* is the most donated and second most sold used book at the nationwide chain of Oxfam charity used book and music stores (Flood). Aside from being both popular and disposable, *The Da Vinci Code* offers readers the possibility to themselves see hidden meanings and be a part of history (Jacobs 15). And after reading Thomas Hylland Eriksen's brilliant *Tyranny of the Moment*, where he argues that the trick to survival in information society is "protecting oneself against the 99.9 percent of information one does not want," resulting in intellectual burnout and a skewed eschatology, it's easy to see the appeal of a fast-paced thriller that offers chapters shorter and less complex than a typical email from the boss (17). Under these conditions, *The Da Vinci Code* does not have to be good to be popular and it's not.

The most remarkably bad feature of *The Da Vinci Code* is not its many major plot holes and inconsistencies. I counted eighteen; my favorite being that the architects of a ruthless international conspiracy would choose Silas, an albino monk who likes to get naked and penitent whenever possible, as their secret agent. And while a nudist albino monk may be loyal, it is hard to imagine that the architects of the ruthless, mega-powerful, and centuries old international conspiracy would not spring for some foundation, a wig, some sun glasses, and maybe some street clothes, in order to make their secret agent, you know, a little more secretive. The fact that such a profound suspension of disbelief is both asked and quietly accepted, while say Kafka's "Metamorphosis" or a latter-day M. Night Shyamalan film is not offered the same courtesy, reveals an appeal deeply routed in ideology.   The most remarkably bad feature of *The Da Vinci Code* is revealed in this simple question: If you were to meet Robert Langdon for coffee, what would you talk about?

Of course you could discuss Symbology, which would entail him giving you an instant five-sentence breakdown of the meaning of every symbol present as he does throughout the film and the novel. You could discuss his relationship with Sophie, which again would entail a five-sentence breakdown of a presumed consummation of romantic interest, followed by more awkward silence. The difficulty of this question is due to the fact that Robert Langdon does not exist; he is an empty signifier waiting to be filled. No where in *The Da Vinci Code* does Robert Langdon exist beyond fulfilling simple plot devices; he is an ATM for compressed historical information. We do not know his favorite anything; his personal habits, history, etc. are a mystery to us. Like a "fast cash sixty," Langdon gives us valuable information on demand, in a neat stack of bills. It is no

wonder that critics said Tom Hanks's portrayal of Langdon was flat; Hanks was playing a character that simply does not exist (Ansen; Dernstein; Hornaday). The same can be said for Sophie, Silas, Collett and any other humanoid plot device found within the book. The only member of the cast that may approach character status is Teabing, and Teabing's eccentricities, stories, and personal history are ultimately objects of ridicule and abjectified as he is the unrepentant villain of the story. This elimination, and ultimately abjectification, of character is the most troubling aspect of *The Da Vinci Code*, and this problem should not be taken lightly. While in the other texts mentioned in this chapter character is somewhat important for the sake of storytelling, in *The Da Vinci Code*, character is not only an obstacle to storytelling, it is the sign of villainy. In a fictional realm where everyone fulfills Bauman's notion of a "Zero Drag" person without any thing to hold them back from maximum production, part of how Brown characterizes Teabing as a villain is the fact that he wastes time telling stories instead of articulating everything as if his dialog belongs in bullet-point lists like the hero Robert Langdon (*Consuming* 9-10). What does this mean considering this one story sold more copies from 2003 to 2006 than the entire Stephen King franchise sold in the 90s? ("Grisham"; Wyatt).

Shifts in the importance of character in prose are nothing new. In *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase makes the argument that, in the American tradition, authors have abandoned the novel for the form of the romance, signifying an important cultural shift. Chase defines the novel as a literary form where character and the interaction of the character in society is most important. Conversely, Chase then defines the romance as

an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of

verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards

melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other

hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a

willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man

in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly. (ix)

For Chase, this is all part of an effort to explore just how American Literature, and most

importantly the Americans who read and write it, are culturally different than other

traditions. I use Chase here to say that a text like *The Da Vinci Code* is another step

towards a new cultural understanding. While Chase characterizes the novel as asking

moral questions and focusing on the spectacle of man in society, the romance more

celebrates the individual, signifying an important cultural shift. He then further defines

the differences between the novel and the romance:

The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail … Character

is more important than action and plot, and probably the tragic or comic

actions of the narrative will have the primary purpose of enhancing our

knowledge and of feeling for an important character, a group of

characters, or a way of life. (12)

Again, this establishes the idea that the social context and empathy are important for the

novel as a literary form. However, the romance

feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer

action over character…[with the character's actions receiving] less

resistance from reality. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional

types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or the past.

(13)

Chase then goes on to then explore canonical works of American Literature like *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *McTeague*, among others, as examples of his working definition of romance, but there is an important distinction between *The Da Vinci Code* and these texts.

All of the romances Chase profiles contain elements of the novel. The five texts listed above all contain a central conflict, and the source of that conflict is the protagonist's interaction with society. Yes, the individual in the romance is less complex and grounded than in the novel, but there is still the existence of others in the romance. Furthermore, while Chase argues that action is more important than character, he does argue that an exploration into the psychological make up of the character, which is a major component of the American Novel, then allows for a substitution for character. Hester Pryne, McTeague, Isabel Archer, and company all possess some degree of character or psychological depth. And this allows all of them to pass the "coffee talk" litmus test posed earlier. After all, what reader of *The Portrait of a Lady* doesn't wish to interrogate Ms. Archer about her decision to marry Gilbert Osmond? We can then see Chase's re-definition of the "American" Novel as more of a line of distinction between the traditions of the European Novel and the American Romance, and the purpose of his work is to then illustrate both the differences and the substitutions made in order for the American Romance to function in a similar means to the European Novel. *The Da Vinci Code* lacks all of these substitutions, signifying the emergence of a new form.

In this new order, characters, and even the protagonist, are even more one-dimensional, and the threat posed by the existence of others is further disembodied. The major source of Robert Langdon's resistance comes not from society but from Opus Dei, a free-floating entity representing its own interests, not the interests of the whole. Here, Opus Dei functions as the "members only" premium branch of the Catholic Church. Other individual obstacles block Langdon's progress and sometimes these obstacles represent larger interests, but these interests are disembodied and situational. And as stated earlier, Robert Langdon is an empty signifier. He possesses no psychological depth aside from the occasional bout with fear and his sexual impulse towards Sophie in Chapter 105. This lack of substitutions is then the result of not just a line of distinction and substitutions of action for character but rather a wholesale break from tradition and the founding of a new order, one which has a decidedly different purpose than the one which we are used to teaching and working within.

All of these texts fit within Chase's definition of the romance, but they all contain important elements that *The Da Vinci Code* lacks. Chase then defines American Romance as a form where action, and in particular action that is not hindered by society, is more important than character, and character is replaced by psychological intrusion. Chase's definition of the romance as a text where dynamic action unhindered by reality could perhaps explain the plot holes and ahistorical decontextualized nature of *The Da Vinci Code,* but since psychological intrusion is also lacking, we can then begin to see how *The Da Vinci Code* is not a novel.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that Chase's study is intended not to defend or attack on moral or intellectual grounds, but the purpose of my study is to do so.

The denial of character and history that is the defining characteristic of *The Da Vinci Code* is the very denial of humanity through accumulation under the assumption of consumer freedom. As Daniel Harris points out in *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*, one of the major tenants of the consumerist sign system is the denial of the self and of others. To mention hunger in anything other than a snack food commercial is to acknowledge bodily need and bodily limitations as barriers to consumer pleasure. Likewise "Coolness" is defined as an aesthetic where fear is not shown in the face of terror. Langdon and Sophie's excursion is exhausting, but they are not exhausted. Hiding in the back of an armored car is very likely a sweaty ordeal, but their bodies do not exist, nor do they exhibit fear when their lives are threatened, only cool posturing and sly maneuvering are present. In the face of certain and painful death, Jacques Saunière is able to neatly fold his laundry and die in a pre-arranged pose, presumably as if his ordeal were no big deal in the face of the highly stylized gesture he was trying to make. They all conquer the fear of death in the same way the Tyler Durden conquers pain in *Fight Club*; the struggle is internalized and appearance is maintained.

Harris points out that romance and fun are also often portrayed as private events in public places, for our fantasies of enjoyment rarely involve people outside of our inner most circle. Rossyln Chapel and the Louvre are portrayed sans the hoards of tourists which inhabit them. They are as we would like to imagine them, not as they actually are on the Saturday afternoon when we visit them. Furthermore, Harris's definition of quaintness as the condition where disparate historical artifacts are jammed together to give a sense of past-ness matches Langdon's historical ATM version of history. *The Da Vinci Code* fits easily within this sign system of the negation of the human subject for the

sake of private pleasure; there are far too many examples of the correlation between Harris' criticism and Brown's book to mention here. This model of a privatized public space is a place where individual consumption and accumulation is seen as freedom is manifested throughout *The Da Vinci Code*. Part of the novel's appeal is the way in which it presents the utter dislike of humanity and human frailty indicative of consumerism and privatization dressed up in the guise of a fast-paced international thriller.

As the reader of the book and viewer of the film follows Robert Langdon through the Louvre to Westminster Abbey to Rosslyn Chapel, we are overwhelmed by the sense that Langdon is the master of these public domains; he owns them through his knowledge. This is what makes this character with a complete lack of human characteristics a sympathetic character. Iain Chambers describes tourism as a domestication of public space, most notably the public space of others (31). This concept is reflected beautifully in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, where she describes a tourist as an ugly human being; ugly because, in the desire to escape the boredom of their own lives, the tourist seeks out the space of others for amusement and in the process of personal redefinition of a space deprives that space for the people who live there. It should not be surprising then that the two most important sites for *The Da Vinci Code* take place within the tourist destinations of The Louvre and Rosslyn Chapel. Harris also describes the most romantic gift one can give one's beloved is a neutron bomb, since the majority of romantic commercials and films scenes take place in public spaces where others do not exist; they belong to their individual users. After all, what is more romantic than if the entire world were as private as one's own bedroom (Harris 79-106)? In these newly privatized public institutions, prepackaged manifestations of history, art,

Frenchness, and Scottishness can be enjoyed as if one were at home watching a DVD, especially when one is at home watching the DVD.

Agamben's work also establishes the idea that the self is the last remaining domain with which one can resist sovereign power. This has been accomplished through the removal of the self from the societal system through increased privatization. Or as Agamben claims in *Homo Sacer*, the model of twentieth-century development has not been the city, a public and private space where the physical and psychological needs of humans are met through the establishment of culture, but rather the camp, meaning the concentration camp, where the self is so far removed from the whole of society that dehumanization is possible (166-80). The ahistorical, characterless portrayal of action in *The Da Vinci Code* makes it a novel for this model of development.

The increased privatization of the globe is a manifestation of the desire of Neo-liberal ideology to commodify material and immaterial goods as a profitable venture. Public spaces are then seen as suspect; they do not fit into this ideology and often characterized by Neo-liberals as traces of communism which must be eliminated in order for our society to be completely free. The university, originally conceived as a public space, is becoming increasingly privatized, and the non-character of Robert Langdon is its ideal inhabitant. He possesses tons of intellectual capital, and that allows him a degree of control over everything he sees.

With this in mind, *The Da Vinci Code* is hereby defined as a consumerist novel or novel of accumulation. While Teabing is the most multi-dimensional character in the whole text, Brown's description of him pales in comparison with his description of Teabing's Hawker 731 twin Garrett TFE-731 private jet. And let's face it, the jet is far

more important than Teabing; in this novel of accumulation, Teabing functions mostly as an access point to intellectual and material resources that Langdon and Sophie do not possess. Without Teabing, Brown wrote himself into a corner on several occasions and instead of waiting for character and context to pull Sophie and Langdon out of peril, Teabing can produce a magic jet or Range Rover as a ready means of escape just the same as Langdon can produce a fact when intellectual capital is required. This is important because, within the novel of accumulation, the most important function a being can fulfill is the accumulation of capital. In this sense, the broad-based appeal of The *Da Vinci Code* is its dehumanizing properties.

With a little help from Pierre Bourdieu and his brilliant work *Distinction*, we can see how education is both like charging up a debit card and training to shop with more expensive tastes. Bourdieu's work sought to expose the ideological underpinnings of taste. As Bourdieu asserts, "The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education" (1029). Basically, the expense of education is an investment into the accumulation of intellectual knowledge and with this the acquisition of expensive tastes. For Bourdieu, the acquisition of knowledge is a reproduction of value and value systems. College is where students learn about the finer things in life and get the earning power to purchase the finer things in life (1028-36). Today's students understand this logic quite well; they see college as an access point to middle-class identity through promises of future employment (Readings; Fox, Tom). Under this logic, the experience of college is an experience of accumulating personal, intellectual capital. One does not have to know much about art history to know that Da Vinci sounds expensive. And what mark of educational distinction is more expensive-sounding than Harvard?

Brown uses Langdon's employer as an easy mark for establishing Langdon as a premiere scholar. Langdon's labor is forgotten; he does not write or do research that we can see, only that we hear about. The non-linear thoughts and other complexities of research are hidden, and Langdon is never wounded by the slings and arrows of the peer-review process. His display of expertise is not an act of opening up complicated sign systems and the traditions they represent in order to display the web of meaning that lies within. Rather, Langdon takes a sign, something that already functions as a metonym for a more complicated concept, and reduces it even further, often compressing centuries of historical conflict, complexities, and contradictions into a few sentences.

Brown's portrayal of Langdon's methodology mirrors the mistake made by the Ancient Greeks outlined in Georgio Agamben's *The Man Without Content*. Agamben's argument in this text is that, when the Ancient Greeks outlined the essential human activities, they omitted work, because those making the definitions owned slaves. The omission of labor from the list of essential human activities has resulted in a chronic inability for those in the Western Tradition to be aware of the cost of living, resulting in an attempt to separate the art and the artist and the work of art from its mode of production. Langdon's scholarship is a manifestation of this omission of history, humanity, and labor.

A young woman once came to me at the writing center because she could not begin to formulate a thesis statement for a paper she had to write in correlation with a twenty-page selection from Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. I thought that the problem was with reading comprehension. After all, Marx's text is intellectually dense and firmly rooted within a moment in history. I then explained to her how to perform an active and

close reading of the selection with the purpose of then showing her how careful note taking can assist in the generation of a thesis, an outline, and ultimately a paper. She then flipped through the twenty-pages and exclaimed, "You mean I gotta read *all* this junk!" What I had assumed was a situation that entailed a problem with the methodology of reading turned out to be a problem with the act of reading itself. She left soon after, another unhappy customer. Of course, Robert Landon's encyclopedic knowledge is on demand; he is the exemplar intellectual for the age of fast capitalism. Rarely does he need to do outside research, let alone non-immediately productive research in order to solve the mystery. He reads no junk.

At this point, it would be easy to assail the student for her laziness and anti-academic stance, but we must remember as we historicize authors *with* our scholarship that we must historicize our students *within* our pedagogy. This particular student is the product of a world where *The Da Vinci Code* is the greatest selling novel of all time. Labor, academic or otherwise, is like defecation: It is something we all do, rarely discuss, and is almost never portrayed in media, or at least not in a positive light. In an unscientific browse of ninety-one images on the web sites of the three colleges I have been affiliated with as both teacher and student, I found five where reading was the primary activity (francis.edu; iup.edu; pointpark.edu). Of course, the thing I have to realize is that I was the one in this situation who chronically misreads such situations. In the post-Twitter era, reading long bits of information is antiquated. We all have better things to do and our information technology facilitates time to do those things or to commute. As a graduate student and as a professional tutor, I have encountered professors who do not read student papers; one even bragged about it as a "special skill"

that comes from being in the profession for years as I was handing in a research project. This particular student and the professor who grades essays based solely upon the merit of thesis statements and topic sentences are simply responding to the predominant culture. Brevity is the soul of wit, as well as knowledge, compassion, or work, its value, and the years of active labor and passive thought time cannot speak for itself. This means that Robert Langdon is not only on campus, he is the means by which we are represented. Again, it is easy to dismiss this novel as a mere product of consumer culture and this incident to the relative immaturity of young adults, but something far more sinister is occurring.

In the introduction to *The Curious Feminist*, Cynthia Enloe points out that "[b]eing curious takes energy. It may thus be a distorted form of 'energy conservation' that makes certain ideas so alluring" (1). She then goes on to describe how this principle of energy conservation creates the "loaded adjective 'natural'" and that whenever a pre-existing order is described as 'natural' it is beyond questioning, and once an established order is beyond questioning that established order is capable of anything. This is especially the case in a system constantly advertising pleasure and enjoyment. And as Slavoj Žižek points out in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!,* by assuming that we are operating from a position of freedom we may very well be forfeiting the very language by which to express any lack of freedom. Freedom is a totalizing category. One is free or one is not. Little effort is paid to how we define a term that is so crucial to our organization of reality. I would like to argue that the success of *The Da Vinci Code* lies in that it is a text where the established order is both manifested and unquestioned even as Langdon is on the run from authority figures like Interpol and the Catholic Church.

In the preface to *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes states that he was compelled to write his text by "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (11). This is a trap that we can all fall into. *The Da Vinci Code*, as well as all of the other popular primary texts discussed in this chapter, certainly fall into this trap. Furthermore, the fact that they do is crucial to their appeal and make them worthy barometers of ideology in the supposed post-ideological era.

In the reading of Francis Fukyama's *The End of History* found within *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida points out that the Neo-liberal concept of free-market capitalism has become the global metonym for freedom (72, 75-81). Fukyama's argument is that global capitalism will solve human problems if given enough time. The end of history is the end of ideological conflicts once everyone conforms to the whims of capitalism's invisible hand, and it is within this assumption that the ideology of Neo-liberalism functions as a structural limitation by which we cannot see beyond the supposed 'natural' order of things. As Marx claimed, religion is the opiate of the masses; similarly, one could easily argue that consumerism has superseded and redefined religion. In a world where, according to Baudrillard, exchange value has collapsed into use value, everything is a commodity without history, even god.

Langdon's use of the Catholic Church is an example of this attempt to invoke a pre-established order. The sites of most of the action of *The Da Vinci Code* are sites infused with the pseudo-historical depth Jameson is describing as he defines postmodernism. The historical continuity of the Catholic Church is invoked but not

explored throughout the text. The established order of the church and presumed 'naturalness' of this order is then established. Therefore, the supposed media conflict pitting Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Church's heirarcy versus Dan Brown is a false conflict, since both are attempting to assert different aspects of the same 'naturalized' ideological system of domination at the same time. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops rated the film "Morally Objectionable," their worst possible rating (Forbes and DiCerto), they are the same sides of the same coin because they need the pre-established order of the Roman Catholic Church for their survival. While the Pope may or may not be infallible, Brown needs Benedict's intellectual capital as a premium brand name.

As a novel of accumulation, *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel for the consumerist aesthetic. The spread of transnational capital has resulted people all over the world assuming that the freedom to accumulate is the highest manifestation of freedom. The problem is that, again as Slavoj Žižek points out in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, by assuming that we are in a situation of freedom, we may be forfeiting the very language by which to express any lack of freedom.

Fredric Jameson points out in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that the fragmentary nature of modern life requires us to communicate in fragmented bits, or bytes if you will, of information. The most effective way to communicate within this system is to invoke previously established notions, and often these notions are manifestations of the dominant ideology (20).

The pseudo-historical depth that Langdon provides whenever Brown wishes to establish any sense of context within the novel are manifestations of a dominant ideology.

By compressing centuries of history into a few short sentences, as Brown often does, like at the beginning of chapter ninety seven when he goes from William the Conqueror to Princess Di with stops in the middle in one glib, sweeping sentence, he is establishing a sense of past-ness which fails to both effectively establish and/or question history. Yet the value of historical information remains. Therefore, a critique of *The Da Vinci Code* as an anti-Catholic book is a failed project because Brown and Benedict XVI both need to invoke the established order of the Catholic Church to exist, even if they do so in different ways. By describing commodities, such as the Range Rover product placement ad which occurs between chapters 66 and 67, Langdon is also evoking the established order of the consumption based culture industry through brand recognition. His doing so is an act of diminishing the individual and the society in which they live in for the sake of the dominant order.

Catherine Belsey in "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text" discusses the role of knowledge, and subsequently knowledgeable characters, in the construction of texts and social order. According to her analysis, one who embodies transformative knowledge also possesses agency. Robert Langdon's knowledge of the hidden and his easy explanations transform his immediate environment and ultimately re-write history. His emptiness as a character allows the reader to fill in the blanks with narcissism. We are riding along; his power is our power.   Mystery pulls us in and through Langdon's meticulous truth telling, a realistic verisimilitude the reader also unlocks the code.   The reader can then come to own the most valuable traditions and works of art for themselves, better than the reproductions from Franklin Mint or the fall campus poster sale.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Freidan states that "the American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be" (64). Reading her analysis of how the culture industry destroys the sense of the individual self, written in 1963, one is easily frightened by the contemporary nature of her text, especially in light of the role media plays in the anorexia and bulimia epidemics of today (see Susan Bordo on this point). This is contrasted sharply with Langdon's transformative knowledge. He possesses agency through the ability to read the symbols of the external world. The women Freidan are discussing, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3, are conversely "read" by the symbols that populate their environment. The ubiquitous, 'naturalized' nature of the culture industry and the globalization of that industry mean that the problem outlined by Friedan is not just an American female problem but one that affects women and men throughout the globe. By invoking familiar aesthetics and established notions, *The Da Vinci Code* is both a cause and a symptom of the problems of the established order.

This is not to say that one cannot deal with consumer commodities at all. Contemporary novelists like Stewart O'Nan and Douglas Coupland deal with commodities in their novels. In *The Names of the Dead*, O'Nan's protagonist drives a Wonder Bread truck and in *JPod* Coupland compassionately portrays the life of a "gore specialist" at a video game company. However, both O'Nan and Coupland's novels are compassionate testaments to the profound depth of the human spirit and character of individuals living in a consumerist economy. In Chapter 4, we will discuss the ways in which their novels are attempts to reclaim the public sphere. In their novels it is through a network of other people, even with their competing interests, that characters find

meaning, success, and redemption. Brown cannot muster anything approaching this.

Žižek poses the question: if the cultural imperative, or superego, is no longer inhibition but enjoyment, what then can one hope to rebel against or even find true enjoyment with (*For They* 237-43)? People find *The Da Vinci Code* enjoyable not only because if follows the imperative to enjoy, but also the reader experiences the right kind of enjoyment.

The popular appeal of the act of reading *The Da Vinci Code* is the appeal of the private negated being searching for some broader meaning through a pre-established system of signs and meanings that are 'naturalized' and handed to the individual. It is not culture but rather a system of dominance and personal negation under the guise of personal freedom. To say *The Da Vinci Code* is just a bad book is to belie its truly frightening nature. The role of the Humanities is to make individuals more fully human, and it is the role of educators to create a space beyond the dominant order where humanity can still exist.

Recently in a Freshman Composition class, I utilized several games where the students were forced to respond to questions, based on the problem-posing model of education established by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Upon entering the classroom one morning, one of the actively engaged students in the class noticed that we were going to embark upon another problem-posing activity. The student then said, "Oooh, not again, can't you just lecture?" Now I could easily mistake her yearning for the pedagogy of the oppressor as a result of my *brilliant* oratory skills, but rather it is a manifestation of a culture where the safety and privacy of consumption are packaged as the only desirable conveniences. In a world where Easy Mac is marketed as the perfect

college food because pre-packaged macaroni and cheese is just not pre-packaged enough, this student is again just thinking within the dominant ideology as are instructors who scrap lesson plans and "just show a movie." To just sit and listen does not require home work. It also does not require the risk of having to speak in class, and it does not require the energy of active thinking. Neither does "just showing a movie." Under our current mindset of competing profitable and pleasureable interests, both attitudes de-legitimize good listening and the use of media as effective pedagogical strategies. The question of what is gained is not what was learned but was it fun?

The pervasiveness of this system, as manifested in the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, or the fact that the follow up was for some the last best hope for the entire publishing industry, gives us little time and space by which to forget what is at stake (Bethune). The struggle against what *The Da Vinci Code* represents is a struggle for a very sense of humanity, democracy, and freedom for our students and ourselves. The collapse of humanity and public space manifested in this text are exhibited within the classroom every time a student or instructor looks for the easy way out and rejects a difficult concept simply because it's hard or painful to realize. And this doctrine of convenience applies to both ends of the student teacher relationship.

Reductionism is now common sense, and Robert Langdon is a common-sense academic. Yes, he struggles with the magic device to "unlock the code," but he does in hours what other mortals spent millenniums either trying to obscure or uncover. By comparison, a semester's work or an entire academic program stands no chance. Two of the major intellectual maladies which afflict this profession are theory-phobia and technophobia. Both are the products of the tyranny of convenience. Derrida and the

Microsoft operating system are dense packages, or tough codes to crack if you will, which, when opened and thoughtfully engaged with, change the way in which one relates to text; however, they demand much from their pupils in terms of time and energy expended. It is easiest to condemn these systems as wrong without fully understanding them simply because they cannot be owned by being understood, and I have seen this approach too many times to count. As Bauman points out, the elimination of ambiguity is key to feeling in control (*Modernity* 206). However, techies are the best critics of technology and the true post-theory people are indeed theory people (Menand 12). The question is, are we willing, or even able, to embark on such a time-consuming undertaking? What are the rewards? Can we do better? Can we have fun instead? Much is lost under this new social order.

My argument throughout this chapter has been that the economic arrangement of Neo-liberalism has had some very severe social consequences. This arrangement has lasted long enough that it has produced its own generation of young adults with a very real sense of danger, those which they are taught to fear and those which they sense at the peripheries of contemporary ideology. The thing to remember is that the kids really are alright, they just need to be nurtured by quality education. Contrary to Fukuyama's "end of history," this arrangement will, and must, end. However, we as a species rarely leave eras the same way in which we enter them. Next, I would like to look at other eras and other social arrangements as they relate as mileposts to this moment on our historical journey. We cannot roll back the clock, but we can write the future with citations from history.

CHAPTER 2: THE REWARDS OF BEING NAKED:

SUCCESS, SCANDAL, PRIVACY, INTIMACY,

AND THE RECIPROCAL COLLAPSE OF THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

Kids today, according to popular notions, are not only scary because they are violent, as described in chapter one, but because they are also über-confessional, and not in a socially acceptable tell-all autobiography or afternoon talk show sort of way, either. Today's youth are portrayed in popular media as techno-exhibitionists, threatening the very notions of privacy and modesty with every status update and text message. A Lexus/Nexus search of English language newspapers and magazines revealed that, globally, over two hundred different stories about "sexting" appeared from January 2009 to January 2010. These stories slip between framing the issue as a purely legal one to being simultaneously tantalizing and horrifying about the shattered innocence of youthful sexuality, including a *USA Today* story with the headline "To deal with 'sexting,' XXXtra discretion is advised." My point here, unlike these articles, is not to be alluring or alarmist. After all, later research revealed that the phenomenon is substantially less common than it was portrayed in the first wave of sensationalist reports ("Teen Sexting").

We do live in a confessional age; however, rather than rooting the issue purely within anxieties about the future and the people that we will have to share it with, I would like to look at how the expansion of privatization as an economic, but also social, agenda has left us desperate for human contact. Ultimately, privatization has given us new, and often insufficient, tools for the pursuit of social relationships, resulting in the "privatized personhood" explored throughout this project. This condition is marked by a chronic

mistrust of others, an inability to imagine oneself in settings with other people, and, of course, a pervasive dissatisfaction in pursuit of ever higher forms of accumulation. Consumerism is an economy of dissatisfaction. There is always a better, newer product in the pipeline. Those who are satisfied by consumerism effectively cease to be consumerists.

It is with this chapter that we begin a historical tracing of the growth of this phenomenon through an exploration of the shifts that have occurred since the late 19th century. Privatization has meant the mutual collapse of the previously separate public and private spheres into one another, resulting in a conceptualization of space that is neither public nor private, neither here nor there. By looking at texts like August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* while juxtaposing them with contemporary texts like *American Beauty*, reality TV, and social networking, we can see just how our notions of success, scandal, privacy, and intimacy have and have not changed.

Betty Friedan once said, "[A]n American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be" (64). This is still a very relevant quote. The stereotypical "media savvy youth of today" have to come of age within a virtual realm of perfect imaginary people, devoid of imperfections and the possibility to thwart our advances. It is within this scale that young people must somehow negotiate coming into being and joining the wider world. As I will continue to argue in this chapter, the Children of Reagan, those who are most imbedded in this new world of pleasure yet troubled by it's inequities, often live their lives according to an unrealistic scale and without the comfort of human companionship. The young people I work with are often

stuck somewhere between a defeatism that blindly accepts the notion that they might not be as prosperous as previous generations , yet are still tantalized by lavish dreams of success and wealth. There is a tremendous fear of the future, but a flicker of youthful exuberance. One cannot properly understand their story without first acknowledging this dialectic. The overt question of this chapter is, how did we get to this state of affairs? However, perhaps the underlying question is, how can this state of affairs be met with anything other than severe performance anxiety?

With the advent of Fordism, in and around the 1910s the lives of the citizens of the Global North have increasingly had their lives defined by the expectation of mass-produced pleasure (Allen 281). Henry Ford's business proposition of paying the producers of consumer products enough to afford those same products was good for Ford but also transformative for the lives of many people, to the point where it becomes hard to imagine another way of living. Inherent in the definition of Fordism, for most, is a link of mass production and mass consumption. This twin axis forever altered life on the planet, predominant modes of living, our dreams and desires (Allen 282-92). It is the purpose of this chapter to look at capitalism before and during Fordism to illustrate the nature in which mass pleasure and privatization has shifted the way we relate to others and to ourselves. By looking at a time when Fordism was a monumental historical shift, rather than simply a familiar mode of being, we can understand how we got to a state where looking at and showing the most intimate details is normal, even hallmarks of success.

The three historical texts *Miss Julie*, *Ragged Dick*, and *An American Tragedy* all intertwine success with a certain degree of scandal. They are all public explorations of

private lives—and all were subjects of vigorous public debate. *Miss Julie*, *An American Tragedy*, and even some of the later works of Alger all were subject to public pressure due to their content (Rokem 2; " Banned"; Scharnhorst and Bales 117). Being as they were commercially produced and published, they were subject to the wants of editors, directors, the ticket or book buying public, and even obscenity laws. Under this arrangement, the public, or even the notion of audience, is clear, creating a dialectic that curiously mirrors the very dialectic of the works themselves, which center on the public exposition of a private world. One of the things that has occurred with technological advances is the democratization of the production and consumption of information. We can see more and we can now have a hand in creating our own content, publishing our own confessions, and yes, even our own pornography.

While fulfilling the requirements for my assignments, students have "come out", confessed minor crimes, as well as revealed pasts marked by drug and sexual abuse. I take it as a sign that students feel comfortable with me, or at least my teaching persona. I also realize that I am dealing with a group of individuals desperate for some adult guidance. Either way, it sometimes leaves me with the questions like: can a student's narrative about being the one to find the aftermath of her father's shotgun-suicide earn anything less than an A-plus? How does one give constructive feedback about the silences in a narrative that are too painful to write? It is hard to prepare for such things, even as the experience is dovetailed with the joy of watching the students grow over the course of a semester as they undertake the assignment in a lonely and sometimes violent world.

The Children of Reagan's lives are marked by the negative side-effects of privatization. One of the primary symptoms of privatization is distance, and one of the primary tools for the creation and reinforcement of distance is the automobile. Cars allow us to collapse time and space while simultaneously expanding our sense of freedom in isolation. We can get away from it all, with the help of being enclosed within several tons of steel, sound dampening glass, and a good stereo, *be* away from it all as we are in the act of getting away from it all. Communities are built not on human ergonomics, but rather vehicular access. A large percentage of my traditional-aged college students have spent the majority of their lives in communities built around, and for the sake of, automotive transportation, but for most of their lives were not old enough to drive. Perpetual tax and budget cuts to public transit also mean that my urban-dwelling students have a very difficult time getting around. And even if they were able to move around freely, they usually have no place to go, being too young for that most sacred and common of public sphere meeting places in the U.S., the bar.

The spaces people call home are themselves designed to isolate. According to Bill McKibben, a CEO of a major home-building corporation kicked off a keynote address at a major convention of corporate homebuilders during the height of the McMansion phase with the proclamation, "We call this the ultimate home for families who don't want anything to do with one another!" ("Keynote"; *Deep* 97). As part of the same talk that later became a chapter in *Deep Economy*, McKibben mentioned that he toured one of the newest and most advanced McMansion designs. The most remarkable feature, he said, was a part of the room set up to look like it belonged to the oldest daughter of a "typical" family. The bedroom featured a private bath as well as cable,

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phone, and internet connections. This is, of course, now the standard for new homes.

What made this room a model of architectural advancement was that, accessible from a

trapdoor in the walk-in closet was a separate and even more private bedroom room. This

captive room was set up with a karaoke machine, a disco ball, and beanbag furniture

(McKibben "Keynote"; McKibben *Deep* 97).   In this arena, one does not need an

admiring audience to be a star.

      To grow up in a room like this is to learn its lessons: adventure occurs inside,

behind a closed door, and through the back of the closet. One separation from parents

and siblings is simply not enough to ensure complete freedom. While Ragged Dick from

and Clyde Griffiths from *An American Tragedy* go out into the world and make

something of themselves, there is a new idea of success, one that is domesticated and

perhaps without labor. People, even and especially intimate relations with them, are an

obstacle to personal enjoyment. As pointed out in the Introduction to Kojin Karatani's

Architecture as Metaphor, historically it has been within architecture that attempts at

utopia, both physically and metaphorically, have been realized (Isozaki x). Quite simply,

buildings are built with a distinct notion in mind of how human beings will exist in those

spaces. Grand halls, cathedrals, parks, and libraries are built out of a belief in society. Of

course, in the words of the one who brought Neo-liberalism to Britain, Margaret

Thatcher, "There is no such thing as society, but only individuals" (qtd in Harvey, *Brief*

History 82). Reading Karatani leaves us with the question of what kind of spaces do we

create when we no longer believe in a future marked by collective happiness? If one

cannot account for humanity as part of their vision for the future, one must negate

humanity in their physical spaces.

Like mentioned earlier in my reading of *The Da Vinci Code*, narratives of the era of privatization tend to negate the presence of other humans. Conversely, in the formula Horatio Alger utilized in most of his novels a boy goes into an outdoor world of adventure and becomes a man. Ragged Dick does not even have a private space when we meet him; he sleeps in an alley. However, what are we to say about the prospects of adventure for a generation who grew up under the shadow of stranger danger playing video games in the limited and limiting spaces McKibben is describing? Karatani's reading of Christopher Alexander's seminal essay "A City is Not a Tree" is important to mention here. Alexander points out that cities are overlapping and intersecting systems. One can read a magazine at a news stand at an intersection near a bus stop and simultaneously participate in several overlapping systems at once (33). As commerce, transit, the street grid, and other systems converge, city life acquires its distinctly humane qualities. However, Alexander points out that modern city planning is more based upon separating out individual systems like branches on a tree, allowing them to seek out their own purity and perfection, isolated rooms within isolated rooms. What both Anderson and Karatani point out, however, is that this perfection results in a kind of profound disconnection, one that Anderson equates to "schizophrenia and suicide" (Karatani 35; Alexander). The room behind the closet is such a prefect end to a perfect branch, a space disconnected from other spaces and possibilities, alone. This space offers enjoyment without resistance from others, while silencing any notion of what is missing. In contrast, Alger's protagonists frequently master multiple tasks on their road to success. A boot black becomes a tour guide, and a rescue swimmer, culminating in his final status as a self-respecting citizen. All of this happens within and because of the overlapping

nature of the urban environment. What is to be said for the individual at the end of the distant branch of the kinds of spaces commonly built today? This is a recurring theme for this project: by moving forward in the quest for greater enjoyment, something important has been lost. Privatization means that we are focused on happiness through the ownership of things, rather than through connectivity to people and places.

There are some things that might bridge this gap. Social networking through Facebook, Twitter, etc allows one to be everywhere at once, yet no where at the same time. The student who checks their smart phone in the classroom is both trying to alleviate boredom but also collapse time and space into one another. Ragged Dick sees friends and foes on every block he walks down; the social network user is reaching beyond their highly specialized and isolated physical environment to find companionship. To riff off of Iain Chambers's reading of the Walkman in *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, the smart phone/social network user in public is trying to impose not a soundtrack on public space but rather trying to populate it with one's own crowd. According to Chambers, the end result is a kind of privatization of a public arena (50). Smart phones do the same thing. The half a dozen or so social networks I belong to allow me to keep in touch with my now far-flung friends in places like Texas, Jordan, and Brooklyn; however it is a model with limited possibilities. Or as Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg puts it, "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa" (Pariser). It is with this understanding that virtual and physical spaces are coming together.

Consumerism is forcing the hand of the way spaces are redefined. "Consumerism might be understood as the tendency to replace…demanding structures and disciplines

with undemanding, quasi-substitutes" (Crawford). The world of privatization that I am talking about here is one where all resistance to personal pleasure, even when they are embodied within necessary human needs, is not allowed to speak. Social conflict can also be filtered out. Eli Pariser coined the phrase "filter bubble" to describe the invisible state we are in after the algorithms that Google and Yahoo utilize to tailor our search results specifically to us, resulting in only immediate access to that which is agreeable to us. Our sense of place has changed, and as a result, our places are changing who we are and our tolerance to things which challenge us or resist our whims.

Furthermore, critiques of consumerism often focus upon the way that consumerism is dependent upon both the manufacture of goods and desires. This was understood as early as 1889. "Early ideologue of consumerism Simon Patten" spoke of this with a bluntness unheard of from today's consumerist apologetics (Spring 72). "It is not the increase of goods for consumption that raises the standard of life… [but] the rapidity with which [the consumer] tires of any one pleasure. To have a high standard of life means to enjoy a pleasure intensely and to tire of it quickly" (Marchand 51). Perpetual dissatisfaction and an accelerated sense of time are essential parts of the mechanisms of consumerism. And with the manufacture, as well as constant replacement, of certain needs, very important needs, including the need for social interaction, are being ignored. Lifelong friendships, after all, are durable but also constraining at times. In the texts featured in this chapter social conflict plays a vital role. For Ragged Dick, social conflicts allow him financial opportunity and the opportunity to prove his moral virtue. Social conflicts are the ruin of Miss Julie and Clyde Griffiths. When it comes to the Internet, there is a very real attempt being made to diminish the

negative possibilities of social interaction, while still being social, creating an unrealistic scale for human interaction.

To be alive today is to be torn between an ideology that teaches us to consume and fear others versus a need for the comfort of social interaction. To paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, Heaven and Hell are both other people, even online. This has always been the case, but my argument here is that, for the first time in history, there is the very real belief that a personal, private heaven is attainable. The negotiation between the public and the private continues; however, the terms of this negotiation have shifted within a matrix determined by intermingling influence between the mode of production, personal choices, and the cultural fantasies that reinforce the terms of these negotiations. By examining how this negotiation has taken place in some historical texts, I am hoping to make transparent this often invisible, unthinkable yet crucial dimension of social life. *Miss Julie* predates Simon Patten's manifesto of consumerism, *The Consumption of Wealth*, by one year and it too signifies the coming of a new order. We can see the shift from aristocracy to meritocracy, the rise of disposable products and peoples, and a concept of worth that must be both earned and shown.

Miss Julie is the story of an aristocrat's daughter. In this relatively short play with only three major characters, Miss Julie falls in love with, as well as under the spell of, one of her servants, consummates her love, and commits suicide over the loss of her honor caused by the previous two events. *Miss Julie* is indicative of many works of modern drama in that it portrays a domestic or family setting being acted upon by some outside or public influence. It is precisely this tension that I would like to explore within

the context of privatization and the effect that it has upon the shifting dynamics of the public and private sphere.

According to Raymond Williams's brilliant reading of the evolution of tragedy, tragedy is inherently social in nature. It is within society that conflicts between individuals are mediated and thus is a ripe landscape for tragic actions ("Private" 48). Miss Julie is a woman twice scorned. As the play begins, the audience learns two intrusive facts about Julie. First, she has recently been dumped by her fiancé, and, second, that she is currently menstruating (Strindberg 71-5). The conversation between servants Jean and Kristin provides more exposition for the character of Miss Julie than it does for the characters of Jean and Kristin. Here they function as the ultimate celebrity inside sources. They predate Kitty Kelly tell-all biographies and celebrity sex tapes by a century, yet they serve the same function for a voyeuristic audience. After all, Kristin lets us know that she has gossiped with the servant who regularly sees Miss Julie naked (Strindberg 73).

It should further be noted that the very dynamics of Naturalist theatrical performance further this kind of voyeurism, for it is in the theatre that a group of public spectators come together to explore the private life of a fictional individual (Rokem 2). Una Chaudhuri furthers this notion by stating, "In the staging and meaning of the play [*Miss Julie*]—just as in the logic of naturalism— 'inside' is not merely contiguous and continuous with 'outside' but thoroughly penetrated by it; similarly, the private is not a realm withdrawn and protected from the public but thoroughly determined by it" (319). The same threat of public voyeurism, either actual or merely implied, that compels Jean and Julie to hide in Jean's room and later guides the razor in Julie's hands, is the very

same force that compels us to keep watching. We, with our fetish for celebrity scandal, with our desire to see behind the bedroom doors of others out of the hunger to understand our own experience, determine the position of both Miss Julie the character and *Miss Julie* the work of art. We are complicit co-conspirators; we play the same game in our desire to be remarkable and remarked upon. *Miss Julie* is then a cautionary example of the fall from the grace of stature.

In his reading of the public/private dynamic in modern drama, Freddie Rokem points out that Strindberg's notes for designing the set reveal a desire to further draw the audience into this voyeurism by collapsing the public/private dynamic of theatrical performance. Strindberg's direction for the stage is to show an incomplete, large kitchen. The incomplete kitchen, concealing draperies, and "slanted rear wall," according to Rokem, call the audience to look closer at a space that is larger than their plane of vision, to construct the rest of that larger space in their minds and further collapse the boundaries of the proscenium arch (Strindberg 71; Rokem 55). The private world where some of Miss Julie's very material needs are met now belongs to us. We sit in and see a small part of that behind the scenes world of the very bowels of her domestic life. This is not the semi-public parlor where she entertains guests, but a site of domestic labor, labor that Miss Julie does not perform of course, where the play takes place. In this sense, Miss Julie is already fallen; she is not in her honorable place at the banquet table, but rather where the dishes get washed. The fact that this play has lasted for over a century is an enduring testament that audiences enjoy looking in. And through this dialectic of voyeurism and ownership, we can explore how Strindberg's *Miss Julie* is a watershed

moment towards our contemporary understanding of privacy, privatization, and our
public personas.

One of the first factors that must be accounted for is our shifting notion of what
constitutes tragedy. It is a popular creed that whenever something bad happens to anyone
anywhere at any time it is "such a tragedy." This was not always the case. As Raymond
Williams points out,

> Tragedy, as we are told, is not simply death and suffering, and it is
> certainly not accident. Nor is it simply any response to death and
> suffering. It is, rather a particular kind of event, and kind of response,
> which are genuinely tragic and which the long tradition embodies…What
> is more deeply in question is a particular kind and particular interpretation
> of death and suffering. Certain events and responses are tragic, and others
> are not. (*Modern Tragedy* 14)

Common people with common problems could not, traditionally, be the subjects of
tragedy.   Nobles are struck down tragically, commoners just die.

For *Miss Julie*, the presentation of the demeaning survival of Jean and the honor
suicide of the aristocrat Julie signifies an important shift. The capitalist meritocracy is
replacing the old nobility, and this new arrangement is populated with a new kind of
person. Subservience still has its place, but survival is dependent on successfully
negotiating the new order. Strindberg in his famous "Preface to Miss Julie" states, "Miss
Julie is also a relic of the old warrior nobility that is giving way to the new aristocracy of
nerve and brain" (61). On the same page Strindberg proclaims, "The servant Jean is the
type who founds a species, someone in whom the process of differentiation may be

observed. He was a poor tied-worker's son and has now brought himself up to be a future nobleman" (61). Strindberg also instructs the audience,

> If my tragedy makes a tragic impression on many people, that is their fault. When we become as strong as the first French revolutionaries, we shall feel as much unqualified pleasure and relief at seeing the thinning out in our royal parks of rotten, superannuated trees, which have stood too long in the way of others with just as much right to their time in the sun. (57)

Here Strindberg is announcing a conscious break from the past. In *Miss Julie*, the commoner survives, the noble just dies. He may claim, "In the following play I have not tried to accomplish anything new," but the argument should be made that Strindberg is having a rare moment of modesty (56).

In the hands of another playwright, Miss Julie's death would be bemoaned instead of celebrated. Her intimate secrets would not have been laid so bare, they would have been hidden. Her tragedy would be the product of fate or fortune rather than the product of an individual shortcoming to be celebrated. This seems to fit Williams's notion that, under the old order, "Some deaths mattered more than others," but, "[i]ronically, our own middle-class culture began to reject this view; the tragedy of a citizen could be as real as the tragedy of a prince. Often, in fact, this was not so much a rejection of the real structure of feeling as an extension of the tragic category to a newly rising class" (*Modern Tragedy* 49). This shift makes *Miss Julie* relevant to us today because her death is the precursor of a new understanding of the self, how it is valued, and how we come to understand it.

Miss Julie can be seen as a milestone to modern notions of personhood. As Peter Berger and company point out in *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, a significant shift has occurred from the notion of honor as a product of birthright to the more democratic, modern notion of human dignity. Honor is linked to institutional roles; dignity is free of such restrictions. Dignity is a birthright for all humans. And in fact, institutional roles are often seen as a threat to dignity rather than underpinning (90). We can see the conflicts that embroil Julie and Jean as conflicts between the concepts of honor and dignity. Their sexual union results in two distinctly different outcomes. Jean is troubled by the consequences of the act, and his troubles come via the symbol of the old order in the form of his lordship's boots (Strindberg 108). Jean, the "new man," will survive. Hands could be placed in motion to punish him, but he is not lost. Julie is a symbol of a corrupted old order. Not only is her chastity lost, Strindberg portrays her as too masculine and daring to properly fulfill her social role. Having lost her institutional role with the loss of her sexual purity, she can only restore herself in death. As a dead object, the image of her cannot fall any further, even as she rots physically. In the unsympathetic portrayal of her death we can see the rise of new hierarchies of class and gender to replace old hierarchies of class and gender. To subvert Strindberg's own words, "the new wine has burst the old bottles" (56).

With this new understanding comes a new way of coming to know the self. The dignified modern man, in this case Jean, is less restrained by institutional roles even as he lives under the threat of them, and as a result we cannot come to know him through the roles he is forced to play. To quote Berger and company, in the world dictated by honor,

The true self of the knight is revealed as he rides out to do battle in the full

regalia of his role; by comparison the naked man, in bed with a woman,

represents a lesser quality of the self. In a world of dignity, in the modern

sense, the social symbolism governing the interaction of men is a disguise.

The escutcheons hide the true self. It is precisely the naked man, and even

more specifically the naked man expressing his sexuality, who represents

himself more truthfully. Consequentially, the understanding of self-

discovery and self-mystification is revealed as between these two worlds.

(90)

The world of others is a threat to truth. Truth is to be found in the private and the

personal. It is through overhearing the peasant song and dance that Julie finds her

ruination; her lesser self has been revealed. In contemporary confessional celebrity

culture where the two realms have collapsed into each other, she would have found ample

opportunity to endear herself to those very same peasants. Kristin gets reflected glory in

her ability to gossip about Miss Julie. However, in our contemporary re-negotiation of

public and private, success and scandal, her post-assignation private world would be a

highly marketable commodity. While the peasants have and would gossip, Julie could be

selling the wares of her privacy. We could follow her on Twitter, buy her authorized

biography at an airport book store, and wait for her to show up on a talk show; all

relaying her scandalous fall from grace.

This public/private tension has been indicative of the *Miss Julie* experience since

the very beginning. In an attempt to skirt censorship, Strindberg was willing to move the

location of Jean and Julie's tryst from Jean's bedroom to the garden, under the

assumption that the public "garden is much less loaded and dangerous as a place for erotic adventures than Jean's bedroom" (Rokem 11).   Here we see that Strindberg was acutely aware of the public/private dynamic as it plays out in *Miss Julie*. This strategy did not work, so the world premiere was held in private as to avoid any censorship laws governing public performances (Rokem 11). Of course, if Strindberg were writing a screenplay for a mainstream rated-R film today, in the era of the celebrity sex tape, he would not have had this problem. Yes, there is still censorship and firm but unspoken bounds of what is acceptable, but the desire to see is so crucial to our modern understanding that almost unquestionable.

In the era of campus cock and boob blogs, where students upload photos of, rate, and discuss their privates in an open forum, its easy to forget that nakedness once signified, in conservative philosopher Edmund Burke's estimation, "a fall into nothingness from which nothing and no one can arise" ("Boob Blogs"; Berman, *All that is* 109). As Zygmunt Bauman points out, it is the liquid modern society that provides many rewards for confession in the era of the credit report (*Consuming* 2-4). The confession of one's secrets, financial, sexual or otherwise, is the key that unlocks rewards, be they an emotional bond, a "like" on Facebook, or a good credit score. The commodified self must continue to sell itself. Bauman goes further to equate opting out of social networking as akin to "social death" (*Consuming* 2). Those poor unfortunate souls without the ability to compose witty status updates are relegated to the dustbin of contemporary consciousness. We have no ambient awareness of them; they have nothing to share, nothing worth sharing. They are voiceless, invisible.

Marshall Berman explains that, at the start of the eighteenth century, "metaphors of nakedness as truth and stripping as self-discovery" took on new, higher significance in the works of Rousseau and Montesquieu (*All that is* 108). Marx, of course, with the notion of ideology, upped the ante. It is clothing that hides the illusory consciousness. There is a truth to be seen beyond, or in this case underneath, the escutcheons. This mode of peering in is still with us and is crucial to the play as well. After all, it is in his "Preface to *Miss Julie*" that Strindberg promises us a glimpse at the materials by which his souls (characters) are made of, and by materials Strindberg is referring to the "conglomerates of past and present stages of culture, bits out of books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, torn shreds of once fine clothing now turned to rags, exactly as the human soul is patched together" (60). It is easy to imagine, if Strindberg were alive in our own time, a *Miss Julie* chock full of the same *Simpsons* and *Saturday Night Live* references that populate our daily conversations. These external metaphors become our internal monologues, hallmarks of naked truth and confession.

If confession and nakedness are the means by which we know and come to be known, then it is important to point out that, according to Bauman,

> Well-sewn and durable identity is no more an asset; increasingly and ever
> more evidently it becomes a liability. The hub of postmodern life strategy
> is not making identity stand — but the avoidance of being fixed. The
> figure of the tourist is the epitome of such avoidance. (*Postmodernity* 89)

We must confess, and we must confess often, and to ever newer and deeper frontiers, or we risk falling through the cracks of social visibility and viability, the bottom of the news feed, the dustbin of history.

"The Preface to Miss Julie" contains the teaser that Strindberg "took this theme from a real incident" (75). This statement is meant to tantalize. The very notion of reality is itself alluring. Those words "from a real incident" are strikingly contemporary, be they the mantra for the era of reality TV or the joke inter-title at the beginning of *Fargo*. We live in a world of, "'No more salvation by society' [which] means that there are no visible, collective, joint agencies in charge of global societal order. The care for the human plight has been privatized, and the tools and practices of care deregulated," sometimes nakedness is our only virtue (Bauman, *Postmodernity* 39). We have gone beyond Berger's shift to the "dignified naked man" as one of worthy status to something else. *Miss Julie* in its own time was scandalous and noteworthy. Call me jaded but this seems like just another day on the Internet.

This appeal of private exposure as a virtuous, marketable commodity was part of the argument Kate Gosselin of *John & Kate Plus 8* made for getting the child labor permits necessary to allow herself and her children to continue to be reality stars in spite of numerous previous violations of child labor laws connected to the Gosselin's previous show *John and Kate Plus 8*. The argument more specifically was that the Gosselin private sphere was the family's only means of support (Matheson; Larkey). In this case, voyeurism and exhibitionism become matters of public policy; the permit was granted. The Gosselins are themselves stars of the panopticon that we willingly and openly enter into and it's easy the fall into the same trap. Occasional scans of the supposed mouthpiece of the liberal intelligentsia *The Huffington Post* has revealed to me such gems as the fact that Kate has not had sex in over a year and Jon has a lowball offer from *Playgirl* to pose nude, lowball of course because it is supposedly well known that Jon has

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a small penis ("Kate Gosselin has not"; "Jon Gosselin Announces"). Usually, one does not have to go past the reading headline to hear these new and increasingly private confessions. The single revealing factoid is the whole story. This is part of the new arrangement I am referring to; we have always looked but never so intently and comprehensively. Knowledge about Miss Julie's body is implied second hand; the Gosselin's intimate secrets are a part of our ambient awareness of current events. The scale is perpetually being re-balanced as far as what is a noteworthy truth. We can be sucked into being both audience and creator of this content. The audience for *Miss Julie* silently looks into this sphere. They can interpret it as cautionary tale, prurient spectacle, or simply a thrilling bit of gossip. In our contemporary construct, it is all, quite literally, hanging out there.

Again, there would have been a time that such knowledge would have been the stuff of whispers and conjecture, not as open public discourse. Likewise, connectivity becomes crucial, and the need for connectivity breeds the need for information to share. As our technology, and the capacity to invent new uses for that technology, expands the possibilities for new immediacies, new confessions, and the new legitimization of those confessions expands with it. The very idea of a Naturalist theatre for Strindberg's time would have been imbued with notions of progress and advancement. Strindberg ends his famous "Preface to *Miss Julie*" with commentary on theatrical design and how realistic set pieces and mat paintings enhance the experience. Likewise, advancements in lighting technology allow for the theatrical spectacle to more closely mirror reality (66-8). This notion of truth as an object to be exposed effects the way we utilize and improve upon technology. Improvements to broadband networks, FM stereo, smart phones, color TV,

HDTV, 3D TV, Hi-Fi, surround sound, Blu-Ray etc. all have the common quality of being watershed moments in an evolving chain of representational technology. All of which seem to associate verisimilitude, reality, and progress. Showing the un-show-able can be a matter of breaking down the boundaries of both technology and censorship. And with each expansion the public/private dynamic reorients itself. As Zygmunt Bauman points out,

> It would be a grave mistake, however, to suppose that the urge towards a public display of the "inner self" and the willingness to satisfy that urge are manifestations of a unique, purely generational, age-related urge/addiction of teenagers, keen as they naturally tend to be to get a foothold in the "network" (a term rapidly replacing "society" in both social-scientific discourse and popular speech) and to stay there, while not being quite sure how to best achieve that goal. The new penchant for public confession cannot be explained by "age-specific" factors — not only by them at any rate. (*Consuming* 3)

One spectacular celebrity flame-out is trumped in the media by a bizarre celebrity death or night-vision enhanced sex tape. If peering in, and consequently sharing, are the goals to be achieved, are encouraged to get into a game, and we are encouraged to win.

The nature of the game is also signified by a grand collapse of not only of the public and the private, but of the important and the trivial. In April 2010, the state of Ohio announced they were seriously considering using Twitter to announce executions ("Twitter Considered"). Imagine the little blue bird makes the cell phone in one's pocket buzz: George is at the all-night diner, so and so just got put to death by the state, and

Cindy thinks Perez Hilton is still funny. What matters is the spectacle and the enjoyment the audience gets out of it. Situations are read according to not the context of the human beings involved but rather the enjoyment provided from the spectacle. Something profound is missing.

When he wrote *Miss Julie*, Strindberg was creating a personal, permanent, and public record of things unmentionable. This is, of course, a possibility, if not intention, for all users of social networks. Stages are hierarchical in nature, the platforms I am describing are less so. Julie Inness's *Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation* provides a framework to articulate what is missing. The book was published in 1992, before the internet age, but Inness's hypothesis that the hidden component in the ongoing dialog about what constitutes privacy. Inness frequently reminds the reader that a touch on the arm does not constitute a violation of privacy, but a touch on the breast obviously does (33, 63, 72). It is the matter of emotional significance that differentiates between privacy and simply being alone. In our current, spectacle-driven mode of information, is consumption intimacy lost?

Several years ago, an honors student of mine wrote her semester project about the fickle nature of love. The academic parts of the project were nebulous and contradictory, or in Composition Professor speak, the project lacked a clear thesis. At the very end of the semester, when the personal narrative was due, I found out why. This portion of the project, probably turned in late intentionally, recounted the story of her first "true" love. This love seduced and then dumped her within 24 hours. This betrayal of intimacy is bad enough, but worse still, the act was visually recorded without her knowledge or consent and forwarded to the network of cell phones throughout her school. The narrative

concluded with her discussing her family's decision not to make the matter a legal issue, reclaiming some sense of privacy at the cost of legal justice, and her subsequent ongoing confusion about what love is. It was at that point I realized that this "lack of a thesis" was due to a severe emotional trauma caused by a violation of intimacy, a sexual assault really. The project itself then was an attempt to reclaim a very human need, and put it back into some sort of symbolic order. I hope it helped. Like Miss Julie, my student's body and her sense of intimacy became an object of gossip, snickers, and sneers. Miss Julie's violation is important, an enduring literary classic; this student's is momentary, a memento like an unsigned yearbook photo, free to be deleted, forgotten, or shared.

One of the most serious and extreme examples of this dual collapse of the public and the private, coupled with a removal of intimacy from private settings, is chronicled in the documentary *We Live in Public*, about dot.com pioneer Josh Harris and his early attempts at internet TV. The filmmaker makes it very clear that Harris understood the expanding desire to share digitally, before the age of social networking. Throughout the documentary, Harris repeatedly proclaims that in the future our whole lives will be online. The film chronicles two experiments in ultimate sharing. One "experiment," as Harris described it, was an exercise in communal living, where many persons were locked in a "bunker" in Manhattan in 1999. People in the bunker were given "the freedom to do whatever," be it shoot guns at the built-in firing range or just sit in their small personal cubicles and watch their "roommates" on their own personal video monitors. Cameras captured what happened everywhere, including in bedrooms and bathrooms. Cameras everywhere allowed for a grand leveling of space. No one space was more private, personal, and therefore intimate than another. If anything, assigning

emotional significance to something is a liability that leaves one weak. Everyone who was part of the experiment was also required to attend interrogation sessions marked by cruel authoritarian undertones. The experiment hinged on a culture of both the suspension of morality and voyeurism. Participants were not just watching scandal unfold; they were actively creating scandal. Again, we see how a private life can become a marketable commodity. *Miss Julie* the play is notable because Miss Julie the person is someone important in a compromising situation. In our reality TV/social network construct, the situation itself becomes the marketable commodity. The social stature and the humanity of the offender are at best secondary. Anyone can become successful through transgression.

The second experiment featured just Harris and his girlfriend. The first experiment featured an ensemble cast; the second time around, Harris was to be the star. Both experiments were centered in living spaces dotted with cameras and monitors. Harris's personal experiment even included a toilet's-eye-view camera. In both experiments the desire to see, be seen, and to be given feedback come to dictate behavior in the physical world. Confrontations, and other more extreme behaviors, happened and participants would immediately scurry to their PCs to see how the public "scored" them in real time. This cycle of being cyber rewarded for dramatic and often physical acts escalated throughout the experiments. Both experiments culminated in sexual assaults. Again, pleasure de-couples intimacy and privacy and a human cost is dearly paid.

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the role of confession in the Western tradition. The act of confession makes one both the teller and the subject of the story. Others, be they authority figures or not, validate this

teller/subject's position and story. Behavior is regulated, normalized, etc. through

confession (58-63). The pathway to approval is delineated by sharing. The collapse of

walls of separation can be both risky and highly rewarding no matter how they are done.

In this new privatized order, we see a matrix of intimacy, privacy, and approval playing

itself out. Again, fundamental human needs are re-arranged by technology and market

ideologies, not always for the better. Approval can be quantified in hits, likes, friend

requests, and followers. After all, to resurrect an earlier quote from McKibben, what

kind of intimacy and approval are possible when families, our societies most cherished

platform for the fulfillment of human needs is now a platform for individuals "who don't

want anything to do with one another!" ("Keynote"; *Deep* 97). Our über-confessional

youth are born into these conditions; of course, they are going to make mistakes. Their

unfulfilled needs are in the process of finding new pathways towards fulfillment,

sometimes with very negative consequences.

My argument here is that personal worth, or the worth of others for that matter,

has been replaced by something else. Certain values can speak, other values cannot.

Privacy in and of itself has no intrinsic value. Polling reveals that a vast majority of

people in the English-speaking world are more than willing to part with bodily privacy

for the sake of security, but a similar majority has severe anxieties about their financial

data ("Most Americans"; Creedy; "90%"; "People Happy"; Greene). Privacy in and of

itself no longer has an intrinsic value. Unless it's for a social networking site's first stock

offering. Miss Julie is fallen because her intimate secrets will soon be known by all.

Contemporary secrets have significantly less value unless they are have an explicit

monetary value, like a credit card number, or they are being sold, like a celebrity scandal

or reality TV show. Travelers can witness a rape survivor, further traumatized by an invasive screening procedure, being dragged in handcuffs away from an airport security checkpoint and report that "it makes me feel a little safer" (Bergamo). The surrender of private personal information, be it at a checkpoint, credit card application, or social networking site, can open one to a world of possibilities for accumulation, movement, prestige, and a greater sense of esteem. Technology allows our ability to share, confess, or strip to transcend our physical spaces. We are not hemmed in by *Miss Julie*'s proscenium arch, both as audience or as performer. Honor and dignity are both birthrights. One is a matter of lineage, the other is by species. Something else is happening, the self is privatized but increasingly public, the tools for personhood are "earned" and purchased in a market. Other people are needed, but other people are a threat to personal safety or competition to be conquered. This market makes a new citizen: paranoid, lonely, and searching for fulfillment.

This earned and purchased personhood dovetails perfectly into Neo-liberal ideologies about the market. Free market capitalism is by its very nature unstable, and therefore the perfect citizen of the free market is him or herself unstable. A person's very sense of self can be imbued with the notion of whether or not one can continue to be productive and/or continue to be sold. This lack of a fixed point of self-worth and identity is potentially toxic in the lives of the young people I work with. "There's a sentiment currently abroad that if you step aside for a moment, to write, to travel, to fall too hard in love, you might lose position permanently. We may be on a conveyor belt, but it's worse down there on the filth-strewn floor" (Edmundson 282). Furloughed workers must retrain rapidly with higher education and without complications; fashion

victims need makeovers, rags to riches indeed. Scandal plagued celebrities can mount

comebacks, or at least end up on celebreality shows.

Under these conditions, the juvenile fiction of Horatio Alger Jr. makes the perfect

example, or as I will argue later shibboleth, for Neo-liberal conceptions of the free market

citizen.   Like *Miss Julie*, Alger continues to be relevant because his works portray the

private lives of those valued by society. Unlike *Miss Julie* however, no one can argue

that Alger's work constitutes some kind of literary advancement, but Alger, like

Strindberg, chronicled the lives of people who were or became important through

embodying "admirable" traits. As much as Strindberg claims Jean is "the type who

founds a species" (Strindberg 61), it is within Alger's protagonists that we see the coming

of a new order. Strindberg chronicled the end of European nobility; for Alger, the notion

of the American meritocracy was already entrenched.

Alger's very name has come to mean "rags to riches" success, the self-made

notable individual of merit not inheritance, and every year Horatio Alger Jr. Association

of Distinguished Americans presents the Horatio Alger Award for "dedicated community

leaders who demonstrate individual initiative and a commitment to excellence; as

exemplified by remarkable achievements accomplished through honesty, hard work, self-

reliance and perseverance over adversity" ("About Us"). Past winners include Ronald

Reagan, Gerald Ford, Clarence Thomas, Condoleezza Rice, Roger Stauback, and the

CEOs of companies from Federated Insurance to Starbucks (Jackson). This award for

business leaders, athletes, and Republican politicians is a serious attempt to reinforce the

idea that the American Dream is indeed a reality. The legacy of Alger is perpetually

marked by such notions attempting to either make real the story line of the Alger novels

or bemoaning its passing. The award itself began as an attempt to convince the youth of America that the American Dream was still very real ("About Us"). Conversely, in *Horatio Alger: Or the American Hero Era*, Ralph Gardner so eloquently bemoans the passing of Alger's America:

> [F]ew boys in America today would cheerfully start climbing the ladder to success on these terms. Very few would have to. Let's face it—even if one such ambitious lad should show up, he would be prevented by a dozen local, state, and federal laws from earning a livelihood the way Alger's boys did.
>
> In addition to minimum-wage and -hour legislation, there are compulsory education statutes, state labor acts, workmen's compensation. (334-5)

This litany of obstacles, or affronts, to the American spirit, if you will, goes on for another half a page, and I will spare you the brunt of it. In short, in the ideological fantasy espoused here obstacles such as the rights and safety of others are utterly abhorrent. The point being, however, that the perpetuation of the Alger myth is a very real, very concerted attempt to turn works of nineteenth-century juvenile fantasy into the economic policy that ushers the globe into the twenty-first century.

In a novel like *Ragged Dick,* the namesake protagonist receives both a new wardrobe and a new set of marketable skills, and don't we all want that. Alger's nineteenth-century fiction has remained relevant in the twenty-first century if for no other reason than it speaks to the idea that we are all perpetually seconds away from magical transformation. We currently live in an era when a fifth of Americans believe that the

"most practical" way for them to accumulate a six-figure retirement sum would be to win the lottery, in spite of the attempt to transform federal policy and public perceptions so the 401K replaces pensions and Social Security (Coombes). This is also the era when being famous, even if it's for no reason other than being famous, is one of the most easily marketable commodities that one could possess, second perhaps only to professional athletes who file for free agency. With this, and the success of *American Idol* in mind it's easy to see the enduring appeal of Alger's transformative economics. And while Alger places labor and personal virtue at the center of success, labor can be seen as the obstacle to success.

Colleges have remade themselves under the terms the same consumerist version of the Alger mythology. My current employer's new marketing slogan is "The Metamorphosis of Me." The academy is the cocoon where unskilled caterpillars transform into butterflies with high earning potential and crushing debt. We rarely, however, focus on the debt, and the difficulties of academic labor is similarly expunged from the understanding of personal transformation. Under the Obama administration, this is a matter of national policy; the idea being that a better educated work force will solve the economic problems of the day, often with out increases in tuition and frequently in the face of decreases in state funding. However, as a 2006 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article points out, such transformations are often extremely difficult. The article discusses the closing of a Ford and a GM plant in Northwestern Ohio. Workers were given the option of trying to transfer to a different plant or a buyout option which included up to $15,000 annually in college tuition. In one instance, of the over three thousand workers offered tuition, fifteen workers accepted. Most who declined cited

their other financial commitments (such as mortgages and children) and the fact that many of the professions offered after graduation earned less than one could at a unionized auto plant. The consumerized version of the Alger myth would argue that they were passing up a wonderful opportunity. However, many of the students who took the plan were unsuccessful in their studies, or as one auto-worker turned student put it, "It's such an adjustment, going from on the assembly line to using your brain every day, having to pay attention rather than just trying to keep your mind as far away from where you are as possible" (Ashburn A28-30). My point here is that, while, yes, students come to college to become something and they often do just that, sudden transformations are often more magical than material in their rooting, and those magical ideas of transformation devalue the labor done on campus and the need for financial support while doing so. Ragged Dick practically falls into a circumstance where he can get an education and money. Few of us are that lucky.

The promise in Alger is the promise of the ever-newer beginning, the promise of the eternally upwardly mobile and the antithesis of the fallen Miss Julie. Alger's protagonists are literally and figuratively born again, saved from a decent into the depths of poverty, while wedding wealth and personal virtue. In one telling incident early in the novel, Dick chides a less industrious, less successful contemporary named Johnny for his lack of initiative, even after charitably buying the boy breakfast (Alger 11). Again, this is in tune with the Neo-liberal notion of no salvation by society, salvation only comes through the invisible hand of the market. This hand condemns some and saves others. Alger's Neo-liberal fans tend to prefer to focus on the stories of salvation, and, like Johnny himself, "feel the justice" of the charge of laziness for those who are not

successful (Alger 11). In the words of the George W. Bush White House press release

congratulating the 2001 Alger scholarship recipients:

> "The Horatio Alger Society is dedicated to really one of the basic truths
>
> about this country, and I hope this home remains dedicated to the same
>
> truth. In America, we believe in the possibilities of every person. It doesn't
>
> matter how you start out in life; what really matters is how you live your
>
> life. That has always been our creed." And while the president
>
> acknowledges that Alger's stories "were just stories" that "had a point and
>
> showed young readers the way," he remarks in the very next sentence that
>
> "such stories are still written in America, in every town and city, every day
>
> and in real life." (qtd. in Hoeller 208)

At this point, it is tempting to ignore the President's need for the "in real life" qualifier

and invoke Nathaniel West's famous quote, "Alger is to America what Homer is to the

Greeks" and call it a dissertation (qtd. in Trachtenberg xi). However, within this

understanding of Alger, I would argue, there is a serious misreading of Alger. The

incident in *Ragged Dick* described above is only half of the Alger story, and through an

exploration of this misreading can we come to understand an important shift in the way

we comprehend our capitalist selves.

Strangely, even Alger advocates and apologists would agree with this notion. For

example, in John Trebbel's *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger and the American

Dream* he states, "What [Alger] came to be celebrated for, however, was precisely what

he did not do. He constantly preached that success was to be won through virtue and

hard work, but his stories tell us just as constantly that success is actually the result of

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fortuitous circumstance" (14). For example, in *Ragged Dick*, the namesake protagonist perpetuates acts of cunning and kindness to a number of individuals, but it is only the acts of kindness directed towards wealthy industrialists and their children that results in the luck portion of Alger's "luck and pluck" formula for success. And while Alger's contemporary fan base tend to emphasize self-reliance as his protagonist's primary qualities, a reading of *Ragged Dick* reveals a story of the goodness helping and being helped. Yes, *Ragged Dick* is the story of a hard-working and industrious bootblack named Ragged Dick and his journey of industry and thrift to becoming Richard Hunter, Esq. And yes, Dick literally goes from rags, as that is what he is wearing when we first meet him in a dark alley, to respectability, if not riches. However, during this quest, he helps another young man navigate the dangerous streets of New York City, saves another boy and his family from homelessness, pays debts to anonymous strangers who have no recourse for collecting them and have already written off the money, buys generous meals for hungry companions on several occasions, helps a rube from the country recover his family's savings, saves a child from drowning--and all while showing mercy and restraint to all of the bullies and scoundrels he meets on the way. Not all of these deeds are met with rewards, but Dick receives for his efforts money, expensive sets of clothing, better lodgings, an education, and better employment--all of these things are bestowed upon him by individuals of greater means. Quite simply, Richard Hunter is forever Ragged Dick without the aid and assistance of others. He is nothing outside of society. If *Ragged Dick* is not a tale of the goodness of collective efforts, collective responsibilities, and ultimately collective survival, I am not sure that such a tale exists.

The very same people who tactically refuse to acknowledge the role of collective efforts in social and economic policies also fail to read the role of the collective in Alger. Alger, both the man and his works, has become a blank slate by which readers may project their own particular ideologies. This is due to the sheer volume and formulaic nature of his work. Also, Alger's simplistic style calls for the reader to fill in many gaps. By the time of Alger's death in 1899, his books were being sold for the expensive sum of one dollar per copy. These novels of poor boys finding wealth were marketed towards boys most likely born into it, revealing a sense of fantasy has defined Alger's work even in his own time (Lhamon 22). It is also due to, according to biographers Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, concerted efforts to cover up and ignore Alger's personal life, efforts that continued on as late as 1942 (ix). As Scharnhorst and Bales put it:

> The metamorphosis of his reputation —from didactic writer for boys, to Progressive moralist, economic mythmaker, and finally political ideology— seems to have been dictated less by the content of his books than by the context in which the books were read or remembered. An economic and political symbol today more by accident of birth than by deliberate design, Alger has become with the features of his mutation complete, the victim of mistaken identity. (155)

Under privatization, social and collective spaces have been silenced, and, as a result, there is no reading of the collective in a work like *Ragged Dick*.

The collective is forgotten in the contemporary reading of *Ragged Dick* also in the very nature of how the protagonist is understood. In chapter one, I discussed how the public sphere is seen as the playground of criminals and terrorists. Likewise, *Ragged*

Dick's New York City is teeming with thieves, scoundrels, and the Irish. However, unlike in texts like *Hostel* or *The Da Vinci Code,* Alger's public sphere is not a place of terror, nor is it negated. Rather, Dick's primary virtue is his ability to negotiate public space. As argued in "Pandering in the Public Sphere: Masculinity in the Market of Horatio Alger" by Glenn Hendler, the novels of Horatio Alger represent an attempt to portray a male homosocial utopia. Dick stakes claim to his manhood through careful negotiation as much as he does through industry. Dick's adventure begins as he charms a client out of a few extra cents (5-6). Alger's protagonist is never at a loss for words, in all and any social situations, except of course, for those situations where silence is the best social grace. He does not retreat to "the mancave" to perfect his masculine self; he makes his way in the world, the world of men obviously.

In our own time, things are different. Žižek argues that now our morality is changing to where our sins are their own redemptions, the malicious qualities of products are engineered out of them before we consume them, and Žižek points out that these products reinforce a world view where malicious qualities are negated and consequences are silenced (*The Puppet; For They* 237-43). If potato chips can be fat-free and if a chocolate Ex-Lax can negate the constipation often caused by chocolate, then is the leap to what Žižek calls, "The Colin Powell Doctrine of War" meaning "warfare with no casualties" —like in the first Gulf War— be far behind? (*Welcome to the Desert* 10-1). Here the retreat to the mancave involves engineering the public sphere out of masculine proving grounds. Other men can be better, faster, and stronger. One could be out hustled, out smarted, out gunned out there. It is better to stay home, in the special space deep inside that home, with a big TV, Xbox 360, some NFL merchandise, and maybe

some guns. Cyber intimacy, through anonymous posts, blocked lists, favorites, filtered

search results, etc. can attempt to filter out the pain of rejection, or at least the face to face

variety. The public sphere is so much better without all the people.

In *Ragged Dick*, the male public sphere triumphs the domestic (Hendler 416-8).

For all of the action outside on the streets of New York, Alger also gives us a clear view

of Dick's home life. He takes in companion, Fosdick, who is a friend, teacher, and

bunkmate. It should be noted that most Neo-liberal Alger fans willfully ignore the

pederasty scandal that forced Alger out of his ministry in Brewster, Massachusetts.

Knowledge of it makes one question the nature and intention of the numerous scenes

where Dick and Fosdick undress together in order to sleep in the same bed (Moon 108).

Throughout the domestic scenes, Dick and Fosdick show the most genteel manners

towards each other. Bedtime is run like a business meeting.

> "It looks very comfortable, Dick" he said.
>
> "The bed ain't very large," said Dick; "but I guess we can get along."
>
> "Oh yes," said Fosdick, cheerfully. "I don't take up much room."
>
> "Then that's alright. There's two chairs, you see, one for you and one for
>
> me. In case the mayor comes in to spend the evenin' socially, he can sit
>
> on the bed."
>
> The boys seated themselves, and five minutes later, under the guidance of
>
> his young tutor, Dick had commenced his studies. (106)

In the bedroom of Dick and Fosdick, Hell is not other people. No one snores, eats

crackers in bed, or hogs the blanket. Mutual exchange, lessons for bed space, is amicably

negotiated in the same way one acquires a loan at the bank. Here, unlike in *Miss Julie*,

the prying eyes of the audience are not driven by voyeurism and repelled by shame; the private simply is public.

The feminine of this domestic sphere is the landlady who Dick describes: "She ain't got no prejudices against dirt" (Alger 139). The male has triumphed over all. Rather than chronicling careful retreats like the ones we will see in *American Beauty*, public places without persons like in *The Da Vinci Code*, or the terror at the hands of others that is essential to torture porn, Alger's protagonist has many great virtues, first and foremost is his social abilities. Richard Hunter, Esq., is a man's man because he enters the world of men and proves himself worthy enough to stay there, not to retreat to a private enclave.

Ragged Dick's other great virtue is his looks, and while much recent scholarship has paid much attention to how this may or may not relate to Alger's alleged sexual assault of two boys of the same age that he was writing about, I would like to go back to Peter Burger's notion of the honorable knight (Trachtenberg ix-xi; Moon 88-91, 92; Hendler 431; Scharnhorst and Bales ix, 66-7). Attractiveness is a common virtue of all of Alger's heroes (Moon 95; Hendler 419). In the century before plastic surgery, Alger's focus on looks belies a powerful belief in innate and unalterable qualities that merely need the opportunity to shine through. Early on, when we meet Ragged Dick, Alger tells us, "But in spite of his [Dick's] dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that, if he had been clean and well dressed, he would have been decidedly good looking" (4). Throughout the story, we see Dick in rags, in a fine suit of clothes, and in states of undress; however, his virtues remain consistent. In one important episode later in the novel, Dick must put away his fine clothes in order to pick up a letter addressed to "Ragged Dick" (Alger 165-70). This episode illustrates that his

behavior does not change, but the ways in which he is perceived does. This episode illustrates Burger's notion of honor succinctly. The ragged or undressed Ragged Dick are manifestations of a lesser Richard Hunter, it is only when Dick gets a makeover that his true self can be revealed to the world with full regalia. There is even a chapter entitled "Dick's First Appearance in Society" to further prove my point that the social roles dictated by regalia are what make the true person (Alger 114-20).

In our century, the unfashionable Ragged Dick could end up as the "Featured Creature" on PeopleofWalmart.com and not a blog about nobility coming into being. The "Walcreatures" featured on this site are unfashionably dressed individuals portrayed via clandestinely snapped cell phone photos. Walcreatures are people who are overweight and underdressed, outlandishly dressed, hopelessly out of style, and/or just plain weird. Mostly, their looks are dated by fifteen or more years and many of the subjects probably do not have the means to purchase a more fashionable look. The important distinction here is that, while Ragged Dick is dirty and out of style, he is always a great and noble soul waiting to come to his fulfillment, and Walcreatures are *creatures* simply because they are out of style. For the over 6 million monthly visitors and 500,000 Facebook fans, devotees of "The People of Walmart" have gone from honor for some, to dignity for all, to personhood exclusively for those who can afford to purchase it and who are market savvy enough to make the right purchases. It should also be noted that The People of Walmart's advertising sales page also boasts that a significant percentage of visitors are young professionals with incomes over $60K ("Advertise With Us"). Class, and not to mention race and age, are important factors when talking about what constitutes a fashion victim. Walcreatures are the victims of

Othering at the hands of the true believers of consumerism, a projection of all that consumerists must strive not to be. Clothing certainly mattered to Alger, but his dirty and disheveled boys still possessed their humanity even when they possessed little else.

Purchased personhood is dependent upon both income and the ability to direct that income in the proper direction. Since Fordism took over as the mode of production, the income expended in order to become a person is spent on a mass-produced product. Fashion victims are those who do not negotiate well in this market. Those who still sport the vintage 1987 Bon Jovi look are of course objects of scorn, even if they themselves are happy with who they are. Those who are on the cutting edge of the next big thing must be perpetually dissatisfied as they ride the wave of fashion or else they risk losing their place. The irony here is, of course, that individualism is defined through a product that is one of millions, rather than one in a million. One can go for a drive and be stuck behind a Chevy at a light, and in the rear window of that Chevy is a decal of Calvin from Calvin and Hobbs urinating on the Ford logo; likewise, a few blocks later one can see the same spectacle with the roles reversed. This absurd, yet very popular, spectacle is one of many examples of the double-bind in which people find themselves. Our ideological construct highly values and celebrates individuality, yet that same construct leaves people with very few tools by which to establish their individuality. All too often there are mass produced products and copyright protected myths as the only tools people have to work with. The popular mythology of the *Star Wars* geek is that we are talking about the people who are defined as outsiders because they like one of the highest grossing movie franchises in history, and the film that set the template for the mass-marketed big-budget blockbuster Hollywood film! Popular culture tastes define all as subversive freaks, every

single one of us. I could end this paragraph by referencing the joke from *Monty Python's Life of Brian.* Namely, there is that scene where Brian tells the crowd, "You're all individuals" and the crowd chant's back "We're all individuals" except for one loaner who says, "I'm not." However, I am way too cool for that.

Criminologist Jock Young refers to the condition of living in a time where individualism is prized but the tools for constructing individual identity are devalued as "The Vertigo of Late Modernity." Fashion trends change, technology goes out of date, status updates are forgotten, yet the citizen of this era has to somehow outflank banality at every move, acquire the status everyone wants before everyone has it. So far, we have looked at texts that are about peering into the lives of important people. One rises, one falls, but what they have in common is the fact that the concept of a solid demarcation between public and private space create narrative possibilities, as well as ways of exploring how each distinct space has a purpose and series of expectations. In *Miss Julie*, these expectations are short circuited, resulting in her death. The pressures of the public sphere intruding into her private life lead to her suicide. At the beginning of *Ragged Dick* is where we find the short circuit of the two spheres. Dick has no domestic space; he has an alley. Through the successful negotiation of the pitfalls of a decidedly male public sphere, Richard Hunter Esq. acquires a domestic space. By the end of *Ragged Dick*, we see a proper relationship between the two distinct spheres. The public world makes the private possible. My argument is that we live in a permanent short circuit of the two spheres. The spaces where we frequently preside are neither public nor private. The technology of constant connectivity allows us to interlay public and private space as well as spanning distance to communicate. Privatization means that the public sphere

hovers between being of little value and downright dangerous. By its very nature, privatization means a decrease in public space. It also means the expansion of private space to encompass formerly public institutions. Home theatres, mancaves, and secret rooms in suburban homes are symbols of a private sphere that is getting bigger and lonelier. Such a space breeds an extreme need for companionship and connectivity. This is coupled by a media environment that prizes over-sharing and voyeurism. A profound commodification of the self means we must strip and sell to be seen and even to be. Reality TV, sexting, and social networking are manifestations of this bred desire. The end result is a mode of living that is devoid of intrinsic value, intimacy, and perhaps even a sense of one's own humanity.

In Chapter 4, I would like to explore the latter group and test the possibilities for resistance to this system. Before that, however, I would like to examine two "American" tragic tales and how they portray the mass produced public face of success. Both *An American Tragedy* and *American Beauty* are tales of a creative rebirth of an individual, both coincidentally also happen to have a murder for the sake of preserving public standing as a crucial plot point. In *Miss Julie* and *Ragged Dick*, public perception are clearly important; however, I would argue in *American Beauty* and *An American Tragedy* the public gaze is never more transparent. While in *Ragged Dick*, survival and dignity are at stake, and in *Miss Julie* psychology, misogyny, and class issues inform the action, these two "American" tales are driven almost exclusively by characters worried about how they are perceived. Like the students I discuss and the young people media teaches us to fear, the protagonists in these two tales possess inadequate and incomplete tools

with which to reconstruct their new public selves. The result is that something crucial is missing, and the results are deadly.

Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* are both texts that appeared during economic times of, to use the Robert Shiller name for it, "irrational exuberance" (Cassidy 133). As *An American Tragedy* appeared in the middle of the roaring twenties, *American Beauty* appeared at the end of the dot.com boom nineties, and the mainstream reading has always been that both texts are not so subtle attempts at producing a critique of the materialistic excesses of their respective times. They are attempts to peer into the workings and people behind the possessions. However, it is my intention to argue that within these critiques of American materialism there exists a more subtle form of materialism, suggesting the moral of these texts is not an attempt to transcend American materialism, but rather a further refinement and reinforcement of its practice, even as *An American Tragedy* was a serious attempt to parody the Alger success myth (Lhamon 10; Pitofsky 277-80; Lynn 37-44). These texts occur at different moments in American history, and this difference reveals a difference in attitudes towards materialism and the public sphere.

As products of manufacturing and information economies, they are rooted within the rewards of that economy, despite their creator's intentions.   This is how, when the moral journey of both texts are almost complete, commodity fetishism appears within Mendes and Dreiser's attempts to critique materialistic greed.   For *American Beauty*, the magic commodity is a 1970 Pontiac Firebird that appears in Lester's "end of life" flashback. It appears within a montage portraying images of natural beauty and the emotional bonds of family, giving it equal status.   At the end of *An American Tragedy*,

Clyde's mother has learned from the crimes and punishment of her son, and hopes not to repeat them with her grandson by allowing him to have the object of his desires, an ice cream cone (Dreiser 814). Even here, stuff, and good stuff at that, has ultimate meaning even in the face of the human cost of greed.

There is an important distinction between consumption, consumerism, and the moment in history of these respective texts. According to Zygmunt Bauman, while consuming is an unavoidable fact of life, consumerism is a means of organizing life so that all other human needs are subservient to the desire to acquire more and better material goods (*Consuming* 25-6). The distinction is that one can consume ice cream without greater implications; however, when one's belief system is altered to facilitate and perfect the act of consuming ice cream, it then becomes an act of consumerism. In the case of *An American Tragedy*, the moral is that proper material enjoyment is a moral solution. The ice cream cone represents a socially endorsed mode of consumption; it exists within the social order Dreiser critiques. Here the grandmother is attempting not to replicate the mistakes she made with her now executed, murderer son. As Dreiser explains, "She must be kind to him, more liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe, she had— She looked affectionately and yet a little vacantly after him as he ran. 'For his sake'" (814). She realizes that her duty is to instill a proper sense of enjoyment. In spite of this singular moment of commodity fetishism, *An American Tragedy* is still an attempt to critique the injustices of American life. Here, the decision to purchase an ice cream cone is made in reference to its social consequences.

In contrast, *American Beauty* is a consumerist critique of consumerism. Consumerism is a state where an individual's psychology and the social life of the nation

state are ordered for the sake of consumer satisfaction. For this to occur, commodities cannot be thought of in terms of social consequences; that would be a downer. For Bauman, the highest order of consumerism occurs when a product can be enjoyed without perceived consequences. Even the self becomes an object for personal consumption and enjoyment (*Consuming* 11-2). The enjoyment of the consumerist self occurs when the consumer imagines oneself as a spectacle that can be enjoyed by others, much in the same way that the subject of an advertisement derives enjoyment from viewing the advertisement (Bauman, *Imitations* 197-8; Bauman, *Modernity* 206). This is expressed within *American Beauty* in Lester's expression of his desire to look good naked. The distinction is that, while consumption is vital to continue the life process, consumerism is an ideology by which all human interaction, which in the case of Lester includes the most intimate understandings of self, is commodified, even if one is aware of the dangers of commodification.

Both texts begin with the protagonists, Lester Burnham and Clyde Griffiths respectively, as undesirables. In *American Beauty*, Lester is mired in the doldrums of middle age. He is out of shape and out of touch. Clyde Griffiths is young, poor, and socially awkward. He cannot escape the puritanical grip of his mother and her religious teachings. This is where we meet both men, at this point in both texts we may identify with them but we do not want to be them. Both of their stories are stories of seduction; a window to a better world is opened and both men attempt wholly enter that world, much like in *Ragged Dick*. Their stories are stories of transformation, and the narrative is driven by the men's relative ability or inability to renegotiate themselves in order to fit the social rules of the new world they attempt to join. Ragged Dick is successful, these

men less so. This transformation, to borrow a term from marketing, is a "rebranding" of the self, and this transformation is both initiated by and expressed through material goods.

The drive towards transformation begins with an initial seduction. Clyde's seduction begins when he enters into the working world as a bellhop, much like an Alger hero would. By entering the male public sphere of labor, Clyde is exposed to the rewards of giving into desire, and the messages of temperance he was exposed to in the domestic sphere of his mother did not prepare him for future temptations. It is in the hotel setting that Clyde "saw immorality and the world's practice of paying lip service to a public standard of conduct, while following another in the privacy in the hotel's rooms." Dreiser thought, "The hotel was life. Dreiser found its business and standards alternately fascinating, repellent, and pitiful" (Morgan 176). As Clyde moves up the social ladder, his temptations increase in both number and quality while his ability to resist them lessens. At first Clyde is seduced by the decidedly low-class pursuits of gambling, drinking, and prostitutes; these vices could easily lead one into a life of petty crime, and Clyde is on the cusp of that life when it is interrupted by some vehicular manslaughter. He flees towards some wealthy and distant relatives in Upstate New York to avoid prosecution. It is as a peripheral member of high society that Clyde is exposed to the temptations necessary to lure one into committing murder.

Likewise in *American Beauty*, Lester Burnham is exposed to temptations that are both petty and criminalized. Like Clyde, Lester's gateway into a new life is when his sexual desires are awoken by a friend of his teenage daughter. While Clyde's initial foray into forbidden sexuality occurs in a brothel, Lester is interested in one of his

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daughter's young friends. This occurs in the famous "rose petal" scene where Lester sees

his daughter's friend and immediately imagines her nude in a bed of rose petals that rain

down upon him. Both sexual awakenings have their seediness, and it is through sexuality

that other transgressions present themselves. While in Kansas City, Clyde becomes a

petty gambler and drinker; sexual desire leads Lester to a lifestyle where he willingly

commits blackmail and starts smoking weed.

It is important to note the position of a sexual awakening as the "gateway" for

both of these tales, as occurs in *Miss Julie* and, some would argue, in *Ragged Dick*.

Strindberg portrays Miss Julie as already out of step with her gender and social role. She

is far too "masculine" and assertive for Strindberg's misogynistic sensibilities. However,

it is an assignation that takes her completely out of this world. Alger's alleged pederasty

makes for more than a few eyebrow raising moments in *Ragged Dick*. Even within the

conjugal sphere sexuality represents the threat of public disgrace. For texts written in a

time when the certain aspects of private life and intimacy were not a legitimate subject

matter for literature or polite conversation, these glimpses into private life had a weight

that is not fully understood today. Throughout the history of Western morality, it has

been sexuality that has been most consistently problematic. In particular, it was St.

Augustine who felt that sexuality was the worst of all material temptations, for its status

as the most physical and the most difficult to resist. For Augustine, the fasting monk

could plausibly resist a plate of food, but even the most pious monk would still have a

physiological reaction to the sight of a naked woman (Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol.*

2 138-9). Because of the idea that sex is the most irresistible and pervasive of all

temptations, we see sex as the gateway temptation for both protagonists, and one could

easily argue that their transgressions are proportionally scandalous according to the sexual mores of their respective times. Both Clyde and Miss Julie fail to properly control their desires or negotiate the fulfillment of them. Both die as a result, and Clyde takes someone to the grave with him. Lester refuses the sexual advance of a neighbor and it leads to his murder. Western morality provides a platform where sexuality leads to a fall. This is a common theme to the texts under discussion in this chapter, but also slasher films, after school specials, etc.

Dreiser and Mendes handle the protagonist's sexual desire and sexual conquest differently. As sexuality opens the door for the exposure to and the fulfillment of other temptations, it is in the treatment of sexuality that the distinct historical moments that produce each text reveal themselves. Theodore Dreiser's legacy is that of a grim determinist as well as a social reformer. In the world of Dreiser, it is the public sphere where power is held, and the individual is often powerless to resist both internal and external forces. In Dreiser's morality tale,

> Clyde was at the mercy of the nature that gave him his desires and drives, but a society of false values motivated him toward crime. These standards heightened his innate weaknesses. Society made him poor, contrived the stultifying religion that warped his youth, set the social and financial standards that made him think money and social status were life's only goals. (Morgan 177)

Dreiser's determinism belongs to an era where the public sphere, or at least external forces, still had their sway. We see this in *An American Tragedy,* even at the moment of Clyde's biggest crime. On the boat with Roberta, Clyde wavers in his decision to murder

her. It just so happens that a gust of wind wobbles the boat and causes Roberta to move towards Clyde, at which he reacts, note not thinks, and proceeds to smack her on the head with a camera causing her to fall overboard (Dreiser 492-4). From here, it is his inaction against external influences, not action, which seals Roberta's fate.

As sexuality opens the door for the exposure to and the fulfillment of other temptations, it is in the treatment of sexuality that the distinct historical moments that produce each text reveal themselves. When Clyde's sexual transgressions occur, another person is at least present. Conversely, Lester fantasizes and masturbates alone. When Lester is confronted with the actual physical presence of the object of his desires, his privatized fantasy is shattered. To paraphrase Žižek, the malicious quality of lusting after a teen girl had not been successfully engineered out of the experience; as often happens when dealing with other human beings, fantasies do not have the agency to resist us or reveal their troubling natures. Clyde, in spite of his social ineptitude, can successfully negotiate his way into the underworld, and with four chapters worth of maneuvering, he can convince the "good girl" Roberta to take a room with a private entrance, as to try to preserve her social standing even as he regularly spends the night (Dreiser 282-306). Clyde's struggle is the struggle for social acceptance along with personal pleasure. His final, and ultimately fatal, transgression occurs out of the desire to permanently join the ranks of the wealthy and socially accepted. Clyde's nights with Roberta produce an unwanted pregnancy just as Clyde becomes infatuated with another girl, one from a wealthy family. Murdering Roberta saves him from shame, while allowing him to become a full fledged, and quite prestigious, member of the bourgeois with Sondra. Without the opinions of others and the social norms that dictate them, Clyde would not be

motivated to act. Conversely, Lester opts for private self improvement and personal

consumption. His fatal moment comes through rejecting another person's desires.

Clyde's moment in history is within the society of producers one can see the

products of one's labor and the labor of others. Clyde worked in a garment factory.

Production and consumption are public affairs and subject to societal interventions. As

one article points out, the real case that mostly inspired *An American Tragedy* took place

in and around a skirt factory, but Dreiser shifted the story to a factory that manufactured

detachable shirt collars. Arguably, this is because the detachable shirt collar was itself a

symbol used by the lower classes to "climb the ranks" and appear respectable, Clyde after

all was attempting the same transformation (Mulligan). In the world of Dreiser's

creation, it is plausible to be a grim determinist and a social reformer, and this is why

Dreiser does not fully embrace consumerism. In other narratives, the commodity

transformation could indeed be real.

On the other hand, *American Beauty* occupies that time between the fall of the

Berlin Wall and 9/11, what Francis Fukuyama would call the "End of History," the

period after the triumph of capitalism over communism, a time when, under Fukuyama's

hypothesis, no other possibilities or conflicts could possibly exist. Fukuyama's belief was

that capitalism, as the best possible system, would soon be the only possible system, and

with this eventual hegemony would come the end of the possibilities for wars, conflicts,

and historical change. In a very real sense, the end of history signifies the very

possibility for the end of possibilities. As positive as this sounds to most free market

conservatives, with it comes a grim, anti-interventionist determinism that signifies the

idea that this is as good as it gets. *American Beauty* is a text sprung from the Neo-liberal

age; a time when the end of history through a complete hegemony of Western Capitalism was a plausible hypothesis, nothing else is imaginable. Hegemony triumphs and nothing better is possible. *American Beauty* is the tale of a liminal space where other possibilities might very well still exist, as stifled as they are. The market, its trappings, its true costs, and its effects on its successful subjects are often hidden. Things just come into being, and those things are good. The new technological frontiers of modernity are software interfaces and incremental improvements upon existing technologies, advancement sneaks its way into our lives. The inhabitants of the late twentieth century are experiencing a technological evolution as opposed to the radical technological revolution experienced by early-twentieth century subjects of modernity. Planes and highways don't appear from nowhere in a few short years, instead we download updated versions of iTunes that appear to be suspiciously like the old ones (May; Izzard). Lester worked on a computer; his production created not a material item but digital information. The moment in history that makes *American Beauty* plausible is a moment within the society of consumers. The America of *An American Tragedy* was a time of separate public and private spheres. *American Beauty* is rooted in the time of the collapse of the public sphere through privatization.

The privatized nature of Lester's struggle reveals itself in several ways. First, Lester is rarely seen outside of the home, and that is usually only for the necessity of labor. We see Lester at a party, but he prefers drinking in solitude to social interaction. In an era when Americans have fewer friends, we see a character that finds pleasure in severing social bonds. Aside from his drug connection, Lester does not invite friends into his private world of transformation. Lester wants to look good naked, but who else will

be there to admire the spectacle? Clyde's social awkwardness is contrasted with Lester's

cunning attempts to free himself from the responsibilities and constraints of his family.

In the dinner plate-throwing scene it is Lester who says, "You two [Carolyn and Jane] do

whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it and I don't complain. All I want is

the same courtesy" (*American Beauty*; Spector and Wills 285).

For Lester, this privilege comes through a refinement of shopping habits. This is

never clearer than in his decision to trade his Toyota Camry for his own 1970 Pontiac

Firebird. When his wife Carolyn confronts him about this decision, he explains that it is

the fulfillment of a dream. They then begin to talk, the talk leads to a near seduction.

They instead begin to argue about their possessions; namely, the symbolic value of an

Italian leather couch after Lester almost spills beer on it. This is where we see the true

evolution of Lester's character. Carolyn's aesthetic is his old aesthetic. In the mise-en-

scene of the film, she is portrayed as out of place in the world that she helped to create.

To the viewer, her fashion is both contemporary and immediately dated. She is Martha

Stewart, who at the same time was at the height of her simultaneous popularity and

lameness. That same potential viewer can be Carolyn, but fantasize about becoming

Lester Burnham, because the suburban multiplex viewer to some extent probably is

Carolyn. And while his aesthetic has changed, his value system has not. He returns

Carolyn's anger over his almost spilt beer. He says, "This isn't life. This is just stuff."

And at that moment of the film, the viewer is supposed to identify with him. However at

this moment, his precious car is unthreatened.

We are supposed to identify with Lester throughout the film. His values are our

values, and his expression of those values is supposed to become our aesthetic. Likewise,

Dreiser always empathized with his characters. Dreiser's autobiography even mentions how, as a young man, he shared Clyde Griffith's desires for wealth and women (Lynn 39). These desires are meant to mirror our desires; we are to sympathize with Clyde. Like with *Fight Club*, the revolution fits neatly into dominant ideology. It is through obsession and revulsion that we see the upper-middle-class life of the Burnham family. *Ragged Dick* is a tale of who we want to be, as much as *Miss Julie* and *An American Tragedy* are tales of who we do not want to be. All are attempts to reveal to us the private world of successful people. By enjoying their nakedness, we are supposed to learn about our own ways to successfully negotiate our personhood. These models also, due to their reliance on artifacts made possible by and models based upon commerce, and painfully incomplete. As a result, they, and consequently we as well, pay the substantial human cost for the incomplete nature of these models.

Throughout this chapter, we have been looking at the interplay between and eventually the mutual collapse of the public and private spheres. The environments that we have created for ourselves are also defined by us. They take on meaning as public space, sacred space, intimate space, fearful space, etc. A careful reading of *Miss Julie* and *Ragged Dick* reveal the interplay between two mutually exclusive public and private spheres. In the case of *Miss Julie*, the threat of public shame leads to her complete destruction. On the other hand, *Ragged Dick* is the tale of a boy adept at negotiating the tricky terrain of street life in New York, ultimately securing his own space in the world. Ragged Dick is unlike Miss Julie or Clyde Griffiths in that he is capable of thriving in the public sphere. Clyde's inability to properly balance his private needs with his lofty social climbing aspirations leads to his ruin. Similarly, while Miss Julie is already at the top of

the social latter, her inability to manage her private life destroys her. In our

contemporary era, the two spheres are not mutually exclusive. It is more that they are

reactionary to one another, resulting in a private space that attempts to fill the need for

community that in turn results in an increased desire to market one's intimate life as a

valuable commodity.

In *American Beauty*, the privatization of Lester's fantasies, and our fantasies

about Lester, are without end. In the final montage of the film, which chronicles the final

moment of his life, Lester reminisces about his wife and daughter without reconciling

with them. As silent black and white images, they are denied agency; they have become

perfect commodities, unable to harm their possessor. Meanwhile, his Firebird is

undoubtedly parked safely somewhere, and his corpse instantly becomes a commodity

spectacle. The public sphere is so silenced, no one even calls 911. Lester's, and likewise

our, heaven is a lonely place.

CHAPTER 3: THE RISE AND WRECKAGE OF THE CONSUMERIST MYSTIQUE:
CONSUMERIST IDEAS OF PLEASURE AND THE INTIMATE PUBLIC SPHERE

There is a specter haunting the lives of the citizens of the Global North—the specter of a profound and pervasive sense of chronic dissatisfaction, the specter of consumerism. However, Mr. Marx, all the powers of the Global North have entered into a holy alliance not to exorcise this specter, but to let it possess them in mind, body, and spirit. The result of a consumerist definition of pleasure, strangely, has been a profound unhappiness that seems to define the most intimate and personal aspects of existence for many people, yet the march of the consumerist mystique seems unabated. It is the point of this chapter to explore the trappings of a particular brand of pleasure defined wholly under the terms of consumerism. In the last chapter, we explored texts where the public/private split was short-circuited, and the intrusion of one sphere into the other had dramatic results. Ragged Dick becomes Richard Hunter Esq. after successfully negotiating the public sphere well enough to secure his own domestic space. Miss Julie and Clyde Griffiths die after failing to successfully negotiate their private desires with their public aspirations and personal stature. Within this chapter, no one dies, but something no less destructive is afoot. We will look at texts from the post-World War II era, in which the halcyon days of consumerism first became synonymous with notions of freedom and personal agency. What emerges is a portrait of another kind of short-circuit of the public/private split, one where highly-stylized market-determined public images intrude into the most intimate understandings of the self, determining how the subjects of privatization see themselves and who they strive to be. We will also explore some contemporary examples to illustrate the historical evolution of the privatized person.

It is important to note that the texts we will be looking at deal with the supposed "winners of capitalism." These are not narratives of a downsized working class, of the individuals left behind in an ecological disaster, and they are not tales of suicides at the iPad factory. And while these narratives are strangely both transparent and silent in contemporary ideology, and important work is being done with these narratives, I want to look at the people who are supposedly 'getting something" out of capitalism and who frequently refuse attempts at political change because of their supposed rewards. By looking at people who look like they should be having a good time a picture emerges of a passive but pervasive, and potentially quite destructive, sort of intrusion of the public into the private.

Betty Friedan referred to the problem plaguing her female peers in the early 1960s as "the problem with no name." My argument here, both the problem and its un-nameable nature, is at least partially defined by the pursuit of a certain ideal of pleasure. It is important to note that *The Feminine Mystique* is itself an example of the transformative power of the written word. *The Feminine Mystique* gave a generation of women a sense of community, agency, and political power. Women who ran themselves literally to exhaustion caring for their children, maintaining the perfectly clean home, and preparing the multi-course dinner only to subsist on cans of a chalky diet beverage called "Metrical" fought for a place in public life and recognition for their unpaid labor. However, my argument here is that for all of the transformative power of the second wave of feminism, the issue of the way one's personal identity can be determined by market values and consumerist notions of pleasure have not changed. That woman who drank Metrical to maintain an attractive figure might very well have a grandchild who has

grown up in a world with the same intense pressure to be perfect in the face of human

limitations. From subsiding on Metrical to subjecting a toddler to Your Baby Can Read

is not progress. Both products exist because of a deeply seeded and market driven sense

of fear of inadequacy.

"The problem with no name" is rooted in a consumerist notion of pleasure, and

consumerist pleasure is a value obfuscates other possibilities and is extremely difficult to

argue against, and not just in the nation that equates "the pursuit of happiness" with life

and liberty. Here the "American Dream" functions not just as a stereotypical image of

perfect domestic tranquility, but as a determining and all encompassing moral imperative.

Using Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the two most famous, most

anthologized selections from the best-selling *Stories of John Cheever* as examples, the

aim of this chapter is to problematize consumerism's promise of pleasure for those who

are supposedly benefiting from capitalism and the way consumerism shapes experience

and alters our most very intimate understandings of ourselves.

It is not merely that pleasure is itself a problem. What Friedan and Cheever

illustrate is that pleasure can be destructive if a culture encodes pleasure in a way that

makes it destructive, while silencing other possibilities. This is especially the case when

pleasure becomes an imperative, imbued with notions of citizenship and personhood.

Not only does this particular idea of pleasure feel good, it defines the morality of what is

good. This particular consumerist idea of pleasure is determined by a narrow definition

of pleasure as a material endeavor, one that does not demand much of its user/owner and

can quickly be replaced by something newer, better, and all around more impressive.

The sometimes destructive unhappiness that defines the lives of the characters of Cheever

and the women whose testimonials appear in Friedan is due to the fact that consumerism

creates an idea of pleasure directly antithetical to certain human values such as:

connectivity to the environment and others, self-worth, having a realistic sense of oneself,

and certain forms of self-determination. Furthermore, the interplay between

consumerism and narratives of progress becomes a problem when consumerism becomes

the foundation for identity. In this matrix, a stable life-long sense of identity becomes a

liability and failing to maintain a contemporary sense of consumerist identity is a kind of

social death. Throughout this chapter, we will look at not only the historically relevant

texts by Friedan and Cheever but other ways in which the interplay between public

images of pleasure re-arrange our very most personal, private notions of ourselves.

However, consumerist values, when endorsed by society as the good and proper

means of enjoying oneself, are almost impossible to resist even on the most personal

level. Alternatives to destructive, but societally endorsed, pleasures are difficult to

imagine. It is the purpose of this chapter to illustrate how market-based constructions of

pleasure can be an obstacle to fulfillment. *The Feminine Mystique* as well as Cheever's

"The Enormous Radio" and "The Swimmer," among several other examples, will be

utilized to explore how a publicly endorsed notion of pleasure comes to define some

extremely private understandings of the self. Friedan and Cheever occupy a common

moment in history as popular texts that expressed angst over mid-20th Century social

roles, but the similarity does not stop there. For the purpose of this study, we are going to

look at these texts as milestones, fair warnings actually, for the advancement of

privatization and the organization of life around a consumerist notion of satisfaction. As

part of the advancement of privatization, we should also be aware that these

warnings/milestones also provide insight to our own times, where the problems illustrated by Cheever and Friedan still manifest themselves in often uncanny ways in contemporary life. This chapter will explore the ways in which the pursuit of pleasure, specifically the pursuit of destructive constructions of pleasure, can result in a redefinition of life towards an unrealistic understanding of life that is impossible to achieve, resulting in further destruction.

This chapter focuses primarily on the wealth and subsequent suburban expansion that occurs after WW II and before the mid-70s recession, an era Robert A. Beauregard, in his book *When America Became Suburban*, refers to as "the short American century" (xv, 1-18). As Beauregard explains, the term "American Century" is imbued with the notion of ownership, as is implied in the name, and is bound up with notions of exceptionalism and nationalism. It was during this period that "a culture of individualism and upward mobility" came to symbolize a sense of personal satisfaction and national superiority (13). In this construction, purchasing power and a proper domestic space are more than just personal ideals for "the good life."

> During the early postwar period, the United States added another
> argument to its case for exceptionalism. Americans developed a
> distinctive way of life, one based on rising incomes, a vast array of
> consumer goods, broadening educational opportunities, rising levels of
> home ownership, and access to a style of living heretofore unimagined.
> That way of life was a suburban way of life. Other countries —Germany
> and Japan, Sweden and Denmark for example—eventually did as well
> economically, but it was the United States, not Europe, that pioneered the

new social and spatial order known as suburbanization . . . America was

exceptional both in the opportunities it held forth and in the lifestyle many

of its people were about to adopt. (Beauregard 14-5)

What's being described here is not just a lifestyle choice. After the wreckage of World

War II and under the threat of the Soviets, lifestyle becomes a matter of national security

and identity. Under these conditions, the personal becomes political, and any critique of

the political can become personal, a notion that will be explored later in this chapter and

in Chapter 4. This particular codification of pleasure is imbued with a sense of

belonging, safety, and general goodness.

In the last chapter, we discussed the interplay between success and private

practice. In particular, the public side of this interplay was explored. Similarly, the first

chapter looked at the way in which privatization has shaped the dreams of many people,

leaving them deeply insecure about others and the spaces they inherit. Both chapters one

and two explore the way the personal is projected into the public. This chapter will

explore how public projections come to be embodied within the personal. Here we will

explore how privatization has left us deeply insecure about ourselves and the places we

call home. The thing to keep in mind is that as technology has expanded upon the notion

of convenience, certain moral and ethical choices have been made.   The hidden values of

convenience and consumerist pleasure have an increasing say in the way we understand

ourselves. In Chapter 1, we explored how this value system can create a severe and

pervasive anxiety; it is time to continue tracing how we arrived at that point.

Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is, as discussed in the previous chapter, a critique

of the American pursuit of pleasure through wealth and social climbing. Dreiser even

chose the words "An American" in the title because he saw the story of Clyde Griffiths (or the real-life Chester Gillette) as a particularly "American" kind of murder, a murder for status (Donovan 58-60). It is of course easy to explain how Clyde is seduced physically and then spiritually as he encounters the temptations of wealth and the material pleasure it brings. Clyde's faltering falls outside of the idea of normal behavior. He lies, patronizes prostitutes, fornicates, and eventually commits murder. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, Dreiser the social critic wanted to illustrate how society creates such aberrant behavior. Clyde is seduced not just by lust and wealth, but the ways in which lust and wealth have become crucial to the American sprit. Cheever and Friedan are unique in that the destructive pursuits of pleasure they describe are endorsed by the situations they are writing from. Their tales of woe are not about murderers on the run, but rather quiet moments of desperation at home.

Part of the problem is, indeed, that it feels good to feel good, and who could possibly argue against feeling good? Especially, when feeling good is a societal imperative and means that one is good. In the 1940s, in the shadow of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* examined the role of pleasure in pacification: "Pleasure always means not to think about anything; to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is a flight not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality but from the last remaining thought of resistance" (144). Some have criticized Horkheimer and Adorno for having too broad a definition of pleasure; however, this quote is important as a historical reminder of the role of Fordist industrialization in WW II, and it makes an important point about just how hard it is to challenge one's own comfort and pleasure. My research

frequently intrudes itself into my teaching, and when I do raise these issues about our contemporary construction and codification of pleasure, there is a palatable hunger for understanding in a room full of mostly middle-class undergraduates.

Furthermore, I have some people in my life who do not know better than to ask an academic in casual conversation about their research. Those who manage to stay awake during my impromptu lectures about the social effects of privatization "get" what I'm doing. Even the conservatives express frustrations with the way in which capitalism has over-commodified everything. I can even use academic jargon like "over-commodification" and it makes perfect sense to everyone, but no one seems to think there is anything we can do about the problem. The problem seems external, massive, and beyond solution. The question remains: yes, we get it, but what can we possibly do to change the values we have been working so hard to satisfy? The answer, as I will explain in Chapter 4, is to dream new dreams and believe in alternative mythologies. However, as this chapter continues, we will see how pervasive the pull of privatization is and how much its trappings have woven their way into the tapestry of our lives.

The 1950s inhabit a particularly privileged place in the U.S. national imagination as a particularly good and wholesome time. The creative 1950s nostalgia allows for a collective imagination about a time before the turbulent and troubling 1960s and certainly more kinder and simpler than our contemporary culture of fear. This perfect past that some still try to emulate is beyond reproach for social conservatives and serves as a metonym for my student's understanding of tradition, as they invoke it every time they need to bring up a sense of old fashioned social stability. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the most popular works of short fiction of John Cheever occupy this time

and offer a window into this time when pleasure was seemingly ubiquitous. However, Friedan and Cheever resist these pervasive nostalgic simplicities. Their texts are chosen because they exist within the halcyon days of consumerism, the post-war years. Within popular culture, Friedan and Cheever's era is known as the good old days, the idyllic era invoked during election cycles and at the launch of family oriented chain restaurants. This is important for understanding the crisis of meaning described in the last paragraph. For those who seem lost in the world privatization has created, the nostalgic view of these "good old days" often represents an anchor to orient oneself against the disorientating effects of free market living. Doreen Massey, in her book *Space, Place and Gender*, explains, "Those who today worry about a sense of disorientation and a loss of control must have once felt they knew exactly where they were, and that they had control" (165). The era that produced Cheever and Friedan is often thought of the era where "we" had "control," and it is the same era that has come to signify a very strong sense of correctness, tradition, and American exceptionalism. By grounding one's sense of "correctness" within a period of both "traditional" values and economic growth, these individuals can create a narrative for how the world should now be and compare that narrative to their lived experiences. What these individuals often forget, however, is that one's sense of identity, place, and history "is always and continuously being produced. Instead of looking back with nostalgia to some identity of place which it is assumed already exists, in the past has to be constructed" (Massey 171). It was during the 1950s that social scientists began to discuss the concept of "embourgeoisement," whereas the working class would be absorbed into the middle class (Bradley 123). The factories that produced sheet metal for the planes that carried out the Allied bombing raids over

Germany were now producing washing machines by the millions. The theory was that eventually the entire population would settle into middle-class material bliss. In the shadow of such a promise of pleasure, Cheever and Friedan showed that all was not well in the magic kingdom. By looking at these two authors, both of whom were immensely popular in their own times, who critiqued the very modes of living that constituted "the good old days" we can get a better understanding of the past, the appeal of this past, and how we have gotten to where we are.

An important point must be made here about Cheever and Friedan's narratives of an idea of pleasure imbued with notions of materialistic domestic bliss leading to pain. The U.S. has a long history of morality tales. Many attribute this to our Puritanical history of sin and condemnation. This tradition continued into the twentieth century. Educational/exploitation films like *Reefer Madness*, *Cocaine Fiends*, and *Maniac* educated, or thrilled, 1930s audiences with their tales of sin, punishment, pleasure, and improper associations. In these films, people transgress the normal moral boundaries, and after an orgy of sex, drugs, and jazz, they die in these Depression-era Sodom and Gomorrah tales. Interestingly enough, these pre-production code films served both the prurient and moral interests of their audiences. Sin was shown in relatively graphic detail. Likewise, the *ABC After School Special* series from the 70s and 90s showed young people transgressing, albeit in less graphic detail, with the same lack of moral subtlety. Films like *Stoned*, *Tattle: When to Tell on a Friend*, and *The Boy who Drank too Much* are all heavy-handed tales of young lives ruined through temptation. Even John Carpenter's *Halloween* featured a similar message, as the only trigger the audience is given for Michael Myers's homicidal instincts is his sister's foray into teen sexuality.

Friedan and Cheever both distinguish themselves by dealing in subtleties but also, instead of dealing with aberrant behavior, Friedan and Cheever critiqued the socially endorsed pleasures of their eras.

There is a crucial distinction between aberrant pleasure and endorsed pleasure. As Foucault explains, modes of living are controls or policing actions, subjectively controlling desire (*Ethics* 88-9). It is not a case that an enjoyable act is always transgressive, rather certain acts are endorsed by a social system and embodied within its practitioners. Such pleasures are learned or unlearned:

> No knowledge is formed without a system of communication, registration, accumulation, and displacement that is in itself a form of power, linked in its existence and its functioning to other forms of power. No power, on the other hand, is exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution, or restraint of a knowledge. (Foucault, *Ethics* 17)

Indeed, it does feel good to feel good. However, within all of these good feelings is a complicated matrix of social values, personal inclinations, social standing, race, class, gender, etc. And out of this matrix comes a sense that one has had "good clean fun," "dirty pleasure," etc. For a contemporary example, the September/October 2010 issue of *Mother Jones* featured a pop quiz where quotes from Libertarian activists and economists were compared with quotes from gangsta rap artists. Readers were to compare the quotes and determine which are from the likes of Ayn Rand and which are from the likes of Suge Knight (Sheppard 16). It is a very difficult quiz, the point being that one set of beliefs, when embodied within a certain skin, represent virtues of liberty and an ever-increasing voice in our national economic policy. Those same beliefs, when embodied in

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a different skin, represent an out-of-control, yet highly entertaining, segment of the population that must be watched in order to satisfy both moral and prurient interests. The very same people who marvel at and admire the nihilistic consumption of Sarah Palin and family can condemn 50 Cent's own forms of nihilistic consumption.

One can acquire the same feeling while reading through the volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, seeing how different sexual practices have meant different things over the ages. It is easy to assume that one's enjoyment is "natural" or "universal," especially when social systems mediate pleasure and tell one that such mediations are indeed "natural." Likewise, it is rather easy to explore the negative dynamics of forms of pleasure deemed aberrant by society, such as: drug abuse and "illicit" sexual behaviors. However, it is another thing completely to explore the world of mainstream pleasure and happiness. The world of John Cheever and Betty Friedan is a world of distinctly middle-class consumer pleasures, suburban homes, seaside summer cottages, martinis at cocktail parties, immaculately cleaned kitchens, and enormous radios. And it is within these hallowed halls of embourgeoisement that we find the problem with pleasure.

Friedan reflects in the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, "Locked as we all were then in that mystique, which kept us passive and apart, and kept us from seeing our real problems and possibilities, I, like other women, thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't have an orgasm waxing the kitchen floor" (1). Here, one could accuse Friedan of pithiness and exaggeration. However, the important point she is making, and makes throughout the text, is that the position of women at this time dictated behavior and limited possibilities,

particularly in terms of pleasure. Pleasure for these women was defined in the narrow terms of a clean and thoroughly modern kitchen, which led to a home full of domestic bliss. There are no alternatives, no fulfillment in a career or independence. To resist these values was to be a broken person. As Stephanie Coontz points out, "Women who could not walk the fine line between nurturing motherhood and castrating 'momism,' or who had trouble adjusting to 'creative homemaking,' were labeled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic." Coontz also reminds us that institutionalization was a very real possibility for women who resisted their proscribed role (*Way We* 32). The domesticated female was, in a sense, cut off from the larger world, with few alternatives. Coontz points out that women in Friedan's time were frequently not allowed to serve on juries or establish their own residence. Popular media also demonized working women as a "menace" (*Way We* 32). This was not just a strong social norm, but also a matter of legal and political policy, and therefore, more than just an aesthetic. Obviously, the imperative towards "creative homemaking" was imbued with a commercial and consumerist aesthetic. Under Zygmunt Bauman's definition of consumerism as not just a matter of consuming but the organization of life around the act of material consumption, anyone whose needs cannot be fulfilled by the market is seen as a "broken consumer" in a consumerist society (*Consuming* 124). Notice, Freidan echoes this notion when she explicitly says "something wrong with me" (1). Her impression before she went on her exploration of gender roles was that a broken individual, not a broken system was to blame for unhappiness. The material for her dreams came from media, and the media image she lived under equated fulfillment with material goods. Furthermore, her role as a woman was narrowly defined as homemaker. Other possibilities were silenced. I have

already invoked Friedan's "An American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be" in this project (64). This lack of a "private image," or for that matter a realistic one, leads to fundamental misconceptions about what life is, or what to expect from life itself. Rather than being self-determined and connected to one's environment and community, self-image is a public image informed by products and an idea pleasure imbued with market values.

This is eerily similar to what Susan Bordo describes in *Unbearable Weight*, as she dissects the correlation between media images of the ideal thin body and the epidemic of eating disorders. Bordo argues that individuals are bombarded by a plethora of images, images that far outweigh in terms of quantity, the number of bodies they have seen in person, and these images are designed to allure, excite, and come with the full endorsement of our society as a whole. As a result, many women are subject to "perceptual malfunction" or distortion (55-7). This distortion, which she argues has become the norm, leads women to believe that their bodies are too large no matter what their size is. Bordo applies the same theoretical framework to male body image in *The Male Body*, where again the lack of private, or personal for that matter, images leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of what a person usually is or can be (69-71). I would like, for a moment, to go back to the home described by Bill McKibben in the last chapter ("Keynote"; *Deep* 97). In this ultra-private space, there are no living breathing mirrors for that inhabitant to compare their own life. In *The Lonely American*, Psychologists Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz break down how national values of individualism and property ownership are leaving more and more U.S. citizens without meaningful human relationships.

Laura Pappano describes this condition as "the Connection Gap." "The Connection Gap is that precious moat of space around us. It is both the protection we crave and the barrier we complain about" (Pappano 9). What fills the gap is media. These highly stylized, market driven images become the social context for the inhabitant of the "ideal" home. The act of purchasing is an attempt to place oneself within this pre-determined market and media determined social context (Bauman, *Modernity* 206). The gulf between media image and the personal lives of real people extracts a cost from its subjects. Bordo's reading of the role of media in unconsciously promoting potentially deadly eating distorters reveals just how dangerous such an unrealistic scale can be. We have arrived at a point where most driving video games now have a disclaimer warning players that video game physics are not indicative of real world physics. To drive according to the rules and possibilities of *Grand Theft Auto* would undoubtedly result in death and destruction. Likewise, individuals make moves through life according to a similarly unrealistic scale.

Driving with video game physics and living like one is in a Hollywood movie are pleasurable prospects. Self-consciousness, the needs of other people or their simple rudeness of other people, is a drag. However, there is something to be said for the suspension of privacy that goes hand in hand with old-fashioned dorm life. Sharing a hallway and a shower with a few dozen strangers can constitute lessons in both social tolerance and in human biological variation. Of course, the new dorms most universities are building are built upon the model of a private hotel suite. Students living in these newly constructed spaces face the possibility of having to construct a body image, or a sense of human behavior, out of only the highly stylized images found in advertisements

and rated R films; their own bodies and lives simply cannot compare. The student who glides seamlessly between the type of private bedroom with an ultra-private room attached described in Chapter 2 to the new hotel room dorm room might not have a sense of what is normal, or even of their own physical presence, often leaving equally strong feelings of curiosity and inadequacy.

Friedan mentions in the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Feminine Mystique* how "passive and apart" women of her time were (1). Denied a space in the public sphere where information can be shared, it took a thorough exploration like *The Feminine Mystique* to uncover the shared but isolated experience of women of that time. My point throughout this project is that something very similar is occurring in our own time. However, today the isolation and subsequent feelings of anxiety and self-doubt are not limited by gender roles. Privatization is the very real threat that we could all end up "passive and apart," wondering exactly what is wrong with us. As in Friedan's work, we must work in order see an unrealistic image laid bare and construct alternatives.

The key here is an understanding how the "right" way is constructed. Privatization, for all of its promises of a reign of self-interest, takes control of the scale away from its subjects. Juliet B. Schor discusses the implications of when marketing intrudes itself in one's private sphere in her book about consumerism and children called *Born to Buy*. She mentions how the women Friedan was writing about were in the position to make a family's purchasing decisions. As a result, these women were specifically targeted as the gateway to a family's finances. In spite of the fact that few women worked or controlled their own financial destines, their free time and duties as home makers meant that they would be the target of the full force of the marketing

department of capitalism (Schor 10-8). In the face of such an onslaught of promises of pleasure, how can mopping the kitchen floor be anything but a sensual experience?

In recent years, the target of marketing has shifted to children (Schor 10-8). My worry is that the very same emotional distress Friedan fought to understand and resist with *The Feminine Mystique* is rooted into the intrusion of market values into private life and not limited to just gender. Yes, traditional gender roles and patriarchy are vital to this landmark feminist text; however, we cannot forget that consumer capitalism appropriates other values and value systems. In this respect, Friedan was critiquing a patriarchy expressed through consumerism. Patriarchy helped to define the role of women as consumers and care-takers. This was a market to be exploited. For a population isolated in the domestic sphere and without an alternative image to comprehend their lived experience, the attempt to live up to marketing's fantasy of daily life extracted a heavy toll. If we read Friedan's experience as a chronicle of patriarchy and social isolation, we can see a how very real the danger of replacing of personal connections with highly-stylized media images. The shift to children as gateway for a family's finances means that the most vulnerable segment of our population is being set up for a lifetime of unrealistic expectations.

The impact of this shift to children as a primary target for marketing has been immense. An often quoted study concluded that one in four British children's first word will be a brand name (Schmidt). Couple this with similar research that found that half of four year olds did not know their own names but two-thirds of three-year-olds could recognize the golden arches of McDonalds, and we can begin to gauge the impact of this shift (Freedland). In this sense, consumerism is not just an abstract set of images existing

in some sphere outside of consciousness, but vital to the very language one uses to articulate experience. The bigger issue is not just brand recognition, but the fact that brands are now meant to reflect personal values.

An art spread in the January/February 2011 issue of *Adbusters* illustrates this point rather vividly. It features three advertisements for pianos: one from 1880, one from 1900, and one from 1920. The 1880 advertisement showed the picture of a piano, and surrounded that piano with dense text explaining the virtues and superiority of a Steinway piano. By 1920, the rhetoric of advertising changed. Instead of promoting a Steinway piano for the qualities it possesses as a musical instrument, the advertisement "strikes an emotional chord" with its image and slogan "Steinway: Instrument of the Immortals." This new advertisement, rather than extolling the virtues of a piano because of its build quality or engineering, tries to generate an emotional response in the reader. The message is clearly, buy this and become the person of your dreams, your emotional well-being depends upon it. Because of this, *Adbusters* calls advertising "the single biggest psychological experiment ever carried out on the human race" and rightfully so (Sagris). Advertisements like this are experiments in the careful manipulation of human emotions, in feeling good and feeling right. And through these images, one can construct one's self image. In a "survey of 4,002 kids in grades four through eight, 66 percent reported that cool defines them" (Schor 47). One could find this fact and ones similar, in anti-consumerists tracts like Juliet B. Schor's *Born to Buy*, but one could also just as easily find such information pro-consumerist texts like *The Journal of Consumer Psychology*, which explains exactly how an understanding of the workings of the human mind and human emotion can be utilized to sell products with maximum efficiency, as if this was a

positive thing. The question here is who influences the matrix of cool? With the careful

positioning and manipulation of products with emotions culminating within an

understanding of the self, we see just how one's shopping life can alter their very

understanding of themselves. My argument here is that fifty years on from the

publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, the elements of the "mystique," "woman

problem," "the problem with no name," has expanded to people everywhere, as many

have collapsed into the invisible trap Friedan so carefully articulated many years ago.

As described by Friedan in her first chapter, "The Problem with No Name," those

caught in the mystique were anxious, frightened, depressed, and unhappy. In extreme

cases the problem with no name resulted in physical ailments like "bleeding blisters"

(16). To go back a paragraph, if 66 percent of children report that "cool defines them,"

what can we say for young adults making their way as rookies in the public arena?

(Schor 47). Not only does one have to negotiate their way in the world outside of the

relative safety of the domestic sphere, but also they have to do so by the scale of a

moving target determined by market-values. If we could deconstruct coolness for a

moment in a manner similar to how Judith Butler deconstructs gender, we can see that

"coolness" is itself a copy without an original (43). "Cool" is a moving target and that

moving target determines the sense of self-worth for many individuals. Later, when we

discuss "The Swimmer" in depth, we should keep in mind that Neddy Merrill experiences

a similar crisis of meaning. His target, in this case his home, his prestige, his bourgeoisie

life, has in a very profound way moved, and he seems to be the last one to know as he

tries in vain to get past the locked door of his empty former home. Time and

circumstance has passed Neddy Merrill by. His story serves as a cautionary tale for what

happens to those who cannot maintain a proper suburban existence. He is an embodiment for the anxieties of a purchased privatized personhood. Similarly many of my students are anxious, frightened, depressed, and unhappy. A 2010 survey has concluded that the baseline mental health of freshman "has declined to the lowest level since an annual survey of incoming students started collecting data 25 years ago" (Lewin). However, to distinguish between coincidental symptoms and identical maladies we must examine the interplay of factors at play within the domesticated, privatized space Friedan's subjects found themselves.

Again, Friedan was writing about the plight of women in the 1950's, that idealized era in U.S. history where material splendor and domestic bliss meant national superiority. Friedan's subjects are the result of a moment in history when,

> [f]or the first time since the great depression, the majority of American families were able to afford life's basic necessities plus such luxuries as an automobile and a TV…Family textbooks could state unapologetically that they were based upon the middle-class family because that was the goal everyone was striving toward. (Skolnick and Skolnick 2)

This embourgeoisement shielded other possibilities from being explored or realized. The authors of the quoted passage were referring to research in the social sciences. The discipline that breads its own butter in social problems was blinded in much the same way Friedan's subjects could not imagine another way out for themselves. The beliefs were that firmly entrenched in public policy, private practice, and the social sciences took on the task of proving all of this as the direction of human history. The ads were "true," even within the disciplines that in our time seek to uncover and solve society's ills.

Mopping the floor really was a transcendent experience, and Friedan's critique of this belief system is truly revolutionary.

It is important to note that Friedan herself was a part of this machine for promoting market values. After years as a serious labor journalist, so serious in fact she had a file on her at FBI headquarters, Friedan found herself pitching stories that were deemed "too serious" for a female target audience (Horowitz 7; Oliver 67). An early version of *The Feminine Mystique* appeared in *McCalls*. *Red Book* magazine, a publication Friedan wrote for on several occasions, produced a short film from 1957 called "In the Suburbs." The nineteen-minute film is one long advertisement for *Red Book* and its "easy living" marketing campaign, targeted towards young adults who are just starting to make their families and homes. Suburban life is equated with shopping and being on the go. The frenzy of products for "the first young adults in the age of the pushbutton" are designed for the sole purpose of making life colorful and fun. How could anyone successfully argue against colorful fun? Certainly, the women Betty Friedan interviewed could not, even when doing the "right" thing left them hopelessly confused. Friedan herself was confused. In a talk about her work on Friedan, Stephanie Coontz pointed out that to be an educated female at this time meant reading neo-Freudian texts explaining just how messed-up educated women were ("Strange").

In the film, the shopping center is portrayed as the center of human activity, which is an overt metaphor for this project. Young couples go at least twice a day, and *Red Book* is the magazine to let them know about how to thrive in the new "easy living" lifestyle. Aside from a brief interlude showing some black and white stills illustrating the cramped and uncomfortable nature of city life, the entire film is people interacting with

manufactured products. Shopping and family life are utterly intertwined. It's good to be

good, to feel good, and to shop well. Good people live the good life. When the shopping

center becomes the center of life, then the value of having supersedes other possibilities.

A new order is created and reinforced:

> Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their
>
> leveling element shows its strength in the very wrong which it furthered. It
>
> has made the technology of the culture industry no more than the
>
> achievement of standardization and mass production, sacrificing whatever
>
> involved a distinction between the logic of work and that of the social
>
> system. (Horkheimer and Adorno 121)

Truly, it feels good to feel good, and there is little else to know or be known.

However, the next thing we need to think about is the way that an endorsed form

of pleasure can be destructive. When pleasure is an imperative any other reaction, belief,

or possibility becomes a problem. And for those who cannot fulfill or do not want to

fulfill this imperative themselves become a problem and pay a human cost. In order to

contextualize Friedan, I would like to look at an article published in 1951 by Martha

Wolfenstein. The article was entitled, "The Emergence of Fun Morality." It is a

qualitative study of the rhetoric in childcare manuals from 1914 to 1945. What she

noticed was an evolution from Victorian values that dictated that infants, and particularly

male infants, must be morally instructed and protected from their own sinful natures to a

belief that all aspects of childcare are joyful if done properly. Her argument is that both

notions are rather extreme. On one hand, the Victorian manuals recommend pinning the

sleeves of male infants to their mattresses to keep them from exploring parts of their own

anatomy (Wolfenstein 16). At the other extreme, breastfeeding was supposed to be a transcendent and always wonderful experience (Wolfenstein 21). This led Wolfenstein to conclude that a new "fun morality" was emerging, and this fun morality was to be pursued with a high degree of determination.

Wolfenstein pre-dates Žižek's "Enjoy is Superego" hypothesis, discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, by almost half-a-century, but many of the ideas are the same. Enjoyment is equated with correctness; it is the thing we must follow. Granted, Wolfenstein's portrayal of Victorian fears about auto-eroticism that are both morally mis-guided and do not account in any way for the developmental stage of infancy is spot on and rather easy to recognize now. However, her theory of "fun morality" is quietly revolutionary:

> When a mother is told that most mothers enjoy nursing, she may wonder what is wrong with her in case she does not. Her self-evaluation can no longer be based entirely on whether she is doing the right and necessary things, but becomes involved with nuances of feeling which are not under voluntary control. Fun has become not only permissible but required, and this requirement has a special quality different from the obligations of the older morality. (Wolfenstein 21)

In the symbolic order of "fun morality," the ecstasy of mopping can begin to become a tyranny of pleasure. One can do the right or necessary thing, yet still be very wrong. To live is to have obligations to others, under "fun morality" we must enjoy fulfilling those obligations. Enjoyment simply becomes another, if not primary, obligation. Žižek refers to this as a "short circuit" in our social arrangement. Our sins become synonymous with

our redemption, in fact they are the same gesture. Likewise, our moral obligation becomes to satisfy desire ("First as Tragedy"). Let us begin to discuss these "obligations" and their implications.

Within the domestic space defined by "fun morality," or "superego is enjoy" for that matter, there occurs a delicate interplay of issues of gender and citizenship. The National Holocaust Museum recently mounted a traveling exhibit called "Deadly Medicine" that traces a line of thinking beginning with the seemingly innocent hope of creating healthier and happier future citizens, throughout the Third Reich until the Final Solution. One walks through the exhibit starting with the attempts at making people healthy and the happy, and ends in the crematorium. In this case, a healthier, happier future does not allow for unpleasantness, even when embodied within people.

There is one image that I think is particularly relevant to this study. It is a propaganda poster that appears half-way though the exhibit. Those traveling through the exhibit are still in the "happier healthier stage," relatively far from the life size images of children, with minuscule birth defects, moments before they were euthanized. The image is a tightly cropped, very close drawing of the torso of a nude woman. The woman's head, arms, and legs do not appear in the image. She appears however to be running joyously with her arms over her head. Her body is portrayed is joyous, active, free, and within intimate proximity to the viewer. The image itself is reminiscent of Lennard J. Davis's take on the armlessness of the famous Venus de Milo statue. Davis reveals the role disfigurement, and disfigurement at the hands of militarized misogynists at that, has played in the creation of mythological beauty. The armless Venus cannot resist, which makes her beauty even more irresistible (2400-21). Like with the armless Venus, the

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lack of limbs on the woman in the poster negates any chance for her to resist male desire.

Submission here is a trait of perfection, even in a moment of seemingly joyous activity.

Her disfigurement for the purpose of conforming to desire is only heightened by the

absence of a mouth to protest. Written across this highly sexualized and available body

are the words, "A healthy woman is a healthy state" (United States Holocaust Museum).

Here, the intimate portrayal of a highly sexualized body becomes the object of national

public concern. In the image, youth, health, and sexuality as political agents are bound

up with seemingly innocent notions of health and happiness. Like with some of the more

seemingly benign examples discussed in this chapter, we see the potential for conjugal

needs get caught up into notions of citizenship along with personal morality.

    With this image, we see that personal pleasure is a rather public concern. Jürgen

Habermas outlines the interplay between the public and the private in his seminal work

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. For Habermas, bourgeois political

reality is based in the securing of private property. The economic well being that allows

one to secure a home full of possessions is a matter of concern for the state. To invoke

the Bill Clinton 1992 campaign mantra, "It's the economy, stupid." *The Feminine*

Mystique critiques and "In the Suburbs" promotes the same lifestyle choices, and for my

students this era represents a nostalgic vision for "good old days" that they never

experienced. However, for many these "good old days" are the standard bearer for the

future we should try to create. This period of history is equated with a "simpler time"

when all the big problems seemed distant; embourgeoisement's ghost still haunts us. The

good old days are also inscribed with a sense of "all American-ness." Lauren Berlant

defines this interplay as "The Intimate Public Sphere." Within the intimate public sphere, personal choices take on national significance:

> During the rise of the Reaganite right a familial politics of the national future came to define the urgencies of the present. Now everywhere in the United States intimate things flash in people's faces: pornography, abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values. These issues do not arise as private concerns: they are key to debates about what "America" stands for, and we are deemed vital to defining how citizens should act. (Berlant 1)

Pro-life activists wave U.S. flags, and Fred Phelps's Westboro Baptist Church equates the deaths of soldiers, miners, and Mr. Rodgers with the existence and tolerance of gays in the U.S. These activists, like many members of the population, have seen privatization shrink the scale of their political imagination. U.S. Senators, at least the ones who run in Pennsylvania, need to provide images of their family, especially of their many children in their advertisements, even, and especially in their attack ads. Without proof of productive sexuality, a man is not deemed worthy to serve in public office by some. This represents the hold the "intimate public sphere" has in the Neo-liberal era. The Republican mantra goes that "big government will not solve all your problems." In recent times, this sentiment seems to have expanded to the notion that government simply cannot do anything. Without a notion of a nation-state that can work for the citizenry, only deprive that citizenry of income through taxation, what are we left to be concerned with after the fall of the welfare state? The public sphere is dead, and the private sphere has expanded to replace it.

Our private spaces have gotten larger and we have greater possibilities for pleasure within those spaces. Some of us have home theatres now. Our gaming system can take us to adventures around the world, and we can even compete with folks from around the world. Faced with a world of work that most people don't want to think about, and personal time that people dream about, the collapse of the public and private into each other seems inevitable. As early as the 1970s, Barbara Lassett argued that "[t]his development…is the consequence of the separation of work and family activities" (94). Industrialization takes us off of the family farm into a space where work and play occur far from each other. If our dreams consist of time alone in a space of enjoyment, our dreams dictate a political reality where those private choices take on national significance.

For Friedan, and her subsequent involvement within the feminist movement, the personal itself was political. One recent biography on Friedan distinguishes itself with just that title, *The Personal is Political* (Oliver). As Daniel Horowitz points out in his biography of Friedan, her use of the first person plural pronoun "we" throughout *The Feminine Mystique* only heightened the reaction some had to it (238). In a sense, one was either part of the "we" or vehemently rejected the association. Susan Oliver points out that the fame the book gave meant an increase in income, and rejection by her husband and friends (77). Divorce is usually a painful, private matter, but when Carl and Betty split after *The Feminine Mystique*, one cannot help but think about the role the book and its politics played in the dissolution of a family. Biographers of Friedan are not in a position to resist speculation. Horowitz then reports how Carl went on to marry an attractive blonde who "made good soup," well aware that this personal choice was seen

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in its own time as a political statement, whether it was meant to be or not (225). Oliver

wrote, in her biography of Friedan, about how, after getting a "quickie Mexican divorce,"

Friedan checked herself into a hotel bar and wept. As Oliver explains, "The day [of her

divorce] Friedan cried because *The Feminine Mystique* had dealt a mortal blow to her

marriage and the National Organization for Women had dug its grave" (109). The

personal gives one agency for political action, but also the political gives others the right

to critique the personal. Oliver's portrayal of this scene, her word choice especially, is

troubling. By invoking such a melodramatic series of images to describe this moment of

Friedan's life, the drama of family life becomes both political and a good read. As

feminist critic Rachel Bowlby points out, Friedan is guilty of this herself. The opening of

The Feminine Mystique reads like a thriller (61). Instead of, "It was a dark and stormy

night," the reader is met with, "The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years"

(Friedan 11). The result of this is an inability to separate text, author, and that author's

life's work. Upon reading several critical biographies about Friedan, I found myself

distinctly noticing how the author's personal feelings about Betty Friedan had a strong

influence on their professional work about the woman, the work, and the legacy. My

point here is that we can see *The Feminine Mystique* as a critical milestone that is

symptom and cure, medicine and germ. It exists in these multiple realms because of the

way the personal and political are inextricably linked. We now live in the middle of the

same dichotomy.

    With the expansion of Neo-liberalism, the intimate public sphere even

encompasses how we deal with national tragedy and threats to our security. After 9/11,

private choices have taken on additional significance in the war on terror. At first glance,

notions of national security and defense seem like the last remaining vestiges where the

nation state exercises its full meddle. Defense, after all, is a matter of public welfare, and

unlike welfare programs, defense rarely faces the budgetary ax. However, in the post-

9/11 era even the national response to attack is influenced by privatization. Jasbir Puar,

in her book *Terrorist Assemblages*, discusses what she calls "U.S. sexual exceptionalism"

(2). At the risk of being crude, we can say that U.S. sexual exceptionalism means that

real Americans know how to do it right. Even when faced with a danger of global

proportions the intimate can still weave its way into the political. Within the discourse on

terrorism, Puar notes that our tolerance for what homosexuals do in the privacy of their

own home has become part of that exceptionalism. The fact that we are free to be who

we are in the privacy of our bedrooms is part of the U.S. definition of freedom:

> The precious haven of the private, always a relative, tenuous, and often
>
> impossible affair for people of color and immigrants, is even further
>
> spatially and temporally contained through the notion of intimacy. The
>
> private liberty of intimacy implies that sex happens only in the privacy of
>
> one's home, and the liberal ideal of home as sanctuary and as property that
>
> one owns is expressed repeatedly … There is as well a particular judgment
>
> of quality attached to the relationship of security attached to the home and
>
> the sex taking place within it. (Puar 126)

Puar argues that terrorists are queered, or their heterosexuality is portrayed as inherently

misogynistic. Meanwhile, pictures of male soldiers holding babies or surprising their

kids at school after returning from active duty are newsworthy.   Even the notion of how

Others treat and oppress their gays becomes part of the justification for violence against

the Middle East. For the women of Friedan, or for citizens of today, domestic

satisfaction is a matter of national security. With this kind of pressure put upon them, no

wonder Friedan's research revealed doctors who treated female patients who suffered

from physical repercussions called either "housewife's blight" or "syndrome" (16).

Under this kind of pressure for a properly pleasurable home life, we can see how

those who are included within the system are held to a ridiculous standard, while those

outside are often times excluded from basic human needs. In the film adaptation of John

Cheever's "The Swimmer," one of Neddy Merrill's hostesses reminds him repeatedly

that their new filter removes 99.99.99% of all solid matter. Purity becomes personal and

political. We live in the era of hand sanitizer, and what distinguishes the Hand Sanitizer

Age, from say the Iron or Stone Ages, is an overriding concern with the use of a

predominant technology for protecting oneself from the invisible remainders of other

bodies. Within the film, the "99.99.99%" promise invokes notions of not only purity, but

prestige, advancement, and sophistication. It is why she repeats the phrase several times

within the same scene. For Neddy the interloper, maintaining purity is a matter of fitting

in, this is not easy when one has been walking barefoot all day through backyards and the

woods. As feet accumulate dirt, bodies host germs, thoughts and actions can themselves

be inherently "dirty" etc. Within the pure domestic space, those who are on the outside

are truly on the outside. Those who can afford to move within these spaces do not get

filtered out.

Rosemary Hennessey, in *Profit and Pleasure*, chronicles the way she became

aware of her lost heterosexual privilege as she entered into a gay relationship. Her

process of "coming out" in a sense "filtered her out" of polite civil society:

> I learned in very immediate ways that fear is only one of the many
> palpable consequences of a vast sea of heterosexual prescriptions. Above
> all, and much to my surprise, I learned how unconsciously and — despite
> my best feminist efforts, how comfortably — I had lived within the
> privileges of heterosexuality, how they had bolstered not just my
> economic security but my shameless sense of entitlement and ease of
> movement through the world. (2)

Here the personal and the public collapse into one another, resulting in compulsory heterosexuality. She shares the same notion with Puar that those excluded from being able to afford, or do not desire, a secure domestic space have little voice in our dialog about the intimate public sphere, and therefore have a diminished voice in political discourse. One of the default discourses, and most "common sense" defenses of gay rights, goes, "Whatever people do in the privacy of their own home." The possession of a proper private sphere is seen as the anchor of legitimacy. The mainstream image of domesticated gayness involves fashionable districts in expensive cities like New York and San Fransisco. One is hard pressed to imagine a poor or working-class gay identity.

Those inside the safety of having a "proper" or "cool" domestic sphere are dispatched with the task of making sure their private lives take on a role in our national security. It should be mentioned the toll postmodernism plays upon the construction of such a properly and perfectly pleasurable private sphere. "The fantasy of the collective 'we' offered by the liberal state is an abstract, universal identity that is empty of content, and in this sense we might call it a 'dead identity'" (Hennessey 228). This dead identity is populated by market sensibilities and media images.

The market puts on display a wide range of 'identities' from which one

can select one's own. Commercial advertisements take pains to show the

commodities they try to sell in their *social content*, which means as a part

of a particular *life-style*, so that the prospective customer can consciously

purchase symbols of such self-identity as he or she would like to possess.

The market also offers tools of 'identity making' which can be used

differently, i.e. produce results which differ somewhat from each other

and are in this way 'customized' or 'personalized' better catering for the

need of individuality. (Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* 206)

The market dictates choices and allows for a sense of individuality. All is performance,

every private and personal act falls into this matrix. An important thing to keep in mind

is that the focus here is on how privatization has co-opted the public sphere. For U.S.

citizens "the American dream" is a matter of national identity. As a matter of national

identity, notions of citizenship are wed to notions of purchasing and consumption,

providing a code of morality and identity. The shrinking of the public sphere means the

subjects of privatization are pushed into a kind of social isolation. In Chapter 1, we

discussed how a pervasive culture of fear and isolation have resulted from the ways

privatization influences the understanding of physical space, leaving a profound gap in

the human experience.

My argument here is that this gap has been filled by the marketing of a reductive

form of consumerist pleasure, and this very particular ideal of pleasure left the women

Betty Friedan was writing for unable to construct a reasonable context for understanding

their own experiences. While these women were limited to an isolated domestic sphere

by patriarchy, my argument is that privatization by its very nature is pushing all of its subjects into a similarly isolated space. Next, I would like to take a moment to explore just how pervasive a privatized, market-driven replacement for the public sphere can be. In Chapter 2, we discussed the role of intimacy and the ways in which the accusing eyes of the public peer in when it all goes wrong. However, I would argue that the public sphere, or in these times the privatized consumerist metonym for a public sphere, does not just peer in when a scandal breaks. Rather this privatized, consumerist public sphere determines our most intimate understandings of our own lives, raising the possibility that their might be no aspect of human life untouched by the trappings of privatization.

I would like to do so by exploring one of the most private and aspects of human existence. It is my argument that very little, if anything at all, has resisted being overrun by consumerism. The BBC documentary *Perfect Private Parts* chronicles the rising popularity of labia reduction surgery in the UK. This operation, performed even on very young girls, is designed to make women's anatomies look more like they do in pornographic images and at the time of filming, the popularity of this procedure was exploding. I bring this example up because a common argument against censorship is that no matter what a text says, the audience does not have to react to it. However, as Wendy Steiner points out in *The Scandal of Pleasure*, pornography and pornographic art have resisted this line of reasoning, since the purpose for these texts is to solicit a physiological response (38). Here, the response is not just some sort of moment of pleasure, but rather an incredibly dangerous, painful, and invasive elective surgical procedure. I use it here to illustrate Henry Giroux's thesis that pop culture is a kind of pedagogy (Giroux and Simon 236-52). In short, we learn through culture. This is

important because, while "[p]opular culture is organized around pleasure and fun, and pedagogy is defined largely in instrumental terms," within the fun and pleasure, values and ideas are indeed learned (Giroux and Simon 238). Without a critical pedagogy and its values, we only have the pop culture pedagogy. Something here is learned and acted upon, and this thing is very much against the self-interest and personal well being of these women, yet the pull is too strong to be resisted. A recurring theme throughout this documentary is a profound uneasiness on the part of the women: torn between a profound sense that they must "be presentable" even within a monogamous relationship, not knowing quite what "presentable" or normal should look like, and an awareness that they are caught within a system of representation that causes them great harm. The women were aware of the highly stylized nature of pornographic images, but could not counter act those images with an alternative idea of the female body. One woman discussed how she had to ask her boyfriend, who had seen more female genitalia than her, what she looked like and if she was "normal." This tension leads many women to undergo an incredibly painful procedure in order to be "right" in the eyes of only a few other individuals, but under the notion that all private life is now a kind of public spectacle, the sacrifice seems to be worth it for some. In the *Male Body*, Susan Bordo discusses a 1996 study that revealed that college-age men usually underestimate the size of their penises (70). Granted, these are two extreme examples about the most private aspects of a person's life. My point is that if something that so few people will ever see is a matter of such overriding concern, then what are we to say about the more publicly visible private choices such as clothes and window treatments? Through images we can see whether or not things are "right" and as the commercials remind us, we want to get everything "just

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right." Here we see how the anxiety about a private life dictated by the ideals of advertising Friedan was chronicling half a century ago is still with us.

Of course, elective surgery is a matter of class. And for the seemingly financially comfortable women of this documentary one can easily dismiss their anxiety and post-operation physical pain as a malady reserved for only those who have more money than sense. Likewise, throughout her life's work, Friedan herself was criticized for only being concerned with the plight of well-to-do women (Coontz). However, what the cautionary tales of this chapter reveal is that even the supposed winners in this system, those with comfortable existences and disposable income pay a heavy human cost for the loss of a private image to judge one's own life. In *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, British Criminologist Jock Young writes frequently and eloquently about chronically humiliating condition of poverty, to be painfully aware of what one should have and subsequently should be and not be able to attain those things. If anything, one prestigious and attainable commodity stands in place of access to a better life (52). My point here is that we are seemingly left with two options from this privatized consumerist system, the anxiety of having or the humiliation of wanting. Neither is particularly inviting. However, when having certain things falls within a pleasurable construct and there are no readily available alternative models, this condition will perpetuate itself.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed this notion of an unrealistic scale of private life driven by market values. This is a learned and constructed behavior pattern. Self-help columns, manuals, and talk shows also attempt to "teach us" the proper private performance. For example, not only does the idea of the human body fall under this

construct, but what one does with one's body also falls under the guise of the market-driven privatized public sphere:

> Under the guise of frankness and sexual liberation, they dedicated prudery and restraint. Sex was made so mechanized, detached, and intellectual that it was robbed of its sensuality. Man became a spectator of his own sexual experience. And the marriage manuals put new pressure on women. The swing was from repression to preoccupation with the orgasm. (Lydon 161)

The privatized person must wonder if they are indeed "doing the right thing," even during the most intimate and personal acts. Several evangelical pastors have made the news by issuing "sex challenges" to the couples in their parishes. These "congregation copulation" challenges call on married couples to have intercourse every day for a pre-determined period of time (Kovach; Biema). This is far different than the theology of St. Augustine, wherein intercourse, even within the confines of Christian marriage, is gravely sinful. The flip we are seeing here can be categorized as a wrong step in the right direction. However, the imperatives for both chastity and for enjoyment are both intrusions of public ideals into private life.

There are two competing notions of sexuality at play here. In one camp, the Augustinian camp, we have total prohibition. In another, we have sexuality utterly decoupled from intimacy or emotional restraint. Commodified, it is purely a pleasurable act, competing with the spectrum of other purely profitable and pleasurable acts that privatization has made of the world. For these pastors, we again see a kind of intrusion of public morality into private live, making private life a kind of performance. This performance also makes Christian sexuality palatable for a generation of males who came

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of age in an era of readily available pornography, where sexual satisfaction is only a few clicks away, even when one still had dialup. These competing ways are all problematic. The Augustinian camp abjectifies the human body and all its functions. The second camp is an example of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as

> [e]roticism cut free from its reproductive and amorous constraints fits the bill very well; it is as if it were made to measure for the multiple, flexible, evanescent identities of postmodern men and women. Sex free from reproductive consequences and stubborn, lingering love attachments can be securely enclosed within the frame of an episode: it will engrave no deep groves on the constantly regroomed face which is thus insured against limitations on freedom to experiment further. Free-floating eroticism is therefore eminently suitable for the task of tending to the kind of identity which, like all other postmodern cultural products, is (in George Steiner's memorable words) calculated for "maximal impact and instant obsolescence." (*Individualized* 231)

Bauman is describing here a radical commodification of humanity and human experience. Sexuality within these parameters is just another commodity decoupled from other human interests like intimacy and emotion. Pleasure is the primary meaningful value. The pastors are a hybrid of these competing impulses. Rather than abjectifying the body and sexuality, they are reclaiming it under the guise of morality and goodness. Yes, there is a link to be made between sexuality, intimacy, and family for the purpose of making a legitimate human connection. However, they are still making this intimate act a public spectacle, subject to highly personal and privatized notions of technique, prestige,

competition, endurance, etc. What, after all, does it mean to be a member of a religious community, one that determines one's fate for all eternity, and be faced with the pressures of leaving the flock under these circumstances? Enjoy or be damned.

The problem with the consumerist notion pleasure as it is disciplined in the U.S. in the post-World War II era is the way it limits human experience and human endeavors under the guise of liberation and limitless happiness. Dr. Vandana Shiva uses the term "monoculture" to describe what is created by a global consumerist driven media and global capitalism. Monoculture replaces other possibilities with ones provided by industry. I once saw her articulate the idea of monoculture to a room full of college students by asking, "Who was it who decided that you all should wear blue jeans?" In the context of a lecture about the privatization of water and the evils of Monsanto to an audience of 18-to-21-year-olds, the rhetorical question generated nervous laughter. It also illustrates how the stakes are split. In the Global South, those excluded from monoculture face starvation. In the Global North, it's anxiety and humiliation.

So far, we have explored the ways in which pleasure guides human experience, creating a hard-to-resist symbolic order. Indeed, it feels good to feel good, and what can honestly be wrong with that? The point being that there are indeed other possibilities, especially and in light of the chronic unhappiness we see around us in the Global North. There is a lake in Texas where, thanks to the local human population and their sewage treatment plant, all the fish contain traces of Prozac (Wilder). Friedan's problem with no name highlighted the problem of despair for millions of women caught up within the trap of a life dictated by market ideologies. These women were not only in charge of securing family pleasure, their very bodies were the objects of pleasure. My argument here is that

the issue of the inescapable imperative towards a market driven notion of pleasure has expanded to impair the quality of life of a variety of people Friedan was not talking about.

The 1950s were indeed patriarchal times, and Friedan's influence in identifying and ultimately understanding cannot be denied. However, a careful reading of two decidedly masculine-focused short stories by John Cheever, "The Enormous Radio" and "The Swimmer" reveal that the "problem with no name" is in many respects a populist institution that does not stop at the boundaries of gender roles. "After 'The Enormous Radio,' Cheever's most famous short story is the mysterious tale 'The Swimmer,' made popular by a moderately successful 1966 film" (O'Hara 67). In both "The Swimmer" and "The Enormous Radio," we see a delicate interplay between private pleasure and public performance. In both of these stories, the cultural imperative of the all-American happy family is disrupted, revealing a world that is both utterly banal and terribly wrong. In "The Enormous Radio," we see a world where accidental voyeurism unsettles a scene of domestic tranquility. In "The Swimmer," domestic tranquility has already been disrupted, but it is only at the end of the story that we come to understand its nature. Both of these stories can and should be read as an unveiling of a false system of values. In both the political is not necessarily transparent, but, I will argue, extremely important for understanding their popularity when they were written and their enduring relevance today.

"The Enormous Radio" begins with language similar to a market demographic report:

Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that

satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is

reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were

the parents of two young children, they had been married nine years, they

lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they

went to the theatre on an average of 10.3 times a year, and they hoped

someday to live in Westchester. (Cheever 37)

The report continues to discuss other fashion, leisure, and spending habits. Without the

remark about the alumni bulletin, which seems to be a moment of commentary by

Cheever about the language in Cheever's own description, the beginning of this story

could easily be a useful data for someone attempting, in fact, to sell radios to middle-

class couples. Zygmunt Bauman's quote about market identities on display, mentioned a

few pages ago, is important to keep in mind when thinking about the seeming

ordinariness of the Westcott's described in this passage. However, it is also important to

note that, by co-opting some of the language of marketing, Cheever is revealing that, like

a Medieval peasant who somehow learned Latin, our own understanding of our social

reality is imbued with the very same language of those marketing professionals who help

to construct that reality by manufacturing and channeling desires towards particular

products. We know the language of the priests who know the workings of other side.

The marketing talk/exposition shifts towards one of the Westcott's' primary

leisure activities, listening to music on the radio. The Westcott's have refined taste in

classical music, yet their instrument for receiving that music had begun to break down.

Mr. Westcott purchased a new radio and it was delivered the next day, with the help of

the maid and the handyman. Irene isn't pleased:

> She was struck at once with the physical ugliness of the large gumwood
>
> cabinet. Irene was proud of her living room, she had chosen its
>
> furnishings and colors as carefully as she chose her clothes, and now it
>
> seemed to her that the new radio stood among her intimate possessions
>
> like an aggressive intruder. (Cheever 38)

Several important things are happening here. The equation of clothing and furnishings

illustrates the double bind of the personal and the private. Clothing is of course a part of

the self we show the world. To equate the two means that the living room is part of the

public self. However, Cheever returns to mention the "intimate possessions" in the face

of "an aggressive intruder" (38). For a family with a maid we see an intertwining of class

and appearances, their personal space shows the world who they are.

The radio then continues to be "an aggressive intruder" within the Westcott

household through its intrusion into others. Soon after its delivery, the radio begins to

malfunction and begins to relay the sounds from within their apartment building. The

Westcotts now have a window into the private lives of everyone around them. The result

unsettles their own household as the domestic Irene Westcott becomes overwhelmed by

the unhappiness, banality, adultery, and sickness in their building. This causes Irene to

question her own life: "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful. But we've never been

like that, have we, darling?" (45). This is a question better left unasked and unanswered.

We soon find the answer to that question. Her husband worries about the household

spending, but even worse:

Why are you so Christly all of a sudden? What's turned you overnight

into a covenant girl? You stole your mother's jewelry before they

probated her will. You never gave your sister a cent of that money that

was intended for her—not even when she needed it. You made Grace

Howard's life miserable, and where was all your piety and your virtue

when you went to that abortionist? (Cheever 47)

A few sentences earlier, Mr. Westcott gives up on the notion of privacy.   When the

notion that the same radio that listens in to private lives may be broadcasting their own,

he responds, "Nobody can hear us. And what if they can hear us? Who cares?" (Cheever

47). This collapse is similar to the breakdown portrayed in *We Live in Public* and

discussed in the last chapter. Once the veils are pulled off, anything can happen.

This is of course very different from the language at the beginning of the story.

The "marketing profile" is a façade. The public face of upper-middle-class families are

themselves shields, behind which the nastiest of deeds and the most terrible sorrows play

themselves out. Several critics aptly called "The Enormous Radio" a "modernization of

'Young Goodman Brown'" (Stabley 187; Rupp 233; Harmsel 43-6). However, rather

than buy into the notion of condemning the sinful lives of others, we should begin to

question the standard to which people are held. Like in *The Feminine Mystique*,

domesticated displays of success and goodness are an attempt to live the good life, but

the standard is utterly un-realistic. This trait seems crucial to understanding this and

other works by Cheever. "Like the disillusioned Wesctotts, Cheever's New York

residents or visitors generally feel mocked by reminders of Eden, symbols of the failures

of previous questors or of themselves" (Kendle 222). The critic in question here is right

for invoking the name of the place without sickness and death, the garden where the residents don't even know when they are naked. In this world we have created for ourselves, this Eden of "easy living,"

> [h]uman freedom of creation and self-creation meant no imperfection, ugliness or suffering could now claim the right to exist, let alone claim legitimacy. It was the contingency of the imperfect that spurned anxiety about reaching perfection. And perfection could be reached and through action: it was the outcome of laborious 'fitting together.' Once a matter of providence and revelation, life had turned into the object of *techne.*
>
> (Bauman, *Imitations* xii)

If positivism is the notion that we can use science, technology, and medicine to solve human problems, we must face the possibility that we live in a world of quasi-positivism gone amuck in the form of a sort of techno-centric notion of progress governing all human endeavors. Even the decidedly un-technical world of emotion and self-identification are subject to these false scales reinforced by images that the population who consumes these images does not have a hand in choosing or creating.

Within Cheever's fiction we see how a mythical scale comes to measure a lived reality. Like the anxiety of the kinds of consumerism described in this project, the mis-measure that occurs between yardstick and physical space is where the psychological drama within Cheever's stories plays themselves out. As one critic of Cheever explains: a good part of the problem is our paradoxical need for Edenic memories, even as we recognize they are mythical, that is, no longer visible, even if irresistible (Karl 211). As

Judy Giles points out in *Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*:

> [O]ne of the tensions of modern life is the contradictory pull of conflicting discourses. On the one hand, the discourse of rationality and betterment offers the promise of order and stability, on the other hand, the discourse of romantic transcendence invites us to leave behind the mundanity of everyday life that is the price of this security. (101)

The price of simply being, or even being successful, is banality, boredom, and perhaps a very profound sense that one is not terribly special. Within Cheever's stories tension between heroic self-image and sense of place in a new Eden, versus a very different self and place.

It should also be noted here, that like Friedan, something has been made of the special connection/identification the author in question had with their audience:

> Like his characters, Cheever's reader was born in a small town, has spent some of his working life in a big city, and now lives in a suburb. He has traveled to Europe—preferably by boat—is married, male, middle-aged, commutes to work by train, belongs to the Episcopal Church, drinks too much; vexed by his own sexuality, he wanders an erratic path between fidelity and infidelity (but always back again); is literate, bemused, ironic, and nostalgic for the better time and place that never was. (Rupp 232)

Again, we see a curious intersection between literary text and market demographic, providing useful information for both the graduate student and salesperson trying to send the average mid-century middle class gentleman home in a new Chrysler. Either way, we

are talking about the practice of self-creation and how that process works itself out in both the mental and physical world.

Influencing this tension is the way in which modernity creates new possibilities or eliminates others is the issue of desire. What do we want out of this bargain? Zygmunt Bauman, in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, discusses the ways in which the practice of modernity expunges other possibilities from existence. The techne of living a proper and pleasurable private life is the process of locating the modernity's thrust towards purity directly within the intimate life of individuals. As Bauman says, "We can say that existence is modern in as far as it is effected and sustained by *design, manipulation, management, engineering*" resulting in a life where "[n]othing is more artificial than naturalness: nothing less natural than throwing oneself at the mercy of the laws of nature" (9, 7). Again, we see the desire for stability and progress. As "The Enormous Radio" begins with the language of marketing, we as audience are ushered deeper, via flawed engineering, into the lives of the Westcott's. The clinical perfection of that language is lost in the chaos of fallen private worlds. People, their outer selves and their inner lives, are inherently ambivalent or dialectical. Competing forces such as the public and private, morality and desire, etc. reveal themselves through our thoughts and actions. Positivism allows for the belief in the possibility of a world without the negative aspects of life. Again, this is Žižek's idea of the moral world where the negative is already engineered out of a product and redemption is engineered into its place (Žižek, *The Puppet*; *For They* 237-43). "If modernity is about the production of order then, ambivalence is the *waste of modernity*" (Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* 15). This leads Bauman to conclude that intolerance is "the natural inclination of modern practice" (Bauman, *Modernity and*

Ambivalence 8). The quest for perfection often is a take no prisoners approach; within

this system the imperfect can be unimaginable. Remember what I said earlier about those

cheese fries? The tension in *The Feminine Mystique* and "The Enormous Radio" is the

same tension felt by the young person who is driven to an eating disorder by having a

mistaken sense of what a normal human body looks like or the student who is reduced to

tears over a B+. The scale is unrealistic; the pressure is too great.

Throughout this chapter, I have made the argument that there is a very real danger

of the private lives of people being overrun by an ideology of consumerism. This

ideology does not respect their human needs nor does it provide a viable means for

understanding the human experience. Very little if anything escapes this system as some

of the most intimate understandings of the self are caught up in the promotion of a

consumerist notion of pleasure. This notion can determine just who someone is and what

they strive to be, even if the scale this system provides is utterly unrealistic.   In the short

story "The Swimmer," we see this tension play out as a heroic quest plays itself out in a

way very different than the protagonist's intentions. With this final example, I would like

to keep in mind not only everything said so far about the re-calculation of the split

between the public and private; the role of media, consumption, pleasure, and popular

image in this re-calculation; but I would like to add to this problem is the very real

possibility that one's sense of escape or attempt to create a self in opposition to the

problem can be doomed.

Cheever's protagonist this time appears poolside on "one of those midsummer

Sundays when everyone sits around saying, 'I *drank* too much last night'" (713). As one

critic describes this opening paragraph, "Here. the subtle variations on the repetitiveness

of human excuses [in the opening paragraph] capture not only a specific hangover but a more fundamental, universal experience of misgiving that is beyond all genteel excuse" (Hunt 41). This kind of language, where a sense of the personal is linked to the textual, dominates 20th-century critical works about Cheever. It is within this landscape of excess enjoyment that we find our protagonist and his scheme to "swim" across the county to home via swimming pools. Cheever's hero typically "must try to act in some way, be it hurdling over living room furniture in pursuit of lost youth or in swimming across the polls of Westchester County, so as to affirm his own being" (Moore 35). This landscape of excess enjoyment unites the entire community, and Neddy is attempting to "be someone" within this landscape. Here, Cheever is showing us how class, and the personal pursuits informed by class, form a sense of community and belonging, even when exploring the private worlds of people's back yards. Cheever's protagonist calls this chlorinated landscape the Lucinda River, in honor of his wife. Cheever, by giving us a landscape literally determined by leisure activity, reminds us, "A nation exists only as long as it's specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices" (Žižek, *Tarrying* 202). With "The Swimmer," we see an all-American man on an all-American, "easy living" day, and it is within this landscape we see these national myths unravel.

We also see in Neddy's quest an attempt to reaffirm a heroic identity in an era where "the ideal of self-development, of a narrative of self-discovery, and personal achievement is difficult in a world where the building blocks seem so insubstantial and contested. All of this makes the creation of a personal narrative difficult" (Young 4-5).

From the very start, the attempt to swim the Lucinda River seems silly, yet seemingly it is all Mr. Merrill has.

The Lucinda River traverses public and private spaces. Cheever's swim-trunk wearing everyman moves through these spaces. In his journey, he encounters resentment, nudists, excess, regret, and his own shortcomings. The film illustrates the episodic nature of the narrative quite well; jump cuts shift focus from one visually arresting private space to another, back yard to back yard. Like with "The Enormous Radio," the moral of this story is that if one looks close enough at the world, one sees the ugly head of human fallibility everywhere, and when faced with the unrealistic scale of a perfect and easy life, despair abounds. The original theatrical trailer for *The Swimmer* twice confronts the viewer with the tagline: "When you talk about *The Swimmer*, will you talk about yourself?" While not a horror film or short story, *The Swimmer* represents a nightmare for those who believe the American dream can come true. Similarly, one critic calls "The Swimmer" "a ghastly representation of what it means to swim in American values of success, recognition, and status" (Moore 35). What makes this story equally disturbing than is the way we can read the failure of Neddy Merrill's quest as a failure of the project of individuality, and as Marshall Berman points out in *The Politics of Authenticity*, the 1960's represented a time when the Left and Right were united in a belief in individualism (xviii). Neddy's swim is an attempt to establish some mark, to make some kind of heroic individual accomplishment. One could easily argue that this dynamic continued into the Neo-liberal era through the shrinkage of the public sphere. Therefore, a representation of a breakdown of the quest for individualism is itself a short circuit of something fundamental to the contemporary understanding of the world. In *The*

Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway's protagonist is noble in defeat; Neddy Merrill is simply cold and wet.

At the beginning of the story, we meet the swimmer in a happy enough place, surrounded by friends. Even here, the notion of perfect personal practice rears its head. "He had an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools" (Cheever 714). Manhood is a performance to be perfected when one's life is a project. "The self is burdened with the impossible task of rebuilding the lost integrity of the world or, more modestly, with the task of sustaining the production of self-identity" (Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* 96). The swim down the Lucinda River is an attempt at both. By so boldly hurling himself into pools, the swimmer is showing the world that in fact he is "a man," a good man. By going home through the social and private spaces of other people we see an attempt at redemption. Cheever tells us, "Making his way home by an uncommon route gave him the feeling that he was a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny" (714-5). As the journey continues both projects of worldly and personal redemption begin to break down.

Again, the journey begins happily enough. The first few homes are pleasant. "Oh, how bonny and lush were the banks of the Lucinda River! Prosperous men and women gathered by the sapphire-colored waters while caterer's men in white coats passed them cold gin" (715). A summer storm and a dry pool at a house that is for sale are the first places where the fantasy breaks down. However, it is when the swimmer first enters a truly public space do we see things truly break down:

> Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen
> him, close to naked, standing on the shoulders of Route 424, waiting for a

chance to cross. You might have wondered if he was the victim of foul

play, had his car broken down, or was merely a fool. Standing barefoot in

the deposits of the highway—beer cans, rags, and blowout patches—

exposed to all kinds of ridicule, he seemed pitiful . . . He was laughed at,

jeered at, a beer can was thrown at him, and he had no dignity or humor to

bring to the situation. (Cheever 718)

Both in the story and the film, there is a narrative break, a new language and a new

cinematic technique for this section of the story. In the film, the soundtrack is replaced

by fast-paced music that drowns out the noise of the rushing cars and shouting motorists.

The cinematography changes; the camera sweeps rapidly past the swimmer. The

swimmer is out of the cozy private world of suburban backyards, and it is a harsh world,

indeed. Compared to the dignity and humor free "close to naked" state at the side of the

highway, when he encounters the back yard of the nudist Halloran's, "he called hullo,

hullo . . . and he stepped politely out of his trunks before" approaching them (Cheever

720). The conversation with the Halloran's is polite and normal in spite of everyone's

nakedness. At the side of the highway, he is nearly naked. In contrast, he is clothed by

the confines of a suburban backyard even when he is actually physically naked.

The swimmer loses his dignity again at the public pool. In the film, he is refused

entry into the community pool three times. He fails the first time because of money, then

because his body fails to pass a cleanliness inspection twice. On the third try, he is

forced to spread his toes in order to gain access to a crowded and noisy place. There, he

is surrounded by people to whom he owes money, and a resentful community pool patron

mocks him. She asks sarcastically, "Stings your eyes a little?" in reference to the over-

chlorinated water (*The Swimmer*). Throughout the film and the story, the viewer/reader gets a vague sense that something is amiss. In these private realms histories of desire are revealed as the swimmer discusses affairs and crushes, but his real secret is unspeakable. In the film, it is at the pool do we find an open challenge to Ned Merrill's idyllic vision of his home life. In the bourgeoisie back yards, people just look at Ned with concern; his working class creditors openly discuss his daughter's drunken car crashes. The illustration of his displacement is complete.

It is only after this that we find the swimmer's secret. His home is empty. His family is gone. In the face of some of the theoretical issues raised in this chapter, we can see how the swimmer is truly a fallen man. Tired, wet, and slumping against a locked door, his delusions, and perhaps the delusions of those who believe in "easy living," are shattered. If the private practices and personal pleasure fall within a symbolic order of gender, nationhood, and moral sense of right and wrong for that matter, what are we to say and what are we to do with those who cannot maintain these standards?

Both "The Swimmer" and "The Enormous Radio" end without resolution. The Walcott's radio simply works (Cheever 48). The swimmer looks into a window and discovers that his "home" is empty (Cheever 725). The end. Cheever himself said, "I felt dark and cold for some time after I finished that story," referring to "The Swimmer" (Grant quoted in O'Hara 68). The lack of a meaningful solution is perhaps what makes these two middle-class nightmares so disturbing. One critic attributes these "blue-sky" endings" as an attempt to blur out rage, denying the reader an emotional release befitting the events they just read (Donaldson 131). I say that the ends of these stories represent a breakdown of representation. There is no solution. The conditions which created this

inescapable gulf between ideal and real are themselves inescapable. This profound

silence also makes them pertinent to our current understanding of our situation.

For Friedan, the solution to "the problem with no name" was "work that led to

personal growth and self-fulfillment [that] involved several key elements. It had to

require intelligence, initiative, leadership, and responsibility" (Horowitz 4). Friedan, a

former labor journalist and editor in chief of the Smith College newspaper, had that work

and felt its profound absence. Neddy Merrill has clearly fallen on hard times. In the

film, he brushes off several job offers. He is without such work, as are many people.

Part of the thesis of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* is that, along with changing our

dietary habits, fast food has changed the way we work. The word used for this gradual

de-skilling of production is "throughput," the removal of all thought and skill through

automation (67-71). We live in a world created by "throughput." Schlosser describes

how a fierce commitment no training results in disposable employees, disposable people.

For these folks, "intelligence, initiative, leadership, and responsibility" is not part of their

working lives. In the last chapter, I talked about former assembly line workers who could

not adjust to college because life on the assembly line trained them not to think as a

survival skill. As an academic, I get to live a semi-charmed life where work involves

intelligence, leadership, responsibility, and even play. Friedan's idea works for me, but

it's a hard road to get to such a position. For others, the pleasures of consumerism

provide escapism as a "viable" alternative.

This chapter began with the notion of the problem with a consumerist notion of

pleasure; namely, that its pursuit breeds a profound and pervasive unhappiness.

Dissatisfaction is built into consumerism so much that it is essential to its survival:

The consumerist culture is marked by a constant pressure to be *someone else*. Consumer markets focus on the prompt devaluation of their past offers, to clear a site in public demand for new ones to fill. They breed dissatisfaction with the products used by consumers to satisfy their needs— and they also cultivate constant disaffection with the acquired identity and the set of needs by which such and identity is defined. (Bauman, *Consuming* 100)

The packed closets full of unused goods throughout the households of the Global North are silent memorials of this chronic dissatisfaction (*What Would*).

There is another problem with the problem with no name. As Friedan sought to liberate a generation of women from a lifestyle that denied them some of the most basic human needs, critiques such as this attempt to expose how our current system denies its citizens some of their most basic human needs. The results are everywhere: Black Friday tramplings at Walmart, the deep distrust of others displayed in casual conversation, and the anxieties of young people. I hope I have successfully illustrated how this problem intrudes into the lives of everyday people, shaping our most intimate understandings of our day to day experience. However, in spite of my efforts to make this "revelation" clear to the reader, I must make a confession. For many of my students, none of this is news.

Many young people today, in spite of the hegemonic influence of global capitalism and in spite of the fact that they have only known a world of Neo-liberal economics, understand that something has gone terribly wrong. Many of our classroom conversations end in frustration. This frustration is not over the difficulty of the material,

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and this frustration is not an ideological objection to materialist inquiry. One can find the same frustrations on the boundaries of everyday conversations about politics, the frustration is, like at the ending of the two Cheever stories, the lack of a language to articulate anything else. There are people in my life who do not know better than to ask an academic about how their research is going. One would think that people might find my ideas radical; however, even the conservatives get it: market values have trumped human values. My students get it, and on occasion will remind me quite bluntly that they do. However, the next question, the often unanswerable question, is what are we to do about it? Those who understand, and will profess their understanding, still go back to the same models of behavior. The intrusion of the market into our intimate lives is just that invasive.

What can be better than global capitalism and its trinkets? Cars and cell phones are, after all, now quite good. Humanists can condemn the dehumanizing practices of our current system yet celebrate the products of a culture industry that is part and parcel to the current system. Mainstream films are products of the very same process of industrialization that gives us all of our other trinkets, even the ones that make us unhappy. This silence truly is what it means to be at "the end of history." Fukuyama's belief that there can be nothing after Capitalism, even major global conflict, is the profession of faith in this failure of imagination. "[P]ost revolutionary ideology endeavors to make us understand that what we live now is a dream of our ancestors come true" (Žižek, *Tarrying* 117). It feels good to feel good, and at the moment of purchase, in the face of desire, we often do feel good, in spite of it all. However, culture's greatest redeeming quality is the fact that it allows for critical re-imagining of our situation.

Through culture we can come to imagine something else for ourselves. Some of those re-imaginings are already being written, and can lay the groundwork for future dreams. And that is what we will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: CHOOSING AGAINST THE DEVIL WE KNOW:
RE-WRITING THE WORLD AND THE SELF IN THE SHADOW OF REAGAN

At the end of the last chapter, we left Neddy Merrill slumped against the door of

an empty, abandoned house. He is nearly naked, cold, wet, dirty, and defeated. John

Cheever was content with leaving him there, and at this point I am greatly tempted to

leave you, the reader, in a similar position. So far, this project has been about the

negative personal and social effects of privatization. For the "Children of Reagan" and

for many others, an economic policy has left us anxious, confused, insecure, and afraid to

go outside. Unsure of ourselves, but sure that it's a dangerous world, privatization leaves

us confused as of what to do. As the political mantra goes, "Big government can't solve

all your problems," or any for that matter. The public sphere is full of crooked

politicians, wicked opportunists, criminals, terrorists, and the occasional pervert who

wants to kidnap you and cut off all of your toes. It's best just to secure one's home and

make it a nice place, while you're at it. However, the private has been transformed as

well. We can be successful, but that doesn't change the fact that our most intimate

understandings of ourselves cannot escape the scrutiny of an utterly unrealistic and highly

stylized public image distributed via media. And what can we do about it? We are, after

all, just individuals. We are just one guy, just one girl, and even if we make a positive,

progressive change for ourselves: how could it possibly affect a world full of isolated

individuals? First world citizens can "like" a cause on Facebook, but are hesitant to take

to the streets. And when people do take to the streets, privatization has, to borrow an

expression from Paulo Freire, put a "cop in our heads" telling us that something is

seriously wrong. Some news analysts suggested the only possible conclusion to the

uprisings in the "Arab Spring" would be similar to the Iranian revolution of 1979, which installed a radical Islamist anti-Western regime (Hakikian; Beck). Likewise, network talking heads discussing the youth riots of August 2011 in the UK have described it as having "no political component." This is in spite of the fact that the youths doing the rioting come from areas impacted most by austerity measures that have eliminated most social services, in places where the youth unemployment rate is over 60%, and under a Prime Minister who has declared multiculturalism a failure ("BBC Online"). When resistance occurs, privatization's crushing paralysis makes it difficult to see a different set of values at work. After all, the Levi's "Go Forth" campaign was criticized in the UK for attempting to capitalize on rioting, making it chic and fashionable. Levi's suspended the campaign in the UK, but the ad showing a young jeans-wearing man antagonizing a line of riot police still runs in other countries (Neate). This includes multiplexes in the U.S., where I saw the ad in late August 2011. Everything can be privatized, even dissent. One can easily get the impression that resistance might very well be futile. Indeed, so far, it's been a gloom-and-doom affair with the occasional reference to genitalia and bizarre news items to spice things up a bit.

However, heeding the call to action in the introduction of Žižek's brilliant little volume *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, it's time to stop apologizing and retreating in the face of the advance of Neo-liberalism. In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Žižek even claims that, after the fall of communism, "[e]ven radical Leftists were not thinking about what can replace capitalism." However, in the midst of the financial crisis, "The system has lost its self-evidence. The field is open." He later warns, however, "If we do nothing, we will approach some kind of new authoritarianism" (Žižek and Ackerman). I

have argued throughout this project that privatization, consumerism, and Neo-liberalism have renegotiated the way we see and understand our own lived experiences, creating a silence that renders its subjects incapable of clearly articulating that experience. There is a grim determinism created under these conditions, people can only recognize their lives within the narrow discourse created by privatization, even and especially left-leaning leaders who often seem to only offer a watered down version of Neo-liberalism. What I hope to do for a generation of students who know no other way, and for those older who should have known better all along, is to knock us out of our stupor. As Žižek points out, we now dream of "Global Capitalism with a Human Face" in a manner similar to the way the Soviets dreamt of "Communism with a Human Face" several decades ago. Meaning, the inequitable but eternal system has been set up and entrenched. Now, the task is to make the inequalities a little less inequitable, while daring not to question the system itself. History has plenty of examples of the fallacy of Communism with a Human Face, but Global Capitalism with a Human Face frequently gets a pass. Of course, Global Capitalism with a Human Face comes complete with organic apples and Starbucks's "Good Coffee Karma" ("First as Tragedy"). We see in the wreckage that is the fallout from Neo-liberal economic policy in ever increasing clarity and in all its manifestations; the Left can no longer just continue to retreat and apologize. In the U.S.A., left-leaning Democrats have to somehow "legitimize" themselves by adopting the "logic" of Reaganomics. Likewise, a curious silence has surrounded the mainstream media coverage of the Occupy movement. It's time to start thinking about what we can do by looking at models and texts that are already available as for-runners to a post-privatized future.

Chapter 1 was a look into the nightmares of privatization; the next chapter will be a look into the possibilities for a new mythology. Under the old mythology, torture porn is a manifestation of extreme narcissism and an inherent distrust of the possibilities of an un-owned public space.   Popular paranoid fantasies like *Taken* continue to be produced by Hollywood, both capitalizing upon and reinforcing the fear. This chapter is a turn in a distinctly different direction. Next, we shall look at contemporary texts, such as the novels of Douglas Coupland and the BBC series *Spaced* that resist the values of privatization. Under the circumstances that make paranoid fantasy popular, simply representing getting along with others is a quietly revolutionary act. These texts are about people learning to live with others in new ways. In order to act against a prevailing sentiment and its mythologies, one must dream different dreams and imagine a heaven that is not so lonely.

Chapters 2 and 3 explored the creeping expansion of privatization and the ways in which its promises re-shape our understanding of the world and of ourselves. As these chapters illustrate, there has always been a delicate interplay between the public and the private. Both realms intrude upon and influence one another. In the Neo-liberal era, the recipe has been re-written through privatization. The two spheres have collapsed into each other. Public notions such as personhood, citizenship, morality, etc. are expressed through ownership and consumerism. So far this project has been merely about expansion of these values. Next, we will look at those who are trying to move in a different direction.

My students are coming along, as well. Again, contrary to popular belief, they are good people. A *New York Times* story in the spring of 2011 made a splash by extolling

the narcissistic values of contemporary pop music (Tierney). Indeed, narcissism and vanity are popular, but that's not the whole story. There is another thread within our popular culture, and within that thread is a different understanding. Other people do matter; personal satisfaction is not the pinnacle of all human endeavors. But to do something else, we must dream something else. In this chapter, we shall read some alternative dreams by looking at texts about and for young people who want something else out of life. We will discuss my classroom experiences working with texts that see the world in a different way. I'm hoping to give examples of reading against privatization, opposite of the way I have worked so far to illustrate the tracings of privatization within texts.

Critiques of the negative qualities of young people are growing in popularity. Jean Twenge, whom I cited in the first chapter, has made a veritable cottage industry out of exposing the negative personality traits of young people. Her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* was the talk of the media when it came out, and she seems to pop up in newspapers and news sites on the web every few months talking about what's wrong with today's young people in terms of how they are more narcissistic, less empathetic, and more anxious than ever. She even was the commencement speaker at my alma mater a few years ago. Imagine that, after the end of a long journey of hard work and personal growth, on what is traditionally a day celebrating both the individual accomplishments of young lives and the traditional values of an institution . . . anyway. My goal here is to go in another direction, to talk about the eagerness in so many to do something different, something better. They are working under conditions that make it

hard to even imagine just what that is, and as expressed throughout this project, the conditions created by privatization have had a negative effect on them.

Actually, I recall that Dr. Twenge's speech on that day was largely positive, but the work of Twenge and other academics who explore the negative qualities of young people exemplifies the strange admiration/antagonism between the academia and its members. The institution is supposed to be positive and mentoring, yet within the dynamic is the inherent distrust of public space discussed in the first chapter and the anxieties about the people who will inherit the world we have created for them discussed throughout this project, there is an undercurrent of mistrust and animosity towards students.

So far, we have discussed texts written or re-read via privatization. Next, we will look at some very cool, critically well-received, and rather un-popular texts that resist the negative values of privatization that have been described so far. The idea of a mirror stage, be it Lacan or Bakhtin's, states that we judge ourselves via a scale and a scope dictated by others. It has been my argument so far that, in the absence of others, media has stepped in to create a distorted yet highly attractive "funhouse" mirror by which people have come to judge themselves. The scale, or aesthetic, of privatization is one that does not tolerate imperfections within the self or from others.

Here, we are going to look at an alternative aesthetic, texts that share the same moment in history as the texts in Chapter 1. However, unlike the inhumanity of torture porn and *Fight Club*, the stunted social relationships in *The Da Vinci Code*, and the general sense of fear and narcissism that exists throughout the texts discussed in Chapter 1, the texts discussed in this chapter exhibit a profound sense of humanity and

community. While significantly less popular than fear and narcissism, these texts are about people making their way in the Neo-liberal era, finding ways to live a life not dictated by accumulation and loneliness.

As argued earlier in the first chapter, there is a new problem with no name. As seen in the last chapter, Friedan's problem was due to marketing's intrusion upon the personal lives of its subjects. I would argue that little has changed. Marketing, or at least the manufactured wares sold through marketing, are fairly unavoidable. While we may not see ourselves the way August Strindberg describes Jean and Julie from *Miss Julie* as the "scraps of humanity, torn shreds" made out of detritus of mass media, we have all had a catchy commercial jingle stuck in our heads, and perhaps we have at least once used a TV sitcom plot to articulate a moral problem (60). This is something Douglas Coupland calls "tele-parablizing" (*Generation X* 120). There is a profound angst when it comes to what to do about the intrusion of media that promotes market identities into our deepest understandings of ourselves. Those dissatisfied with the contemporary global state of affairs are weighted down by several seemingly unanswerable questions: Can we resist the trappings of privatization? Can we reclaim some other concept of humanity in the face of technology and media? How can we live, if we can live at all, without the political, technological, and cultural understandings we now possess?   After all, I have just spent a great number of pages exploring how privatization has reread historical texts, and also how privatization has influenced the new texts we write. After chronicling the expansion of privatization's way of defining our understanding of others as well as our most intimate selves in Chapters 2 and 3, a question we are left with is what are the possibilities for living a life not defined by privatization and consumerism?

Consumerism has hijacked pleasure in the same way Disney has hijacked childhood. Is it possible to live a good life without destructive forms of enjoyment? What I would like to do now is spend a few pages exploring texts by Douglas Coupland, Stewart O' Nan, Hanif Kurishi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Simon Pegg, and Edgar Wright that provide alternative models that we can use to re-imagine our situation.

With this new "problem with no name" comes a profound sense of dissatisfaction, whether this problem is articulated in the media as statistical evidence of environmental, financial, and personal health catastrophes; or it is manifested in the lives of people as clinical depression; apathy; voter angst; random gunfire; etc. The way out, for most unfortunately, is to try harder in the same bad direction; we can imagine nothing else even after the speculative economic bubbles have burst or if the oil might really run out. Our imagination does not allow for other things, and for other people. To quote Henry Giroux,

> For many young people and adults today, the private sphere has become
> the only space in which to imagine any hope, pleasure, or possibility.
> Neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on market forces, narrows the
> legitimacy of the public sphere by redefining it around the related issues of
> privatism, consumption, and safety. (*Abandoned* xix)

There is simply nothing else for many people. Žižek explains that this is why the apocalypse is so popular a subject for films. The end of the universe is easier to imagine than the end of global capitalism after the end of history (*Žižek!*). We can imagine nothing else, so in the absence of what we already know, the world as we know it must be destroyed. Or better yet, like in the film *Zombieland*, the protagonist is free to be

whatever simply BECAUSE everyone is dead. In *Zombieland*, the narration reinforces several points. First, family and other pre-existing human relationships are an obstacle to fulfillment. Second, survival is on you. There is a proscribed set of rules that, if strictly adhered too, will keep one alive. No one is there to save you, only self-discipline, self-control, and physical fitness can be relied upon. *Zombieland* is a Libertarian paradise. Finally, in the absence of others comes a kind of infinite freedom; flesh eating zombies are simply an inconvenience like the weather. Yes, the protagonist, Columbus, creates a new familial arrangement, but each of his companions has something to offer him, be it love or machine guns. Even the kid is a slick con-artist who bears all the marks of "a survivor" character type. However, quite often four of the only people left on the planet find themselves annoyed by being in close proximity of each other. Again, like with my reading of *Fight Club* in Chapter 1, even self-consciously cool "anti-establishment" texts are saturated with establishment values.

This dearth of constructive imagination means the end of the world functions merely as a reaffirmation of it. Reality must be destroyed, in the form of the apocalypse, in order to save "reality" in our collective imaginations. One tool that can possibly be used to re-invigorate critical imagination is the technique of the counter-factual history. As argued in "History after the End of History: Critical Counterfactualism and Revolution" by Crystal Bartolovich, the counter-factual history is a tool, underutilized by the left, which can be used to explore new possibilities for the present. The Right has displayed increasing dependence upon counter-factual history, for example arguments that the bad guys won the Civil War, the New Deal was the cause of poverty in the 30's, and Martin Luther King Jr. was a conservative activist exist, etc. are getting an ever

increasing voice in our national discourse. This ability to rewrite history represents an

ability to take apart the idea of reality in order to reaffirm certain ideological trappings.

A key question of counter-factual history as an exercise is: "What if X never happened?"

Through this question we can come to see the present as the product of history and not

the result of some natural pre-ordained order. The answers and decisions that made the

present possible become transparent through this technique. What I am proposing here is

that fiction is an underutilized tool for creating new and imaginative ways of reading our

current situation.

Douglas Coupland's novels *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *Generation A*, *JPod*, and

Generation X all can be read as a counterfactual re-telling or reimagining of the present

or near future. The characters in all of these novels are both acutely aware of the

negative aspects of Neo-liberal globalization such as environmental degradation and a

lingering, pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. However, these characters are also acutely

aware of many of the positive possibilities capitalism, such as creative labor, aesthetic

pleasure, mobility, etc. Simon and Schuster acknowledge this in the official description

of *Generation A* by stating the novel "occupies the perplexing hinterland between

optimism about the future and everyday apocalyptic paranoia" ("Books: *Generation A*").

This embodies Marshal Berman's description of what he calls "Capitalism's dark side"

that cannot be blotted out. As liberating and creatively inspiring as capitalism can be

highly destructive and make everyone and everything disposable (*All that is* 99). In

between these two tendencies, liberation and destruction, we see the characters in

Coupland quietly resisting hegemony and finding constructive new ways to be at home in

the modern world.

Douglas Coupland's first novel *Generation X* vaulted him into an international spotlight and named a generation. Popular reception of the novel both then and now seem to center upon a derogatory portrayal of the "slacker" ethic of the protagonists Claire, Andy, and Dag as they sit around and tell stories. What I find interesting here is that this highly negative reception reveals a pervasive and fundamental disbelief in the notion that storytelling serves any meaningful purpose. I find it troubling that this fundamental disbelief possibly extends to the profession of literature studies, as I have found the majority of serious academic work being done about Coupland appear in theology journals and not literary ones. It as if storytelling and not to mention positive, transformative happy endings have no place in critical literary scholarship.

The "slackers" of *Generation X* are low-wage workers in the era of Neo-liberalism. The novel itself is acutely aware of the economic opportunities denied those who had the misfortune to come of age in the era of Neo-liberalism versus those who came of age in the era of union membership, great society programs, and government subsidies for things like suburban housing that made economic well-being easier and often helped to define what "economic well being" was. This is never more acutely revealed in the definitions that appear in the margins of the book. The terms used in these definitions seldom appear in the text, but they do serve to give a work that was self-consciously timely a strong historical context. For example, "Squires" are defined as:

> The most common *X* generation subgroup and the only subgroup given to
> breeding. *Squires* exist almost exclusively in couples and are recognizable
> by their frantic attempts to recreate a semblance of Eisenhower-era
> plentitude in their daily lives in the face of exorbitant housing prices and

two-job lifestyles. *Squires* tend to be continually exhausted from their

voraciously acquisitive pursuit of furniture and knickknacks. (*Generation*

X 135)

Squires are out of place in the Neo-liberal world, when in the "Eisenhower-era

plentitude" the world would have belonged to them. Their symbolic meaning as

remnants of a bygone era of production and consumerism becomes transparent. These

definitions also extend to the landscape and other cultural signifiers. "The Emperor's

New Mall" is "The Popular notion that shopping malls exist on the insides only and have

no exterior. The suspension visual belief engendered by this notion allows shoppers to

pretend that the large, cement blocks thrust into their environment do not, in fact, exist"

(*Generation X* 71). These definitions are often uncanny in their insightfulness and, in

the case of "The Emperor's New Mall," it makes the reader contemplate invisibilities we

prefer sometimes to ignore such as the overwhelming ugliness of contemporary suburban

architecture, but also the way the absurd has been ushered into our lives, usually by

market forces. In this sense, the act of defining forces the reader to ask questions about

the seemingly normal. Their main purpose, however, along with the sobering

environmental, economic, and lifestyle statistics at the end of the book is to ground the

book in a distinct interpretive framework. Main Street USA is dead, or at least relegated

to Disneyworld, and the mall and its inhabitants have taken over. We are not allowed to

forget that the world has changed, or assume that it has settled into some sort of new

"natural order of things."

When these definitions are coupled with the narrative of *Generation X*, we see a

novel about people trying to imagine something else for themselves. The "slackers" of

Generation X are possessed with the absurd notion that working harder for less money, something we are all expected to do in the new economic order, is somehow an unattractive prospect. Instead of diving headlong into the fray, Claire, Andy, and Dag are all attempting something else. As a device for finding something else the three protagonists tell stories to each other. The stories range from auto-biographical in nature about life in "veal fattening pens" (aka. office cubicles) to science fiction fantasies about the asteroid Texlahoma, where it's perpetually pre-oil shock 1974: "The year starting from which real wages in the U.S. never grew ever again" (40). Instead of seeing *Generation X,* both the novel and the generation named for the novel, as resisters or humanists attempting to re-imagine a new path out of an unpleasant situation, *Generation X* was often portrayed as a tale of media-savvy, lazy nogoodniks who just tell stories and engage with pop culture as a means to avoid responsibility. This reaction reveals a profound and pervasive disbelief in not only the idea of storytelling or cultural literacy as a worthwhile endeavor, but also the lack of ability to even recognize alternative models for contemporary living. It is the language of cable TV news pundits, who are of course the global voice of the well-informed, intelligent, and utterly devoid of imagination. In fact, Claire, Dag, and Andy all do endeavor to work, and at the end of the novel move to pre-NAFTA Mexico, which is described as a "newer, less-monied world, where a different food chain carves its host landscape I can scarcely comprehend. Once, I cross the border, for example, automobile models will mysteriously end around the Texlahoman year of 1974" (171). Notice, too, the stories create a new language to go with this new sense of community between the three protagonists. The escape at the end of the novel pre-dates anti-consumerism resistance movements like freegans and lessers,

two counter-culture movements built upon the idea of working less, consuming less, and living better by well over a decade.

Freegans and lesser are groups attempting to opt out of consumerism; the difference between them is the degree to which they do it. Lessers simply downsize their lives. They purposely consume less, which allows them to work less. Lessers are generally people who have been burned out of the mainstream values of working hard to maximize earning potential in order to maximize consumer pleasure. Freegans take it one step further, deciding to base their consumption on mostly free products, including food. Dumpster diving, particularly in the back of supermarkets, is a huge part of freeganism. These two movements put a spin on the idea of temperance movements, people who can but decide not to. Lessers and freegans pre-dated the 2008 economic downturn, but perhaps out there on the fringe we can see the foundation for downsizing consumption in the mainstream.

Of course, consumerism continues its hold on some, even in a major recession. An August 2011 *New York Times Magazine* article about dollar stores illustrates my point. In the great recession, the largest growing segment of dollar store customers is people earning $70,000. People described by dollar store industry insiders as, "They have money, feel as if they don't, or soon won't. This anxiety . . . creates a kind of fear-induced pleasure in selective bargain-hunting" (Hitt 20). The dollar store industry has responded by changing the business model to make sure that these individuals have something that is clean, neat and offers a sense of opulence a dollar at a time. It allows people to buy on the cheap in order to maintain their sense of well-being. What I am getting at here is that consumption is a moral and cultural choice. The desire to consume

is independent of the ability to do so. In this sense, we can see the slacker's personal

choice as a moral response to an economic system that does not hold their human

interests at heart, not just laziness.

Another harsh criticism of *Generation X* is the self-conscious media-savvy-ness

of its characters and its author. However, as Jonathon Oake points out in "*Reality Bites*

and *Generation X* as Spectator" there is a constant reading of Gen X culture as built upon

spectatorship. Gen X-ers are often portrayed as watchers, not doers. Again, I would like

to argue that his reveals a fundamental disbelief in the value of textual exploration. In

order to act, reasonable plans of action must be in place. In the absence of reasonable

plans of action, they must be imagined. Furthermore, Oake points out that it is utterly

unreasonable to think that the children of the media age could possess some mental state

of relating to the world devoid of media images. It as if, mentally, we are looking for

some pastoral new world unpopulated by the ideas of other people and popular culture.

This is an utterly unrealistic proposition. Further complicating things are the trappings of

copyright law. Stories that are re-told and re-shaped still owe a debt of gratitude to their

predecessors. Of course, now that debt also comes in the form of a large royalty check.

A folk tale that has been told and collectively owned for centuries can now be privatized

by the Disney legal team. There are two ways out of this. Coupland plays with

recognizable genre and certain aesthetic cultural signifiers while ignoring specifics.

Works like *Spaced* use satire and parody to keep the legal dogs at bay. Both techniques

silently acknowledge that the building blocks of our cultural literacy are owned and

controlled by outside entities. The very notion of a folk text, one that belongs to a people

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yet no one in particular, is an idea now outside of the mainstream of culture, in spite of the fact that it was once all of culture.

If our imaginations are owned by others, what can be said about our sense of time and place? Coupland reveals a pragmatic model for building a sense of place in his books and documentary *Souvenir of Canada*. In them, he looks for things that make him feel uniquely Canadian. In *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland discusses the wilderness of Canada, moose, the Baffin Shield, and the fact that Canadians have more clean water than anywhere on the planet. However, along with a natural landscape, Coupland gives us a manufactured landscape of Kraft Dinner, post-war suburban tract houses, hockey sticks, and bad low-budget Canadian game shows as markers of Canadian-ness. These things are a part of Canadian identity for Coupland, and similar things are a part of us. To imagine a virgin intellectual frontier without popular culture would be to imagine a place where everyone and most everything is dead. The choice we are faced with is annihilation or the inability to start completely free from the old order leaves many on the left paralyzed by irony.

A further paralyzing factor for *Generation X*, both the novel and the mass of humanity, is, as theologian Tom Beaudoin explains it, that Generation X came about at a time without a significant historical narrative to unify them (qtd. in Tate 5; Katerberg). Here, we see the raw unconscious appeal of Fukuyama's notion of "The End of History." After the fall of Communism, the first-world consumerist subject could see no obstacles on the horizon, only the mediation of the market forces in human affairs. The best possible system had won, and it's hard to question comprehensive victories. Even David Hasselhoff sounded great when he sang about "Looking for Freedom" as the Berlin Wall

was falling. However, like The Hoff's anthem of freedom and his light-up jacket, the passage of time has an unfortunate way of tarnishing supposed perfection. The brilliant documentary *Czech Dream* begins with a montage of news footage showing people standing in long lines, waiting for basic goods before the fall of communism. The film then jumps forward a decade, showing news footage of people standing in equally long lines, waiting for the grand opening of a Best Buy and other big box stores. The cognitive dissonance this image creates is utterly stunning. The question, "Are we really that much better off?" does not need to be asked. The film itself is the tale of public marketing brainwashing, culminating in over two thousand people coming to the grand opening of a store that does not exist, in spite of advertising slogans admonishing people not to come to the grand opening! Two decades after the ultimate triumph of Capitalism, some have attempted to ask, "Is that all there is?" These questions often lie on the fringes of mainstream society and culture. The students I work with are yearning to ask this and similar questions. However, the language to even formulate the questions is often illusive. The end of history haunts all of Coupland's novels. In the absence of a single unifying cause, we turn to the apocalypse to imagine something after perfection.

Two of the books mentioned here, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*, are apocalyptic tales, but they are hopeful apocalypses.   In one, the apocalypse is undone, and, in the other, a global environmental catastrophe is overcome.   These novels challenge mainstream representations of the apocalypse as the end by making them the grounds for bright new beginnings, also and importantly almost everyone survives as opposed to works like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or any of the Will Smith apocalyptic summer blockbusters. *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the tale of a group of friends

who grew up in the late 1970s in the suburbs of Vancouver, British Columbia. Karen, a teen girl starts having visions of a terrible future where everyone is dead inside. The night after she loses her virginity she lapses into a coma and does not wake up until the early 1990s. Karen fell asleep during 70's stagflation awoke into the world of Neo-liberal globalization and the rise of the information age of the 90's, and it is through her eyes that we can see a counter-factual history of globalization. Rather than being seduced by its cosmopolitan charms and techno trinkets, Karen's dissatisfaction is naked, and she sees it with a profound clarity. Coupland writes,

> Friends and family want to protect Karen and her innocence from the modern world, the changes that have occurred since her sleep began. Her innocence is the benchmark of their jadedness and corruption. The world is hard now. The world doesn't like simplicity or relaxation. (*Girlfriend* 140)

Karen simply does not buy into what has seduced everyone around her, and though her we see a world through the eyes that did not witness the incremental transformation of the world through Neo-liberalism. She is the voice of counterfactual history. Throughout the novel, she has a hard time mentioning this in polite conversation. She finally opens up in a disastrous Barbara-Walters-style make-'em-cry primetime interview, with a famous reporter named Gloria. Gloria asks,

> 'What's the biggest change in the world you've noticed so far, Karen? What strikes you as the biggest change?' . . . Karen speaks: 'You know what it is Gloria? It's how confident everybody comes across these days. Everybody looks like they're raring to go all the time. People look

confident even when they're buying chewing gum or walking the dog.' . . .

'You take these same confident-looking people and ask them a few key

questions and suddenly you realize that they're despairing about the

world—that confidence is a mask.' (*Girlfriend* 164-5)

Gloria desperately tries to change the subject, but the interview breaks down soon after.

Here Coupland is echoing the silence hegemony creates, and the uncomfortable-ness

created by hegemony. My students are often acutely aware of their dissatisfaction when I

ask them to critically explore our world, and are eager to explore the nature of their

dissatisfaction even when they lack the very language to do so. They know nothing else;

they are the children of Reagan. Everyone is too busy to notice what has been lost or too

in love with new technology to care. She, with her pre-Neo-liberal sensibilities, simply

imagined the future as something better. When she expresses this, her dissatisfaction

comes to be shared by both the other characters and the readers of the book.

It is after Karen awakes that other elements of her nightmares come true. People

simply start to randomly fall asleep and never wake up, volcanoes erupt, the weather goes

through rapid, extreme fluctuations, and newly un-staffed nuclear reactors melt down.

Nature has struck back, and except for the band of friends who grew up in the same

suburban Vancouver neighborhood, everyone is dead. In spite of this, the mentality of

Karen's friends is decidedly unchanged; they are just freer to indulge themselves, like in

Zombieland. They "go shopping," have money fights, have new car demolition derbies,

and have plenty of time to watch all the videotapes they want. They do this while largely

ignoring the decaying manmade and natural environment, not to mention all of the rotting

corpses around them, which they call "leakers" after an inside joke. The fact that

someone failed to return *Godfather III* to Blockbuster before they died has a far greater

impact on their lives than the fact that everyone but them is dead (Coupland, *Girlfriend*

258). Their world has changed, but they, and their way of relating to the world, has not.

Likewise, we too know about peak oil and the Texas sized mass of plastic floating in the

middle of the Pacific Ocean, but we do little about it (Hoshaw). We have a hard time

imagining a story where this, and other, seemingly insurmountable problems are fixed.

The spirit of the deceased Jared, who also left life before Neo-liberalism, reminds this

band of friends, the only living people on the post-apocalyptic Earth:

> [W]e were all so lucky living when and where we did. . . Childhood
>
> dragged on forever. Gasoline, cars, and potato chips were cheap and
>
> plenty. If we wanted to hop on a jet to fly anywhere on Earth, we could.
>
> We could believe in anything we wanted. Shit—we could wear a San
>
> Diego Chicken costume down Marine Drive while carrying a bloody
>
> rubber head of Richard Nixon if we wanted—and that would have been
>
> just *fine*. And we all went to school. And we weren't in jail. *Wow*. . . I
>
> remember being in a car and thinking of a road map of North America and
>
> knowing that if I choose, I could drive anywhere. All of that time and all
>
> of that tranquility, freedom and abundance. *Amazing*. The sweet and
>
> effortless nodule of freedom we all shared—it was a fine idea. It was, in
>
> its own unglamorous way, the goal of all of human history— the wars, the
>
> genius, the madness, the beauty and the grief—it was all to reach ever
>
> farther unclouded points on which to stand and view and think and evolve

and understand ever farther and farther and, well, farther. Progress is real.

Destiny is real. You are real. (*Girlfriend* 267)

Yet this hopeful statement is juxtaposed with the litany of anxieties presented throughout the novel and it is delivered *after* the apocalypse. Again, "the end of history" haunts Coupland as it haunts us. How can we divorce the good from the terrible if they are products of the same system? It is through these eyes that we as readers can see that working harder for less money in a degraded natural and manufactured environment, as many subjects of the new economy do, is both not an unavoidable consequence and somehow a good idea. We lose some fundamental human values, others lose far more than we do, but we have iPads now. Here we see a kind of doubling up of counterfactual history. The not so recent past is described after the fictional revolution, through which we can see what we have lost. A notion of continuous history is broken, and we can see the flaws in our own historical evolution.

Jared both heals their physical ailments and tells them that they can find a purpose and a way out of both their ruined landscape and ruined selves. In order to restore the earth and the lives of everyone on it, they must do two things. First, they must go back to the exact locations where they were when Karen woke up, and then they must spend the rest of their days not in the pursuit of pleasure, but rather they must spend their remaining days questioning and making people question. Without their profound dedication to the humanistic value of creative inquiry, everyone and everything dies. What a profound defense of the humanities at a time when they needed most and most often silenced. There are two other sacrifices that must be made. Karen must go back to sleep, a decision made more heartbreaking since it is after she awakes that the depth of the love

between her and Richard is shown. Richard, who waited for Karen, without substantial hope of her ever returning, only to have her return, must let her go again. And Jared, who professes how much he misses his friends over all of the years since he died so young, must dwell within the apocalyptic landscape for the next fifty years, completely and utterly alone. Jared, Karen, and Richard accept this without wavering; too much is at stake for them to think solely of themselves and to resist the pleasures the wreckage of global capitalism has to offer.

While *Girlfriend in a Coma* places philosophy at the center of human salvation, in *Generation X*, *JPod*, and *Generation A*, it is storytelling and play that builds a sense of community and a meaningful connection to the environment. In *Generation A*, the future of the world is at stake, but in *JPod* and *Generation X* the more modest goal is young people trying to find their place in the world. In both novels, storytelling is crucial to establishing a meaningful connection to other people and the world.

Generation A is a story about the importance of storytelling and the creation of a new community, a community that saves the world. Set in a near-future where bees have disappeared, vintage jars of honey sell at Sotheby's for tens of thousands, jet-travel is a luxury for the super rich, tall weeds spring up from the cracks in the interstates, and telecommunications in the US are spotty due to unpaid bills to the Chinese, *Generation A* sounds at first like typical apocalyptic fare. However, change begins as five random strangers, scattered all over the world, are stung by bees. Moments after their stings are reported, U.S. Center for Disease Control and UN teams, working in such close tandem with the pharmaceutical industry that one cannot see the line of demarcation from government, non-governing organization, and private industry, descend from helicopters

to whisk them into isolation chambers. This is so the scientists can see just what it was about them that seemed so attractive to five of the few remaining bees in the world. These five strangers, sometimes referred to as "Wonka Children" because their bee sting turns out to be a "golden ticket" of sorts, ar: Harj from Sri Lanka, Zach from Iowa, Julien from Paris, Samantha from New Zealand, and Diana from Canada. They all spend over a month in a setting designed to be as neutral as possible. This means no trade logos, and it seriously freaks Zach out. Here Coupland is reminding us that branding is an essential part of our sense of self. For fall 2010, the common freshman reader at the university where I teach was *A Journal for Jordan* by Dana Canedy. This tale of aftermath of the death of her fiancé and father of her child as a soldier in the Iraq War is both an intentional rumination on the human cost of war and unintentionally the importance of branding in making up our sense of self and memories of others. In the attempt to faithfully remember the father of her child, Canedy uses brand names like McDonalds, *The New York Times*, Salem Menthols, etc. to give the reader, and her infant son, a sense of the person lost, even in the direst of circumstances (29; 5; 17). In the book, brands become an inextricable part of the intimate life of a family. Unlike Zach, I found the presence and importance of brands throughout the text strange; my colleagues generally did not notice. By re-writing a piece of the world without logos and brands, Coupland is forcing us to be aware of their importance by illustrating the surreal-ness of their absence.

The uniqueness of the experience in the isolation chamber, as well as fall-out from becoming a global celebrity by accident, forces first Harj and then the others to decide they need to seek each other out.   They do, with the help of one of the scientists who studied them in isolation. They are jetted off to an Inuit island off the coast of

Alaska. Holed in a cabin, they are given one task, to tell stories to one another, and so they do. The stories themselves are told in distinct voices, as the book is narrated by the five protagonists. Also, sometimes one protagonist's chapter contains another person's story. The effect is to collapse the subject position of the individual narrators and the creation of a new, diverse global communal voice. Stories begin to overlap, plot lines are shared, names like Coffinshark are shared between Goth Superheros and 90's Heavy Metal bands on a reunion tour. The five protagonists grow closer together as they sit around and tell their stories. Eventually, one voice takes over. However, there are some obstacles to the creation of a new storytelling community. Julien, the World of Warcraft-playing sci-fi buff, has been so inundated by popular culture that he has great difficulty inventing his own stories. This is reminiscent of anyone who has watched a child go into meltdown as their attempt to use their Buzz Lightyear action figure to re-create the exact storyline of *Toy Story* is thwarted for some reason.

However, there is another threat to the creation of this new community. In the world of *Generation A*, a new drug called Solon is a global phenomenon, and it is threatening both the Inuit community and the protagonists. Solon is an anti-anxiety drug. Its purpose and name is highly reminiscent of one of our own lifestyle drugs. Solon has two effects upon people. First, it prevents people from worrying about the future. Second, it removes the need for human companionship. As described in earlier chapters, the values inherent in privatization leaves us anxious and alone, and it's easy to imagine that if we could create such a drug, we would use it enthusiastically. When we read this novel in class, my students had the strongest reaction Solon. The consensus was that the plausibility of Solon was uncanny. The possibility of a friction-free but not lonely life

was deemed to be a goal at this moment in history. The Inuits resist the intrusion of Solon into their community with violence, and our class discussion allowed for a degree of understanding about the anti-Solon violence in this part of the novel.

Pharmaceuticals that influence behavior and mood are a part of life for this generation. The possibility that a drug could also change our social contract is entirely plausible. Psychologists Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz, in their book *The Lonely American*, report that patients frequently "look to us for an expert's pronouncement that they must end all contact" with aging parents or difficult siblings (156). They also discuss how psychologists report an explosion of families looking for official letters to be sent to college residence life offices explaining that their college-age child simply must have a single dorm room if they are to remain psychologically healthy (85). These bits of information are juxtaposed with copious studies that illustrate just how psychologically damaging loneliness is in spite of the public perception that it is both virtuous and healthy. The Inuits know that Solon will destroy their way of life and, as a result, they execute pushers and purposely cause a smuggler's plane to crash.

By the end of the novel, it is revealed that Solon's manufacturing process is what killed almost all of the bees. Furthermore, the five people stung by the bees were chosen by the bees because they are immune to the effects of Solon. They were chosen by the pharmaceutical company for two other reasons. Through cloning of their DNA, both Solon and an anti-Solon can be made replicating their brain matter. They are asked to tell stories because, through the sharing of stories, their brains become active and closer. They grow together; the very material stuff of their being changes through storytelling. At the very end, the protagonists learn that they were taken to the remote island not for

research purposes, but because the scientist who, created Solon, brought them there for nefarious reasons. He became addicted to Solon and arranged the continued manufacture of Solon by suppressing the negative ecological effects of Solon. His goal was to eat the brains of the five protagonists for the ultimate Solon high. The protagonists also learn that somewhere in a giant warehouse parts of their brain are growing on a massive scale. The new Solon and anti-Solon are their cloned brain cells. Their cloned brain cells are then sliced and dried and consumed by people all over the world. While in isolation, they ate cloned parts of each other's brains. Ultimately, everyone who consumes this new made from cloned brains Solon or anti-Solon becomes one with the five members of Generation A. And with this, the world has slowly begun to heal itself. With the death of the drug that keeps people from worrying about the future, the future itself is reborn. These five individuals become the basis for the next step in human evolution. Through storytelling and human bonding, the apocalypse is thwarted. At the end of the novel, the first active bee hive since the mass extinction had been found.

As Žižek points out, we can only imagine the apocalypse at the cost of the utopia. It was not always this way. Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backwards* was once and by far the biggest selling novel in US history. *Looking Backwards* was so popular that it spawned reading groups and political parties. We now do not write or film utopias. However, Coupland perhaps has given us something far more revolutionary than just a narrative of a utopia, rather *Generation A* is the story of the recovery from the apocalypse and how utopia is created.

At the end of the novel, my students revolted. While many reported that they still liked the novel, a strong contingent within the class reported throwing the book against

the wall. They wrote screeds in their journals about the stupid implausibility of the ending. The near-apocalyptic premise at the beginning of the book was instantly believable and recognizable. We even discussed newspaper articles about the actual massive bee deaths that were occurring around the world. The end of oil and unpaid debts to the Chinese were all plausible, as they are ideas constantly on the fringes of the popular imagination. Likewise, an awareness of the growing security state makes the notion that a fleet of military helicopters could be anywhere in about twenty minutes, as happens when the five protagonists are stung, is completely plausible. However, the thought that we could solve a problem and get out of danger through gradual yet wild circumstances, that really pissed some people off. The apocalypse is ideologically recognizable; the solution to a global problem is not. A lot of what I am discussing in this chapter is about texts that are recognizable and unrecognizable at the same time. Here the hegemony of privatization reveals itself. We cannot start over after the end of history, or so we think.

A big component to the privatized world is the thought that we are on our own, and solely responsible for ourselves. The end of *Generation A* is hard to swallow because a group of people save themselves and start the process of saving the world. What's more recognizable is the idea that we have to go to work. The issue of work and the sin of "slacking" is not as much of a problem in *JPod* as it is in *Generation X*. Coupland explores the lives and bonds of co-workers. Yes, these employees take time to play games and tell stories, but they have jobs, they meet goals, they produce. Also in *JPod*, Coupland lessens his vitriolic rhetoric towards baby boomers. Yes, the main character Ethan's parents are vapid and eternally adolescent, but Coupland decides not to

condemn them, even when mom calls Ethan to help her hide the dead body of a low-level

dealer who threatened to reveal her basement pot farm or when dad wants dating tips so

he can cheat on Ethan's mother. In this novel, unlike *Generation X*, the boomers are not

perpetuators of the problem as much as they are victims of it. Ethan's mom grows pot in

the basement, which she sells to biker gangs to make ends meet. His dad used to be an

engineer; now he is a movie extra with a penchant for ballroom dancing. Here mom and

dad are absurd characters, refugees from a different time and place, even if they still

inhabit the home Ethan grew up in. In the *JPod* television series, the style of Ethan's

childhood home and his parent's car are stuck in the 70's, further reinforcing their status

as relics. Globalization has forever altered their lives, and they stumble through the

world after cradle-to-grave security. The institutions people have traditionally used to

mediate their lives and create community such as religion, family, and profession are

damaged, non-existent, or cannot be trusted. British criminologist Jock Young refers to

this condition as "The Vertigo of Late Modernity" in a book of the same name. Caught

between market values that prize radical individualization and market values that devalue

the tools individuals traditionally used to construct their sense of themselves, the citizens

of late modernity drown in a pool of anxiety driven resentment politics. Coupland

recognizes the need for building blocks of identity and his characters try to build them

upon the fly.

The twenty-somethings of *Generation X* are uprooted and wandering, while the

characters of *JPod* are gore specialists working at a video game software company, but

uprooted in their own way. A Y2K computer glitch created the *JPod* team out of

everyone with a last name that begins with "J" and placed them in a basement office of a

modern corporate campus. The act of being thrown together illustrates the splits of power and vulnerability, order and chaos, meritocracy and whatever the hell it is that determines success in the bureaucracies of global capitalism. Within this manufactured environment, stories and games become the foundation of a community and it is not just a human community. Artificial intelligence and human avatars become members as well, resulting in a deep sense of place. They tell stories, fill out Dungeons and Dragons character profiles for themselves, and search for the one incorrect digit in the first million digits of pi. These stories and challenges make up part of the book as to other textual elements from their environment, such as the nutrition information from a box of ramen noodles or a bag of Fritos. By placing them prominently in the novel their environment becomes our environment and we are invited to play their games too. The novel re-negotiates the boundary of narrative and audience. At the end of *JPod*, just like at the end of *Generation X*, *Generation A*, *Microserfs, Miss Wyoming, Girlfriend in a Coma,* and *All Families are Psychotic*, the community inherited at the beginning of the novel or created within the novel is preserved.

The very notion of community is important for resisting the trappings of privatization. As Olds and Schwartz point out, "The heroic outsider thrives in states of aloneness; only losers feel lonely" (11). For them loneliness is not the problem with no name, rather it's the problem their patients dare not speak of even in therapy, an intimate environment where people openly discuss their sexual dysfunctions (4-6). Earlier in this project, we discussed the bizarre behavior a lack of community creates: anxiety, sexting, intolerance of others, distorted self-image, etc. We also discussed the ways in which culture and institutions reinforce this feeling of isolation, be it the texts discussed so far

or McMansion design, or the need for visibly intrusive security in public places. In the summer of 2011, a group of radical Libertarians have proposed a project for floating islands in international waters where they can finally be free from the constraints that come from living with other human beings, seriously. One of the founders of Paypal has put up over a million dollars towards the idea (Weigel; Pace). Bill McKibben points out brilliantly the gulf between our reinforced values and our very human needs when he asks,

> Why do people so often look back on their college days as the best years
> of their lives? Usually, it's not because their classes were so fascinating.
> More important is the fact that they lived more closely and intensely in a
> community than ever before or since (college is the four years in an
> American life when we live roughly as we've evolved to live). (*Deep* 109)

As much as us professorial types like to think that it's our clever lesson plans that make this so, McKibben is right, and sometimes that profound bond of interpretive community in the classroom is palatable. And when it's over, its absence is felt. I have had students get misty-eyed on the last day of the semester, and no, it's not because they were getting a grade they didn't like. We want one thing, but need another. Texts about community help us re-learn the basics.

This is not to say that all texts dealing with community are necessarily resistant to the values of privatization. There are texts which conform to the values of narcissism, the lack of empathy for others, and the espousing of personal anxiety discussed in previous chapters, even as they feature ensemble casts acting like friends. Adam Sternbergh in his essay "Era of Jokeless Comedy," discusses this trend in "bromance" comedy films. The

"joke" of the jokeless comedy is that the characters are themselves stuck in a painful or humiliating situation. Often this situation is revealed through the title of the film, like *The Hangover* and *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. Sternbergh describes the *Hangover II* as torture porn with a laugh track. While these films lack the isolation of Robert Langdon roaming the museums of *The Da Vinci Code* alone, or the inner dialogue of *Fight Club*, there is still a profound lack of empathy and a desire to see people getting hurt.

Likewise, the *Jackass* TV and film franchise not only features people getting hurt, but more time is spent showing the friends of those people laughing at them before and after the painful event. A careful viewing of *Jackass* reveals that, often times, the making of *Jackass* becomes its own subject for comedy, as the camera people are seen laughing at the action. Make no mistake, the men of *Jackass* do indeed care for one another, and the making of *Jackass* is revealed as a group effort. We are afforded a view of the kinship between them and that accounts for the appeal of the show. There are plenty of clips on *YouTube* of people getting hurt; people have a profound emotional bond with the boys of *Jackass*.

Similarly, an infotainment show like *The View* or *Fox NFL Sunday* features jocularity as a focus point for the appeal of the show. *Fox NFL Sunday*, in particular, strives to make a warm relationship between presenters a crucial element of the show. These are, of course, commercial programs, often with heavy product placement tie-ins. They provide entertainment and information, but in reality are selling at every moment. The tremendous international success of the BBC series *Top Gear* is another example. Three hundred and fifty million people in over 170 countries watch the UK version of *Top Gear* every week (Kroft). Because it's a BBC show, *Top Gear* is supposed to be

non-commercial. However, the show sells the cars being driven on it, with cinematic

mise-en-scene like slow motions shots of glistening water trickling over a Jaguar logo,

and it also sells the presenters themselves. The interpersonal relationships between the

three presenters make the show better than their U.S. and Australian counterparts. For

these shows, cool cars, cool people, witty banter about Terry Bradshaw's bald head, and a

hearty chuckle and pat on the back when it's all over draw the viewer in. While

watching, it is easy to forget about the Eleanor Rigby's of the world, sitting alone, quietly

by the TV, watching a show where the hosts seem to be friends, in effect having their

own loneliness sold back to them.

The appeal of the simulacra community has a profound effect upon the viewing

public. The outpouring of grief, both in the media and in my classroom, after the death of

Jackass's Ryan Dunn is proof of the profound bond that can be created through the

media. It is possible, then, to have a text which appeals to loneliness while reinforcing

the values that create the condition of being lonely. Either way, the virtual human is

being substituted for the physical human body. This virtual human cannot resist one's

desires; the virtual human is designed to fulfill desire and reinforce the ideology that

forms desire. It therefore takes a very keen critical eye to both create and find texts that

somehow resist privatization's promises of pleasure. The profound emotional bond,

however, can still exist in a text that does. Again, my focus here is on the difference

between a text that reinforces the values of privatization, versus texts that challenge those

values.

Actors from the BBC series *Spaced* have discussed in interviews the "tremendous

good will" still shown to them as people because of the roles they played on the show

(*Skip*). *Spaced* originally appeared on BBC Channel 4 from 1999 to 2001. It is primarily

the tale of two people, Tim and Daisy, as they first try to find a place to live, and then

learn to live with each other and the inhabitants of their building. The series begins

believably enough as both Tim and Daisy find themselves out of a relationship and out of

a place to live in a cosmopolitan but expensive city, desperate for an affordable flat they

find themselves commiserating in a coffee shop. It is there that they see an ad for a very

affordable place with a catch, it's for couples only. Tim and Daisy quickly decide to

construct an elaborate ruse to appear to be a couple. Indeed, much like the astronaut who

found a genie or some castaways on a desert island, this is a typically absurd sitcom

premise. The genre lends itself to fantastically banal "ordinary life" with twist-type tales.

Spaced is self-reflexive and makes the most out of what the sit-com genre has to offer.

Tim and Daisy do some decidedly normal things while living together. They go

to work, lose jobs, find jobs, go in the dole, go out to a rave, get in scrapes with their ex-

lovers, smoke pot, play video games, and watch *Star Wars*. They also rescue their dog

from an animal testing lab with a clandestine raid, win in an underground robot fighting

league, and fend off some young hooligans by coaxing them into a fake gunfight while

using only their outstretched fingers for weapons. Director Edgar Wright brings to this a

cinematography and editing style designed, as he says, to make their lives "look big"

even on the small screen. Wright abandons the standard fourth wall and fixed camera of

the sitcom genre in favor of odd camera angles, moving camera, and fast-paced editing, a

style that has since become a signature. All of this does create the effect of making their

sometimes ordinary lives seem grandiose. Throughout this project, I have argued that

media has replaced the social. Wright's signature style speaks to this condition, and

attempts to put his characters back into a community for those whose imaginations have been sculpted by media images.

This was done with another keen purpose in mind. Simon Pegg, who played Tim, and Jessica Hynes, who played Daisy, wrote the script so that it was dripping full of pop-culture references. Here, life really is like it is in the movies. Wright explains that the characters Pegg and Hynes have created people for whom, "Their lives are so governed by pop culture and media stuff. They can only think in these [pop culture] terms" (*Skip*). Much like the works of Douglas Coupland discussed earlier in the chapter, *Spaced* features people somehow interacting with the culture that has been created for them. They live in pop culture created and distributed by corporations, but rather than passively absorb they interact with it, providing a kind of model for turning an abstract culture created by a corporate environment under circumstances far removed from the users into a kind of folk culture, owned by its users as much as it is by the copyright holder.

However, the most important element of *Spaced* as an anti-privatization text is the fact that *Spaced* primarily portrays people learning to live with one another, not getting everything that they want but are quite happy nonetheless. The title of the series plays on the sci-fi pop culture references peppered throughout the show, but also serves as a constant reminder of the limitations of the living arrangement. Tim and Daisy share a building with some exocentric people. Upstairs is the landlady Marsha, who is permanently smashed on red wine and speaks with a funny accent. Downstairs lives Brian, the rather eccentric starving artist. Even their friends are weird: the condescending fashion obsessed Twist, Mike the militarily obsessed and socially awkward best friend, and Tyres the bike messenger a raver with a heart of gold and a brain severely damaged

by recreational drug use. These people are strange, physically un-attractive, charming, and always around.

The series is full of sight gags. One that illustrates my point occurs in the first season when Tim and Daisy, still maintaining the ruse that they are a couple, realize that they need to make it seem like they are having intercourse or else landlady Marsha might suspect they are in violation of their agreement. The scene involves Tim staring towards the camera with a game controller in his hand. He has the blank face of a gamer lost in deep concentration. He is illuminated by a TV screen. Daisy is standing on a bed jumping up and down. Both intermittently, and rather dispassionately, make grunting and moaning noises ("Gatherings"). The scene is only a few seconds long, but it illustrates much about the dynamic of the show. Their living arrangement dictates and disrupts part of their private lives. They are both aware that their intimate secrets are open secrets upstairs and downstairs in 23 Meteor Street. Brian, the eccentric downstairs painter, knows they are not really a couple, understanding their private lives in his own way. This fact then disrupts the routine of their private lives, as they have to take time out of their downtime, commonly referred to by some as "me time," in order to tend to a limitation of their living arrangement. This is one of the many compromises that dictates the series as a whole, as well as drives the action for the individual episodes. Tim and Daisy both spend time unemployed and wondering how they are going to make their share of the rent. Mike and Brian promise to take care of Colin, the dog, when Tim and Daisy are both out, they fail. Tim accidentally mistakes Daisy's special package of herbs and spices for his weed, mild peril and hilarity ensue. Brian's checkered artistic past leads to some rather boring and awkward nights out. Twist really isn't a very good

friend. And Marsha is always knocking on the door during the most inopportune times.

In spite of these annoyances, everyone is rather happy and the bonds between them grow

stronger as the series progresses. Predictably, Tim and Daisy fall in love as the series

progresses. They don't understand this, but their love becomes clear to the audience.

Complicating things is the fact that Tim has a girlfriend. Pegg and Hynes decided,

against convention, to make sure that Tim's girlfriend is a very cool, very likable

character.   The actress who portrayed Sophie remarked that the measure of their success

was the comments people would leave on the web site expressing their confusion. Fans

of the show want Tim and Daisy to end up together and they wanted to hate Sophie for

keeping them apart but they couldn't. Throughout the series, the characters of *Spaced*

don't always get what they want, but the end up with what they need.

Being a typically British TV series, *Spaced* ran for only two seasons of seven

episodes. Still, a very profound emotional reaction was created in its 14 episodes. The

new family that is created in *Spaced* is threatened by the end of Season 2. Sophie has to

leave London for a job in Seattle, yet another compromise. At the same time, Marsha

discovers Tim and Daisy's ruse. She feels hurt by their betrayal as she came to love and

trust them. She threatens to sell the house, meaning that at the moment Tim and Daisy

were free to be together, everything was being torn apart. Even Colin, the dog, tried

living with a new owner. The last episode of the series begins with, "They say the family

of the twenty-first century is made up of friends, not relatives" ("Leaves"). We know,

without a doubt, that all along, the series has been about the creation of community, of

learning to get along together. As an audience member we see the distress created by the

threat to their lives together. The show is funny, yes, but a sense of community is the

show's appeal.

It has been a decade since the airing of the final episode of *Spaced*, and fans still

clamor for a third season. The show has taken on a legendary cult status that has become

a global phenomenon. Part of the legend of *Spaced* is the fact that the creators of *Spaced*

are themselves close friends. Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, who played Tim and Mike

respectively, are best friends in real life, meeting while working at a Mexican restaurant

(*Skip*; "Simon Pegg"). Pegg, Hynes, Wright, and other actors on the show had a long

history of working together before *Spaced* (*Skip*). Edgar Wright is convinced that the

close relationships between writers and cast members helped aid the quality of the show

(*Skip*). In an interview, Julia Deakin, who played Marsha the landlady, discussed the

awkwardness of going to a *Spaced* convention. She explains that people want to meet

Marsha, a character she has created, while people meeting Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes

are essentially meeting Tim and Daisy (*Skip*). The sense of community that pervades the

Spaced phenomenon is profound.

Spaced is not a perfect, radical utopian text. It does, however, illustrate that a

series with a different set of values can generate a passionate following. Juxtaposed with

the mean-spirited narcissism of American counterparts like *Seinfeld* or the attractive

people who barely work yet have a fabulous apartment like on *Friends*, we see *Spaced* as

something distinctly different. In *Seinfeld*, human imperfection is the object of scorn and

humor. Entire episodes are dedicated to things like the unattractive hands of Jerry's

temporary girlfriend ("Bizarro"). Likewise, on *Friends*, the roommates live a relatively

charmed life, and when things went mildly wrong, they are treated as aberrations to the

way life should be. On *Spaced*, aberrations were the very stuff of life, and the ability to negotiate one's way through these troubles, with help from friends, can lead to a good life.

The problem facing people at this moment in history is how to construct a decent, healthy, and moral life out of the shabby tools provided for them. The texts of privatization reinforce negative values and provide individuals with poor tools to judge and understand their lives. One has to look for alternative models, and as the novels of Douglas Coupland and *Spaced* reveal, the alternatives often contain remnants of global capitalism as found by young people. In the novels of Stewart O'Nan, the working class protagonists search for meaning in a commodified American landscape. They work at Red Lobster and drive a Wonder Bread Truck. In general, they inhabit a landscape of strip malls. They drive Chevys, Dodges, and Fords, and these mass-produced items provide O'Nan's characters with tools to find their way. His novels are realistic and compassionate while being dramatic. With a few notable exceptions, his protagonists are normal middle or working class U.S. citizens with typical mainstream tastes. However, this does not prohibit them from finding themselves, and it does not prohibit the novels from being humanistic or politically aware.

Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the novella, *Last Night at the Lobster*. *Last Night at the Lobster* is the tale of Manny DeLeon trying to manage a complicated personal life and a Red Lobster on its last day of being open. In the culinary world, Red Lobster epitomizes faux-premium suburban dining. The dining experience barely masks the cheapness of the pre-processed food and the simulacra sea-side décor, but then again, who doesn't love a good cheddar biscuit? The interesting thing about

Manny's position as manager is how little he actually manages the restaurant. One would expect Manny, as manager, to be the person who makes decisions, effectively managing the environment. Manny, however, merely implements policy dictated by corporate. Corporate has drawn an X through the franchise and on the last day, Manny must protect corporate interests, maintain the brand and keep the soon to be unemployed staff from walking off with the liquor bottles behind the bar. Capital has moved on, the strip mall is dying, and there is honestly no good reason why somebody deemed unnecessary by corporate, in spite of their contributions to the restaurant, should not walk right out the back door with the fiberglass marlin hanging on the way to the bathrooms. However, Manny maintains corporate policy to the very end, even when he is aware that the fiberglass marlin might very well end up in the trash. O'Nan stated that he studied Red Lobster corporate policies for full year before writing a 146-page novella. Furthermore, he says that there have been offers to make *Last Night at the Lobster* into a film, and he gauges whether or not the people wanting to the film "get" the Manny character by whether or not the potential producers want him to steal the fiberglass marlin by the end of the film. Those who want him to steal the marlin set themselves up for rejection ("Carnegie"). This says much about O'Nan's awareness of landscape, even one as plastic and as manufactured as a corporate chain restaurant. The Red Lobster in the novel is the kind of place most of us would pass by without thinking, the restaurant of last resort if we could not reasonably get to a newer, more attractive option. Even Manny is moving on to an Olive Garden, no less attractive for its faux old-world charms. His struggle is how to live in a fake environment where an organization far removed from his immediate reality hands down directives that shape his environment. At times, Manny sacrifices his own

comfort and dignity to maintain the quality of Red Lobster's brand. O'Nan illustrates a dilemma many face in the era of Neo-liberalism, how to maintain a sense of the dignity of work, when working in a situation that is devalued. Coupland, in *Generation X*, hits the reader with the idea of the McJob, "low-pay, low- prestige, low-dignity, low benefit, no-future job in the service sector" (*Generation X*). McJob has since made it into the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's, in spite of a massive lobbying effort by the McDonalds Corporation to keep it out ("McDonald's Anger"; "McDonald's Seeks"). One can be just some underpaid worker in a situation that takes all of the skill and creativity out of work, yet still having a very human need for dignity.

My career as an adjunct began with a new faculty orientation where the Dean addressed us by saying, "We can't pay you much, but you do get the prestige of saying you are a college professor!" Checking the enrollment every few hours in the week before my classes begin to see if I will have enough or any work for the next few months is far from prestigious or even remotely dignified. Manny too is an authority figure without prestige. In *The Names of the Dead*, the protagonist Larry Markham is a Vietnam Vet who drives a Wonder Bread truck. He is a veteran of the war most wish to forget, driving around representing a brand that at best has become retro kitsch. Still, there is a quiet dignity for both men.

This dynamic extends to public servants as well. In *The Night Country*, Officer Brooks is a police officer in a changing New England town. Where Manny is being displaced by decay, Brooks is being displaced by growth. As his town is growing Officer Brooks is in danger of being taxed out of the very community he serves. All of these characters are grounded in their environment by their income. They cannot purchase

their way to freedom or restart their lives, they must learn to live within, to move forward without the imperative of newness. They struggle with our Neo-liberal imperatives of self-reliance and individuality. Their lives are small lives, and in an O'Nan novel, the way someone drives or manages the money in their wallet is a window into the state of their souls.

To return for a second to *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, we see the dynamic of a highly individualistic society and that same society that devalues the very items people would use to define themselves. The banal suburban landscapes, menial labor, and often tenuous human relationships in O'Nan's novels are products of a time and a place that is fluid. His characters make a place for themselves in this fluidity. The value of nothing is assured in this world, yet one must make due. Of course, young people find themselves not only in this environment but acutely aware of their condition, and before I end I would like to spend some time discussing my adventures addressing this issue in the classroom.

My students are hungry to answer questions they cannot quite come to terms with asking. To be young is to be burdened with an extra-special identity crisis. After all, a young person as they mature must become someone. In a world where we all must become someone, they start from nothing. The keys of adulthood are thrown at them, and as they approach this magical moment when they are about to truly begin their lives, they often do so with an acute awareness of just how flimsy the adult world truly is.

Throughout this project, I have been discussing the ways in which privatization, with its promises of a very particular brand of consumerist pleasure, re-shapes our narratives and our ways of understanding our world. We've been programmed towards

the negative. This lends the possibility for an increase in extremism but also the dissatisfaction necessary for change is vital too. I started quite a while back by mentioning that my students are deeply aware that there is something seriously wrong and there is a palatable hunger in the room when the idea that something has gone wrong is discussed, but there is a palatable lack of language to even articulate the proper questions for understanding the problem. During the end of the reign of Gadhafi in Libya, as with the uprising in Egypt, there was a strange inability in the U.S. media to articulate what exactly was happening. Long before the surrender, "experts" were loudly and openly wondering what will replace the devil we know. CNN even picked up a statement by a Gadhafi government official warning that chaos will ensue of the current regime fails, and ran it as a headline on its web page for most of the day on August 21st 2011 ("Front Page"). To take a statement of a mouthpiece for a brutal dictatorship as a factual expression of Global North fears is an expression of just how impoverished the mainstream imagination has become. We need to pay fervent attention to new tales wherever we may find them.

If consumerism has defined the good life as neat, clean, and easy, change and resistance might very well be unpleasant. Tales or political outcomes might not be positive. As chronicled in the brilliant documentary *Until the Light Takes Us*, the emergence of the Black Metal scene in Scandinavia is an example of deep dissatisfaction towards hegemony catalyzing new cultural expression. As interpreted in Dominic Fox's *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria*, Black Metal is a movement that rather purposely positions itself away from consumerist hegemony. If consumerism has hijacked the predominant idea of pleasure, then different

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models of aesthetic experiences must be pursued in order to comprehend some new understandings of experience. Black Metal is a genre of music intended to be unpleasant. Similarly, Japan has a vibrant noise scene and Drone is also an international underground phenomenon. All cannot be described as enjoyable listening experiences. Black Metal made news when burning historic churches became en vogue. Black Metal has also spawned suicides, serious rumors of cannibalism and murder, and that was just amongst the members of the band Mayhem.

Varg Vikernes, the member of Mayhem who murdered the band member who may or may not have eaten the brain of the member of Mayhem who committed suicide and who probably participated in a few church burnings himself, is interviewed in *Until the Light Takes Us*. Watching the interview, one is struck by how calm and sensible this out-of-control death rocker comes across. In the film, Vikernes speaks eloquently about the way globalization re-negotiates society, about colonial legacies, and about the environment. He speaks of how his life and environment changed when a McDonalds opened up in the town where he grew up, ruining everything. He confesses to his first criminal act being shooting out the windows of the McDonalds with a BB gun. I mention this not to glorify violence and murder. I am more than willing to make a public statement against cannibalism, but throughout this project I have been discussing the limitations privatization has put on public life. Therefore, we have to learn to look for the spaces where the hegemony of Neo-liberalism cannot reach. With this in mind, we can see him as acting like the Inuits in *Generation A*, fighting to preserve a way of life and a degree of sovereignty from global capitalism. Vikernes has also been accused of

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dabbling in neo-Nazism. Change is often not attractive, but we must learn to understand how the ugliness going on in our world is deeply connected to mainstream values.

Likewise, within these spaces we have to do serious work uncovering the motivations and the meaning of change we prefer not to believe in. One example of an unpleasant act of resistance whose motives are difficult to articulate are the London riots of August 2011. Youths, so deeply disenfranchised from the whole of society that the rule of law no longer need be heeded, took to the streets after the death of a local man at the hands of police. Again, the media experts hashed over what issues of race, economics, and wanton criminality played a role in the riots. For some, the riots represent an era where the notion of society has been devalued so much that basic understandings of civility or commonality have eroded. After all, Margaret Thatcher once said, "There is no such thing as society, but only individuals" (qtd in Harvey, *Brief History* 82). Decades after her transformative reign gave Neo-liberalism to the UK, these words have never rung more true.

One of my regrets about this project is the way I have had to limit the focus on citizens of the Global North, and more particularly on the relatively comfortable young people of North America. In the Global South, some acts of very serious struggle are taking place, but those struggles are shown as negative if they are not outright ignored. The hegemony of Neo-liberalism allows for the location of any sort of resistance or aberration to be far outside of "normal" experience. For that purpose, I want to take a moment to discuss a riot that took place close to home.

On July 31, 2011 in the newly re-branded neighborhood of Eastside, a group of approximately 100 teenagers left a church picnic and descended upon a McDonalds,

Trader Joe's, and a new Target store that had just opened. All told, this was a minor disturbance; the local news reported that nothing was stolen. The perpetrators took nothing; instead, they messed up shelves and yelled threats to everyone in their proximity. Local news, however, reported on the disturbance and referred to these youths as "troublemakers." Previous stories about the new Target hailed it as a key part in the continued rebirth of Pittsburgh, and in particular the neighborhood where the store is situated. This portrayal of the new Target as an unquestioned good added to the sense of horror at what happened. For those creating the disturbance, however, a different narrative takes shape.

These teens undoubtedly did not get McJobs at the store, and probably could not afford to shop there, or at any of the stores in the new development bordering their own community, East Liberty. If anything, I am sure going to this store means they are monitored by security guards and reminded again and again about all they cannot have. Jock Young points out that all too often the poor are not disenfranchised from the mainstream objects of desire. They are subjects to the same advertisement and are heavily invested in the same brand worshiping value systems, they just don't have the credit rating that allows them to splurge. In the absence of a counter-narrative, attacking retail establishments, especially prestigious retail establishments, reveals a value system.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson refers to spaces like the Eastside Target as a "cosmopolitan canopy." A cosmopolitan canopy is a space where people of varying backgrounds come together. These places are usually designed and created for the sake of various forms of stylish commerce. Being as they are places where people of different backgrounds come together "makes them the closest thing we have today to a commons;

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for teens, especially poorer teens, the cosmopolitan canopy represents society and authority in the way that a state house or bank headquarters ought to but doesn't" (Wasik 112). Anderson's theory suggests these teens are onto something most subjects of Neoliberalism tend to miss, after all the state house and bank headquarters usually act in service of cosmopolitan canopies, not the other way around. The local, run-down stores that have been in business for years nearby were not touched. The violence was not completely senseless and random; however, the hegemony of privatization does not allow this part of the story to be told.

However, this hegemony does work to re-define and re-shape understandings, even of geography. Developers have taken to call parts of the area of the riots "Eastside" in an attempt to dissociate the location from its location. In my city, local Democrats totter on about the new urban renaissance that provides them with cool places to shop and dream where they can put more bike lanes and streetscape improvements over micro-brewed beers. Meanwhile nearby citizens worry about basic needs of employment, food, shelter, personal safety, and access to basic services. At the same time Pittsburgh was named America's most livable city for its amenities like the ones just mentioned, a University of Pittsburgh study came to the conclusion that, for African-Americans, Pittsburgh is one of the most difficult cities in which to maintain one's well being (Dyer). This truth however, does not make it to billboards around town and the national media.

In the face of hegemony we are confronted with the question of what one has to lose through disobedience. In its own way, the far-right Tea Party movement is a kind of remnant of consumer dissatisfaction. Their obsession with lowering taxes is founded on the consumerist imperative that, no matter how much one spends, one is never satisfied.

The system creates its own decay. Even if a Levi's commercial depicts rioting as chic and fashionable.

Whatever happens after the end of history might not be pleasant and, as I hope I have illustrated, it will perhaps be unrecognizable from our current way of seeing and understanding the world. The current popular mythology is deeply imbued with the values of consumerism. Anti-privatized anti-consumerist texts that make to mass distribution that can be critically acclaimed and deemed cool by their cult followings. However, they often do not reach the mass audiences as well as the superstitious nightmares that reinforce privatization do. Still, the texts discussed in this chapter, and many like them, do exist and generate a passionate excitement from their fans. A keen potential for something different exists, and has been happening for quite some time now. The devil we know is making fewer and fewer attractive bargains. It's time to see what else is out there. It's time to learn to look for it. It's time to find out we're not alone.

AFTERWORD:
MY PERSONAL MANIFESTO FOR THE CLASSROOM

I began this project by discussing violence on campus, and I feel as if I must end with a confession of my own inclinations towards committing campus violence. I was sitting in my car one night after class. It was during my first semester as a Master's student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The car I was driving at the time was falling apart. My car and, most importantly, the windshield defroster needed a long time to warm up in order to function properly. I had to sit in an empty parking lot long after most of my fellow students drove away. I had made my obligatory call home to let my domestic partner know that I was about to start off on my hour-and-a-half drive home through the dark. I brushed off her comment, "You sound down." I was cold, hungry, broke, and I had just spent an hour and thirty-five minutes of graduate instructional time waiting to go to my professor's office so I could see a PowerPoint presentation of his family vacation prepared by the instructor's thirteen-year-old daughter, which just happened to take place in a location mentioned in the book we read for that evening's class. The text mentioned a rocky coastline, and the vacation snapshots showed the rocky coastline the author was referring to. It took an hour and thirty-five minutes to view a handful of images, few of which were of the rocks, the rest being family vacation snapshots. This was the second time I had a class with a heavy concentration on Irish Literature under the tutelage of someone who really liked to vacation in Ireland. Having been an undergrad at a Catholic college, I was struck that my class did not once mention the role of Catholicism in Irish Literature or History. I do recall, however, hearing some pleasant yarns about cab rides through the rainy streets of Dublin and that one time my

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professor stumbled upon a church festival that reminded him of the one in the James Joyce story "Araby."

I thought that, at this higher level and in a different institutional culture, things would be different. Graduate school was a major commitment for my girlfriend and me. We shared a bank account, and I wasn't sure that we would have enough money to survive on by the end of the semester. I was taking out loans that I still cannot imagine possibly paying off completely before I die. There was a high cost to be paid for being in this class, and it extended far beyond tuition and fees. I did all of this to look at vacation photos. I was far from home. I was having a low moment.

And at the very moment my windshield began to clear up, I saw my professor walking through the deserted parking lot. Instinctively, I began revving the engine. I thought not of the moral implications of the act. I didn't even think about the logistics of my car making its way completely over a rather lumpy, middle-aged gentleman wearing a backpack. No, the answers to those questions were already assumed. I was wondering how much cash was in my wallet, because when I would go to the car wash a mile or so away to wash the bits of skin and pretence from the undercarriage of my car, I didn't want to use my debit card, because that would look really bad.

Of course, before I could check, he had gotten to his car and driven off, leaving me in my still un-drivable car. I tell you this tale not because I want you to be afraid of me. I am not the kind of kill-crazy maniac that stalks all college campuses as portrayed in the media and responsible for ever higher degrees of security on campus. Rather, I tell you to make the supreme heresy I am about to commit more palatable. There is a discourse that I have been addressing on and off throughout this project, the derogatory

way in which young people are portrayed. In particular, I would like to focus on the one that characterizes today's college students as entitled, as if the collegiate experience owes them something because they paid so much money to be in school. I tell you my tale of woe and homicidal fantasies to show you that I understand this impulse and, while it's often abrasively expressed, this sense of entitlement reveals some very legitimate, yet often poorly articulated, concerns about the university as an institution. In many dialogs with students, I have learned there is an understanding that something has gone wrong and maybe even an understanding that some social contract has been violated. However, all too often these concerns, and even sense of outrage, are only articulated through market terms and values. It is my purpose here to articulate those concerns not in terms of ownership and money spent on education. Rather, I want to focus on the social contract in higher education and privatization's influence on the moral decisions made in classroom space.

Throughout the course of this project, I have spoken on occasion about the role of austerity on the lives of young people. Certainly, one of the institutions tht at one time cared for people and has since turned sour is higher education. In a slow-motion human-made disaster such as the one we are living through, there is frequently a lot of blame to go around and a series of contributing factors to how things went wrong. There are no magic bullets to be found that can explain everything with one theory. My intention is not to beat up on professors, even those whom I would like to beat up. Rather, I want to read the profession, and my own personal practices within the profession, much like how I have read the texts mentioned previously in this project. Considering how much I have critiqued the collapse of the public and the private in this project, it's only fitting, or

perhaps deliciously ironic, that I end with my own confessions. Next, I will discuss my

own professional practices and a class that I teach in the hopes of doing what I can do to

combat the slow-motion disaster brought on by privatization.

There is a wellspring of titles that chronicle academic labor and the systemic

reconstruction of education under Neo-liberalism. The works of Henry Giroux are vital

to both this project and my understanding of my own place in the world. Giroux and

many others chronicle just how capitalist enterprise has taken over education and turned

it into the mess it is today. My goal in this section, however, is far more modest. I want

to explore where I have recognized the embodiment of privatization within my own life

and professional practice. The works of Michel Foucault introduced me to the notion of

"power from below." Power from below is the power we embody within us, through our

daily practice. Foucault argued that within daily habits and mannerisms there is perhaps

acquiescence to power. With this in mind, I would like to look at how just one adjunct

can take back the power within their own life and classroom practice.

Let's be honest: if you are an educator, I'm sure you have a story similar to mine

about a bad professor. And by bad professor, I mean not just one who was boring or an

extraordinarily harsh grader. What I am referring to is one whose failure exists in the

realm of the social responsibility one accepts when they join this profession. Education,

and even knowledge itself, does not happen in a vacuum. This is in spite of the fact that

our predominant culture celebrates the lonely, heroic genius. All education, even at a

private institution, comes from the efforts and contributions of others, from the minds

that fill the library full of texts to the people who clean the bathrooms. Labor and

responsibility is shared. A degree, especially one that opens the door for a life as a

professional educator, should only be understood within a moral context that acknowledges all of the shared efforts that go into a degree. Again, in a privatized mindset, this is very difficult to conceptualize and rebrands education as an individual accomplishment. I have plenty of well-meaning family and friends who are not academics. They are good and intelligent people who find the process of writing a dissertation inherently offensive and unnatural. I have plenty of friends who are academics who feel the same way. In the mindset informed by privatization, how dare anyone demand changes to a document that is a testimonial to my singular genius? There are few referents in our culture for a process whose value is dependent upon the way it exists within a context and the interplay between the works of others quite like how a dissertation is expected to exist. The value of this often frustrating process is sometimes hard to explain.

A similar misunderstanding of the inherently social dimension of education leads to the particular kind of bad professor I am describing. Call this failure a dereliction of duty, incompetence, or simple laziness, we all have a story about a professor who fails on the level of duty and social responsibility. Likewise, we all have a sense of guilt about times when we did not have our "A-game." I have a hard time understanding someone who sees their doctoral degree as a license to do whatever they please and how such a person could be capable of so transparently killing time yet still have a clear conscience. I'm sure we all have similar stories. The importance is what these lessons teach us about the social function of teaching and how the university classroom is one of the last vestiges of the public sphere.

In *The Ends of Globalization*, Mohamed Bamyeh proposes the hypothesis that global capitalism has transformed us from a rights-based society to an entitlement based one (72). The difference here is that a right comes within and because of a social context and can only be imagined as such, limiting what one can do with something they've earned from a right. For example, most U.S. citizens see driving as a right, but attached to it is a series of responsibilities. Yes, there are those of us who are chronic speeders, but few could justify running a red light or running over a lumpy middle-aged college professor. If driving were an entitlement, one could do whatever one wants behind the wheel, street signs, lane markers, and lumpy professors be damned. In this sense, entitlements exist in a mental context devoid of social responsibility. Global capitalism, with its free-floating boundary-less nature, frees us all to pursue desire however we may find it. In the ideological mindset of privatization, an entitlement does not come from or because a social context, even if that entitlement comes as a result of the labor and contributions of others. It is ours; we are owed it no strings attached. This is the ultimate dream of privatization, to enjoy what is yours with complete freedom devoid of any context.

Perhaps within the context of the class I described, the professor found showing vacation photos to be a very warm, very caring experience. He was, after all, sharing an important and pleasurable part of his life with a group of pupils. Teaching can be an emotionally seductive act. No matter how much professional distance we try to maintain between ourselves and our students, teaching is an inherently social act. It is difficult not to learn to like or dislike certain students. It would be an extreme ethical violation to fail anyone for personal reasons. However, I've failed students I was rooting for and put

much effort into helping. It's terrible when it happens, but professional ethics restricts me from doing what feels good. Similarly, when checking the university data base before the semester begins, certain names on a class roster can inspire warm feelings or cold terror. I'm certain that, as a graduate and undergraduate student, I inspired both sets of feelings depending upon my prospective professors. Likewise, it's nice to be liked or feared, depending on your personality and what you're going for. However, many of my colleagues get into this profession out of a desire to spend their working lives in the world of something they deeply enjoy, and it is this love of a particular author, text, or genre that drives their professional practice. It was an act of genuine love and enjoyment that sparked my homicidal fantasy. I've told this story more than a few times while commiserating with my friends in the profession, usually over a few beers. However, I tell it here to illustrate an important lesson that I learned through experience, and I don't think I am alone in having learned it. I am certain thousands of students might learn it every semester, yet it's a lesson no one intends to teach.

Throughout this project, I borrow heavily from Betty Friedan's notion of a "problem with no name," some malady that is pervasive yet cannot be articulated. The signs of the problem I'm interested in are around us in the form of crumbling infrastructure and a chronic sense of dissatisfaction. In Chapter 1, I discussed how, in spite of austerity measures, many campuses are expanding their counseling services. Some of this is for a very real purpose. A now infamous study of 3,100 graduate students at the University of California-Berkley revealed utterly staggering rates of depression and anxiety. This includes the 54 percent who reported that they felt at times so "depressed that it was difficult to function" (Kajitani and Bryant). During the latter stages of this

product, my future graduate alma mater was declared one of the top 10 colleges with the least happy students by *The Princeton Review* ("The 10 Colleges"). One can debate the methodology and the ranking of such a study, but the fact that a reputable organization like *The Princeton Review* sees fit to make such a list suggests there is something to be said about whether or not universities have ceased serving their populations and turned into anti-humanist monstrosities. As one who likes to think they have a working knowledge of the direction campus security is going, the now infamous image from the Occupy movement of an armor clad UC-Davis police officer casually pepper-spraying a line of seated students failed to shock me, and I am merely waiting for the rest of the populace to catch up. The big question is, how exactly do institutions with such noble aspirations and lofty goals get here?

Privatization has reduced all human endeavors to competing profitable and pleasurable interests. It's good if it feels good. If you like books and love doing research, why not teach to support those hobbies? There is a problem with our consumerist notion of enjoyment in the English department and, in spite of feeling so good, pleasure has helped to contribute to this problem. I once was in a staff meeting for composition teachers, and a colleague expressed to me some dismay that student papers did not come out like the kind of stuff that she liked to read, "You know, like what's in *Harpers*," utterly dismissive of other possible voices, educational needs, or cultural identifications. Over the years, I have found statements like this to be common sense in faculty meetings. Over the years, I have come to find statements like this to be as morally repugnant as someone confessing that they usually defecate in their kitchen sink.

Of course, I have many colleagues who are conscientious, intelligent, and hard working. Many of them work hard and sacrifice much to be a productive and positive member of the profession. This is also not to say that professors fail for a variety of reasons. Like ballplayers, professors can have seasons/semesters where we just seem off, plagued by injury, just not hitting the ball like we used to. I certainly have had one or two in my years of teaching. Also, under current labor conditions, it's not uncommon for a professor to lose concentration because one is so fatigued that the room is spinning. It happens to me several times a semester. Overwork, a lack of support and/or training, and many other factors contribute to why we do not always have our "A game." What I am concerned with, however, is the ways in which the predominant values of privatization have intruded themselves into ourselves, creating a moral problem that must be solved. An additional problem faced on this path of inquiry is the fact that academia is a contentious place. Our titles become so imbedded into our selves that they literally become part of our name. Our degree and our area of expertise make us special, and for many I am sure, fulfill some of our esteem needs. As mentioned earlier, Jock Young's *Vertigo of Late Modernity* points out that we live in an era where individualism is highly prized, yet at the same time the tools for making a personal identity are devalued by global capitalism (4-5). Under this construction, a Ph.D. with a narrow and seemingly exclusive field of specialty is one of the few ultimate brass rings of identity construction left. Any threat to that perceived status often puts a discussion about ideas into an ad hominem steel-cage death-match. In a workshop about effective grading, a colleague of mine said it best. She was asked in a job interview about her grading process. She responded, "Asking someone about how they grade is like asking someone about their

sex life!" She did not get that particular job, I strongly suspect because her answer was too honest, judging by the uncomfortable tone of laughter this anecdote inspired.

In the world of private ownership, to be in public as a professor is, is to exist outside the domain of the normal and the acceptable. So yes, much like the discussion in Chapter 3 about the bedroom habits of suburbanites, we have to see teaching like intercourse for married people. It's known that professors do it, most professors assume (or at least brag) they do it well, how many actually do it well is questionable, and it's extremely awkward to tell someone, flat out, that they are doing it wrong. Likewise, even bad teaching can still feel kind of good. It is an act that brings people together. The human bond that arises through teaching is something palpable. The problem is, the feeling of connection that arises can be seductive in a different sense, can give us an inflated sense of accomplishment. All too often, I hear of colleagues who brag about and focus their classroom towards those students who really "get it" or show a genuine love for the material. This conversation never drifts towards the students who are not reached. Tom Fox reminds us that we all have students who became skeletons in the closet, those whom we have not been able to reach and those who haunt us. My experience working in the body pile that is a writing center has given me some perspective on how misaligned values lead to figurative fatalities in the academy. Discussing one's skeletons or sex life is often an uncomfortable endeavor, and I do not excuse myself and my classroom practices from the discussion. My tone here may seem a little caustic, but I'm trying to channel these frustrations into positive action.

Deep down, the angst about the profession is an acknowledgment of this seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy. We are somewhere between the gutter and the stars,

between, on one hand, a *Dead Poet's Society*'s inspirational story, hopefully without the suicide, and, on the other, a lingering and pervasive feeling of crisis. In the 2005 issue of *The Profession*, Louis Menand stated rather eloquently that the crisis in the humanities has evolved to the point where "[t]here is a sickness, and then there is the sickness of obsessing about your sickness" (11). This profession does spend a significant amount of time on internal critique for the purpose of re-establishing a place for academia within the new global economy. Much great and helpful work has been done in this area. We cannot forget, however, that a typical college age student has not been alive at a time on this planet that the Humanities were not perceived to be in a state of crisis. As Menand goes on to point out, turning our problems into a subject matter is what Academia does (11), yet for all of this effort, it seems as though students are still falling through the cracks for no reason. Of course, it should also be noted that this internal critique has often taken on a highly contentious tone, or as Bill Readings points out in *The University in Ruins*, "Anyone who has spent any time at all in a university knows that it is not a model community, that few communities are more petty and vicious than University faculties (suburban 'model communities' might be an exception)" (180). The global shift towards consumerism as the predominant ideology has meant that higher education has been removed from its privileged position as cultural and intellectual repository for the nation-state, or at least the place where the young play out their last great act of personal discovery, and into a spectrum of competing pleasurable and profitable interests. This has led to an idea of "the university classroom as a talk show that promises to entertain rather than discuss seems to be more and more typical undergraduate expectation" (Miyoshi 267). This and a myriad of other false expectations greatly affect both

institutions and individuals, resulting in what Mark Edmundson identifies as institutional imperatives towards "creating more comfortable, less challenging environments, places where almost no one failed, everything was enjoyable, and everyone was nice" (284). This consumerist model of education is supposed to be enjoyable, but questions must be asked about its purpose.

After several years of working on this project, it has come to pass that the idea of the dynamic between public/private split has come to touch every single class I teach. I have found that the best way to illustrate this point is by giving the student the example of the feeling of strangeness the first time they are invited into the home of a young friend. To be very young and to have a good friend is to become a quasi-member of that friend's family. And when that moment happens, and the veil of guest status is dropped and replaced by pure unfettered, private domesticity, I recall a feeling of utter surrealness that left me feeling strange about both the home I was in and the home I would soon return to. I use this example in every class in every semester and it lands every single time. The few dozen invisible light bulbs of understanding that float above the heads of my students at this moment are then guided towards illuminating the interplay of created cultures and the environment. If we can see how the interplay between physical environment, personal values, and the larger culture can create a particular kind of domestic environment, we can see how this same interplay can shape our larger world.

Metaphors such as this are important for illustrating critical points, but I want to take a moment here and discuss how some of the ideas mentioned in this project play out in the classes I teach. I teach at an urban, left-leaning college with a performing arts conservatory. This class was in the spring semester of 2011, after the 2010 mid-term

elections, at the very moment the last remaining sentiments of hope and change were

petering out in the U.S., yet this was also the semester of the Arab Spring, and students

were checking their smart phones before class to see if Mubarak had resigned in Egypt.

Hegemonic narratives were being contested, and my students were hungry for some way

to avoid the apocalypse, even if the course catalog said that this was just a regular World

Literature II survey course.

The theme of the course was the problem of being young at a moment in history

when a great deal of people, forty percent of U.S. citizens, are thinking about the

apocalypse ("Jesus"). To be young at this moment is to have an acute awareness of

environmental, social, and economic catastrophes without many readily available

alternatives. Here is the statement of purpose I included within the syllabus:

> What is one to do about the problem of being young in seemingly
>
> apocalyptic times? If you are paying attention, the news media reminds us
>
> everyday that things aren't what they used to be, and it seems as though
>
> they are constantly on the verge of getting worse. If it is not a stunted
>
> economy, the compromised environment, terrorists, the various responses
>
> to terrorism, out of control corporate and governmental bureaucracies,
>
> crumbling infrastructures, and seemingly new forms of aberrant behavior,
>
> among many other things, are convincing most people that the future we
>
> will have to live in is certainly going to be unpleasant. These factors are
>
> convincing many individuals that the existence of a future itself is an
>
> impossibility. There is often a pervasive feeling that we are constantly in
>
> danger. Furthermore, young people are often left to negotiate their place

in the world without the benefit of cultural institutions that have benefited previous generations. The public trust, the family, churches, educational institutions, and others seemingly do not offer solace or even a place at the table for many young people. Quite simply, it seems as though there is no place to place our trust. However, if you are young, the world is new, as this is the springtime of your life. If you are lucky you are in love, or at least you have found some very good friends to go get some pizza with on a Saturday night. Music, movies, cars, cell phones, and a bunch of other wonderful things are quite good now. You have hopes and dreams. There are tremendous possibilities in spite of it all.

So what are we to do about these seemingly disparate polls of possibility?

It is the purpose of this class to explore how various people have responded to this question. Furthermore, it is the purpose of this class to explore this situation as a global phenomenon and gain an understanding of how people in different places are coping with a future that puts us somewhere between hope and the apocalypse. Some of the behaviors described in these novels is less than constructive and may leave you with the question, how could someone do something like this? Again, the purpose here is to answer such a question. In our seven novels we will see individuals from around the world finding their way in a globalized economy, a degraded environment, a crumbling family structure, and a tense global political situation. And through the careful exploration of

how others have confronted these situations, we can hope to gain a better

understanding of our own situation, and hopefully imagine better

possibilities for the future.

Obviously, this was a lot to put upon a group of twenty-two young people on the first day

of the semester.

However, I am proud to say that they performed admirably. The reading list was

hard, seven novels. We read *Generation A* by Douglas Coupland, *Purple Hibiscus* by

Chimamanda Adichie, *Gabriel's Gift* by Hanif Kureishi, Animal's People by Indra Sinha,

and three others. It was a class designed to be difficult, but these students seemed eager

to discover something about their own moment in history. There were also two papers, a

final, and un-announced guerilla student presentations that made sure I could not do all

the talking or always get in the last word.

The novel that the students responded to the most enthusiastically was

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. *Purple Hibiscus* is the story of a teen girl

named Kambili. The novel is claustrophobic in its focus on the domestic sphere, but in

spite of this tight focus, the reader is allowed glimpses of just how life in the outside

world is falling apart. Kambili knows life in a gated compound and under an

authoritarian father. The Nigeria of her youth is one struggling with its colonial legacy

and tumbling towards a military coup. Kambili's strict Catholic father rules over the

domestic sphere with an iron fist. He is trying to save his children from the political

chaos beyond the garden fence just as much as he is trying to save their eternal souls

from damnation. In one particularly troubling scene, Papa pours boiling water over

Kambili's feet to remind her of the pains of hell after she had been disobedient (Adichie

194). This was particularly troubling to my students but not just for obvious reasons.

The portrayal of child abuse is particularly disturbing, but within the context of the novel,

it takes on another dimension.

Kambili's family and country are falling apart in equal measure. Earlier in the

semester, we read *Generation A*. When the five "Wonka Children" each become the first

people to be stung by bees in several years, the U.S. military, NGO's, and corporate

scientists descend upon them, isolating the area and take the victim into custody. This is

all done through a massive display of military/scientific hardware and varying degrees of

force. In Sri Lanka, when Harj is stung, the environment is secured with brutality. The

supervisor at the call center where Harj is working is shot dead point blank for arguing

with the police. A student asked me, "How could they have done that?" Others chimed

in about the senselessness and brutality of the killing of this character, even if he was an

unlikable one. This moment was our first opportunity to talk about a social contract,

human rights, and state power.

Next, we read *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha, where a corrupt legal system and

lack of development create a chaotic social order. Again, our discussion centered on the

idea that civil society, the law, etc. are not givens but things that have to be created and

maintained. We became aware of their presence though exploring what happens in their

absence. That's not something most think about, especially within a value system that

values the personal over the social. By the time we got to the military Kleptocracy in

Purple Hibiscus, they were ready to think about how the outside world shapes the

domestic sphere.

Purple Hibiscus is primarily a novel about the home life of a family. The reader gets glimpses of the outside chaos: strikes at the university, police who are easily bribed at checkpoints, and most importantly hushed conversations between Papa and other important people witnessed through the eyes and ears of Kambili as she eavesdrops after being banished to her room upstairs. Even the events of school are not portrayed as they happen in the moment; rather, they are discussed at home. This gives the first part of the novel a sense of claustrophobia. We see this as Kambili ventures out into the world and spends time with her Aunty Ifeoma. This first taste of freedom is shocking to Kambili. In one particularly memorable passage, her cousin Amaka repeatedly antagonizes her. "I listen to mostly indigenous musicians. They're culturally conscious; they have something real to say . . . I'm sure you're into American pop like other teenagers" (Adichie 118). Kambili does not own a stereo and has not heard American pop or Fela, but she does not have the language to express this. She can only muster awkward silence. While she is with Aunty Ifeoma, we see there is much she is not used to: music, free time, shortages, chores, laughter, hunger, running, and sticking up for herself. As her taste for freedom grows, so does the chaos outside. All of this culminates in a horrific act of abuse. However, within the context of the real danger portrayed in the novel--there are riots and dissidents get beaten by the police--Papa's violence towards his own family is strangely motivated and understandable. It is not condoned by anyone but understood.

This created another opportunity to discuss the rise of extremism, which was good because Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was due later in the semester. Both Papa and Changez (the latterfrom *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) dabble in extremes, but again the chaos of the world seems to drive them to it. These behaviors

were seen as motivated but not condoned. Over the course of the semester, I also threw into this mix clips from the documentary *Life and Debt* that effectively juxtapose scenes of Jamaican poverty and explanations of its causes with recognizable images of Jamaica as a tourist attraction. From the sum total of all of these texts emerges a world made chaotic by forces beyond the control of the average person, or seemingly anyone for that matter. Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodernity and its Discontents* discusses this problem with some degree of clarity, "The discontents of modernity arose from a kind of security which tolerated too little freedom in the pursuit of individual happiness. The discontents of postmodernity arise from a kind of freedom of pleasure -seeking which tolerates too little individual security" (3).   The world has been reduced to competing profitable and pleasurable interests; everything is on the market, nothing taken for granted. Those left to deal can find their personal foundations in some utterly terrifying places.

Colonial legacies and kleptocracy shape Kambili's Nigeria and her family dynamic. The students could relate to this not just as a coming-of-age tale, but as a tale that illustrates the sorry condition of the world and how lost people are. Throughout the course of the semester, our conversation drifted into the world of people desperately looking for certainty and order. This was the semester of the Arab Spring, but it was also the semester of Birtherism and the mainstreaming of other absurd conspiracy theories. We discussed the absurd, David Icke and 9/11 Truthism, but also we discussed other forms of extreme behavior and/or beliefs borne out of this. And it is within this context that Kambili's Papa was understood.

Another novel interpreted through this lens was Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift*. Gabriel is a fifteen-year-old boy living in London. He is a talented artist dealing the best

he can with the break up of his parents. Gabriel's parents are middle aged but still like to

"rock," literally and figuratively. His dad is an ex-bass player for a famous rock star, the

latter obviously based upon David Bowie. Both he and Gabriel's Mother decide they

want more out of life than the stability of family life. Gabriel, however, sees this as an

inevitable part of the maturation process. In fact, before the split of his parents, he felt as

though he was the abnormal one for having parents who were still together. Dad still

pines after fame; he smokes pot in front of Gabriel and more than once asks his son for

money. His drinking is out of control. Mom is eager to start dating; Gabriel is more than

aware when she is having intercourse with one of her new boyfriends. Without going

into too much detail, my students said they could relate. Their family histories and

intimate lives are the product of a moment in history where everyone and everything is

disposable, people become surplus labor and surplus lovers. The public and private have

collapsed into one another. In *Intimacy*, Hanif Kurieshi writes of a

> Thatcherism of the soul that imagines that people are not dependent on
>
> one another. In love, these days, it is a free market; browse and buy, pick
>
> and choose, rent and reject, as you like. There's no sexual and social
>
> security; everyone has to take care of themselves, or not. Fulfillment, self-
>
> expression and 'creativity' are the only values (52).

Again, my students relate to and respond enthusiastically to this text, even though this

first person narrative of a father about to leave his family seriously bums them out.

These texts help them see how their public and private spheres are connected, and how

perhaps they can try a little better in the future. In *Intimacy*, there is no resolution, dad

simply leaves. In *Gabriel's Gift*, the family is reunited. Prompting more than one

student to question, "What's with all the happy endings in this class?" Again, misery seems plausible, solutions seem absurd.

Privatization has meant a lot of things, but perhaps its greatest legacy is the death of public imagination. My hope with this class, and all of my classes for that matter, is to somehow foster some new ideas about what life can be. Henry Giroux declares, as privatization has shifted our values, "What is missing is a language, or a movement, or a vision that refuses to equate democracy with consumerism, market relations, and privatization, or patriotism with the squelching of dissent" (*Public Spaces* xvii).   Couple this with Redding's notion that "everything in the lives of these students encourage[s] them to think of themselves as consumers rather than as members of a community," and we see just what my students are struggling against (11).

Under privatization, a social problem tends to be reduced to a personal hang-up and the public sphere is seen merely as a vehicle for personal advancement and pleasure. In the face of the profound lack of what Lacan would call a Big Other, or a socially defining cause, fictional professor and audience are left to pick up the scraps of their own pleasurable interests in an attempt to solve their problems (Žižek, *Ticklish* 380).   This has been portrayed by others as a shift from a rights-based to an entitlement-based culture (Bamyeh 71). Rights occur within a web of socially defining roles and responsibilities; entitlements are objects to be freely enjoyed by anyone who wishes to enjoy them. As a point of comparison, consider the despair of Mr. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. As bleak as his mental life is portrayed, his thoughts reveal a sense of stewardship and a belonging to a collective idea beyond his personal experience. Yes, predominant organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English and the

Modern Language Association have put much effort into refining the practice of literacy education to fulfill social responsibilities and be an agent of positive change, but one has to wonder if those conscientious professionals are merely preaching to a choir of the converted. In research conducted at the University of Vermont, it was revealed that only 25% of new faculty had ever read a journal article related to the teaching of their field (Shelton and Edelman). And even if one is aware of this work, does theory turn into practice? Again, if "power from below" means that we can embody power structures, unwittingly, than what can be done to combat the influence of Neo-liberalism and privatization on our personal lives?

A few years ago, I lost out on a chance too see a very famous academic who has written extensively on best practices in the classroom. I did not act soon enough to get a ticket, but when asking the lucky few who got to go how it went, they reported that one problem with this famous academic who had written extensively on best practices in the classroom is that he proved himself to be fairly incapable of presenting information to a gathering of people wanting to learn. Sigh. There are those who are plugged into the work being done, but is the act of exploring and contributing to this knowledge is itself a statement of one's positive values? What can be said about those who do not have the same professional concerns? Are those who participate in the lively and important discussion around the enduring relevance of English, just preaching to the choir? What are we to do with the "unconverted"? Is there a possibility we are doing damage without even knowing it? Throughout this project we have looked at the ways in which the values of privatization manifest themselves through culture and through personal

practice, and my hope here is to convey to you just how I try to personally expunge these demons.

Unfortunately, privatization has left us in quite a bind. The scale of action is small. The scope of the imagination is limited. Even when organized, many academic communities seem distinctly disorganized. The privatized subject sees public space only as an opportunity for personal exploitation. It would be better for all if faculty members to have healthcare, a living wage, an office, job stability, academic freedom, etc. As an adjunct faculty member, I enjoy none of those things. I know I could be better for my students without the worries created by an unstable working environment. Still, a stable working environment did not stop the abuses mentioned at the beginning of this afterword. Similarly, the lack of job stability does not result in some kind of social Darwinist challenge where the students win because only the best and brightest adjuncts are retained. This idea is more about a belief in a purely theoretical free-market fundamentalism than it is any practical understanding of how institutions actually work. I have seen "career adjuncts" that are just as checked out or woefully unqualified as the stereotype of the slothful tenured full professor. As a student, as an adjunct, and as a tutor, I have experienced all manner of business models and institutional cultures. The brutalized and the comfortable both carry the same potential for greatness and for incompetence and inhumanity towards students. As a tutor, I see the wreckage created by bad pedagogies from both the tenured and the temporary. I have little good will towards many faculty members who are great at teaching students who do not really need much instruction, but who lack the skills or even the desire, as they are often prone towards bragging to me, in order to educate the growing population of students who lack

fundamental skills or knowledge. In fact, when speaking to my colleagues I often find myself, for the sake of gentility, not saying what I really think about education or the profession. Forgive the metaphor, but often I feel as though I am "in the closet" when it comes to my beliefs about the social meaning of education and the role of commitment and professionalism in that. Instead, I feel as though I need to cloak myself in the same ironic over-confidence of the "almost too cool for school set" in order to get through staff meetings and other social situations. If we are to fight against privatization and the deskilling and destabilization of a profession we work long and hard to enter, there can be no gap between our words and our deeds. If we are to fight for our survival and the human right of education, we must make our students and those outside of the academy understand the value of what we do. We too have to shake of the demoralizing, anti-social effects of the stupor that privatization has put us in. I have spent this entire project discussing how Neo-liberalism has adjusted the scale of our lives and our perceptions of ourselves. Privatization has affected the most intimate understandings of ourselves and our personal practices. Who knows, perhaps instead of being isolated geniuses in an acrimonious truce, we could be together working for something larger than ourselves. So far, we have discussed a myriad of ways public sphere has been privatized; we need to look at how privatization influences our behavior in one of the few remaining remnants of the commons, the campus.

So, here are my ten theses for de-privatizing the university through driving the privatization out of ourselves. I'm not saying that all ten apply to every professor and every situation. However, what I am saying is that these are rules of thumb to keep in mind, some things I've learned through my experiences and through my critical,

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historical analysis of the literature of privatization. Working within some of the most ambivalent, problematic experiences of privatization, I've discovered some possibilities for avoiding doing harm even though what one is doing feels so right.

1. Realize that you are not cool and no one gives a shit about what you like.

The brilliant film *Election* features the line, "Dave was one of those guys who taught because they never wanted to leave high school in the first place." The desire to stay young forever is a powerful imperative in our culture, powerful enough to make us forget that with the exuberance of youth comes the folly of youth. I could, and did, go on and on about how the world of competing profitable and pleasurable interests means everything competes for attention. James Axtel in *The Pleasures of Academe* mentions, as a defense of academia against critics, the availability of good record stores and pleasant campus architecture. Sorry, these things are great and I do enjoy them, but whatever a professor likes probably will not be able to compete with the new *Madden NFL* game. For many English majors, learning to hate the favorite subject matter of the professor is as typical of the college experience as those composition notebooks with the faux-marble covers. Therefore, we have to present a different value system and an alternative scale by which to judge ourselves and our actions. In *The Rise and Fall of English*, Robert Scholes refers to "hypocriticism." For Scholes, one who practices hypocriticism is one who has lost their sense of professional purpose (81-4). He so eloquently defines that purpose as, "What our students need, as I see it, is first of all guidance in learning how to understand their world and survive in it, and secondly some grounds for criticizing and trying to improve it" (83). In the absence of this or any other

directive, we can easily go towards pleasure filling the void. The hypocritic is merely master of his or her little domain of specialization and department turf. Some of the most dreadful experiences I have had as a student involved classes where the professors taught something they truly loved, or even worse, something about which they'd just published a book. As the old saying goes, love can be blind. Love can blind the instructor to the flaws of a beloved text or a valued methodology; furthermore, the love of perfection can stifle the creativity of seeing a text in new, exciting, and challenging ways. This does not mean professors cannot teach what they like, but there have to be rules and boundaries. The students must be allowed to hate it. Reading a text is a highly personal act and, when bound up in one's own sense of self and self-worth, exposing that text to students who may or may not have the same reaction can be difficult. Again, I have colleagues who brag about the great student who really likes (blank). It feels great when students connect on that level, but what about the student who is excluded? The text cannot be on a pedestal but rather placed within a context with rules and boundaries about its use. We must understand the text within the boundaries of professional rules and responsibilities. What does this text say about our world? What can it teach us about its creator and ourselves? In what ways can we re-imagine our own subject position through an exploration of the text? As a tutor, I have seen how the pedagogy of "isn't this wonderful" can exclude students who don't immediately understand or don't like the material. This is true whether one is teaching the deadest, richest, and whitest of the dead white male Western cannon set or the most contemporary multicultural text. I have tried to help white males disenfranchised by the cannon and women of color disenfranchised

by multiculturalism. If the approach is wrong, students will be disenfranchised, and all too often the approach of sharing something one loves is wrong.

2. Students really don't care about your professional turf. Most of them are taking, "Um, English."

You would be shocked and appalled at how many students come for tutoring who do not know their professor's names. For me, this is a regular experience. At the writing center where I work, there is paperwork that we have to fill out that records what student's come to tutoring for. "Who is your professor?" is one that frequently stumps students and prompts a search that produces in a shop-worn syllabus from the bottom of an over-stuffed folder. Friends who work in other tutoring centers report the same phenomenon.   This causes me to sometimes awkwardly say my own name at times throughout the semester. I also do not limit ice-breakers to the first day. This further proves just how un-cool you probably are or more likely just how big the gap between instructor and student can be. Furthermore, when asked about what class they are taking, they never say, "I am taking a core curriculum literature survey course with a concentration on postmodern representations of self." They say, "Um, English," whether they are taking composition, literature, or business writing. It's easy to forget that

> in an academic environment where there is increasingly less unspoken
>
> common ground, it may not even be clear to students that their teachers
>
> are in conflict . . . Students in such cases are being exposed to some of the
>
> major cultural debates of their time, but in a way that makes it difficult to
>
> recognize them *as* debates. (Graff 339)

However, those of us who teach Um, English can probably sniff out a New Critic or a Deconstructionist from a mile away, and depending upon our sympathies, some of us would gladly leave the other bleeding to death in the supply closet after a vigorous bludgeoning inspired by something they said at the last department meeting. Students however, are not familiar with our complex institutional, departmental, and disciplinary roles.   We all represent the institution and the discipline as a whole. The lawmakers who greatly affect our funding probably don't either. They're questioning the need for Um, English in all its myriad of forms. We simply must come together and discuss the values that make the entire discipline valuable, or else. Of course, these discussions are indeed happening; the problem is that they too can be infested with notions of personal and professional turf. Department meetings are all too often rife with tension. Scholes states,

>It is the disparities between our professional needs and our personal
>
>desires, as well as the gap between our pedagogical practices and the
>
>needs of our students that turn us into hypocrites. The remedy, I want to
>
>suggest, is to rethink our practice by starting with the needs of our students
>
>rather than with our inherited professionalism of our personal preferences.
>
>(84)

 On the surface, this sounds quite easy and quite self-evident, not even worth a quotation. However, putting something like this into practice is in fact quite difficult. This just goes to show how much pedagogy and professional practice can be bound up within the most intimate understandings of the self and how those understandings inform practice and even our feelings under certain situations. The self-evident thing can be so hard to do when the societal imperative is towards personal satisfaction.

3. Don't believe the hype of your good evals or, god forbid, the things written on ratemyprofessor.com

Part of the seductive and blinding nature of feel-good academics is the way that praise can lead to complacency. Let's face it; universities are places where one earns praise: good grades, minor awards, etc. After my first semester of teaching, I was called into the Director of the Writing Program's office to discuss my evaluations. I had earned great praise. In fact, I got a perfect score of 5 for "teaching effectiveness," meaning that every student who filled out an evaluation gave me the highest possible score. In spite of the fact that this was my first semester teaching and I honestly did not know what I was doing, I could have taken this as license to declare myself awesome and stop growing as an educator. The declaration, however, was quickly stifled as I looked in the next column on the spreadsheet. It was the university average score for the course, 4.89. Yes, in some cases, the margin between perfection and merely average might just be one disgruntled student, and that particular student probably never bothered to log in and do my online evaluation.

We sometimes talk about grade inflation, but are even more reluctant to discuss instructor evaluation inflation. Young people are very susceptible to charisma. It could be this, or a love of the material, a culture where everyone who participates gets a medal, or the Stockholm syndrome, but we must keep in mind that college pedagogy is itself its own academic discipline. And furthermore, most of our students have not read those academic journals dedicated to pedagogy. As mentioned earlier, a study at the University of Vermont revealed that the majority of faculty has not read those journals, either

(Shelton and Edelman). Their feedback is important, but not the best scale by which to judge ourselves. We know if we are getting through. Be honest, that look of boredom and that pocket-texter in the front of the classroom is enough feedback. Mark Edmunson discusses this in "On the Uses of a Liberal Education" when he mentions how the fact that he can teach Freud using pop culture references and a laid-back style earns him excellent evaluations, but questions if that really makes him an effective teacher. Reading this the first time cut me very close to the bone. Students frequently praise me for being both laid back and funny; this garnishes me positive evaluations and full-class rosters, which as an adjunct means I have a continuing income in the profession. Effective educators who seem less like fun have more to worry about at my institution. This, however, does not necessarily mean they are learning, or I am doing the right thing. It's nice to be liked, but it's a comfort best denied. In the world where profitable and pleasurable are the only meaningful scales of value, yes, this is the pinnacle of human endeavors. However, in the world of literacy, critical thinking, and knowledge, we should aspire to something else.

Informed reflective practice is the only way to go. It may be difficult to articulate on an evaluation form, but deep down we know when teaching works and when it doesn't. This of course leads to days when I am utterly convinced I would be doing my students a service by jumping underneath the wheels of the bus home rather than getting on it. Both positive and negative feedback must be read with the same critical intensity as a literary text. Audience, intention, and ideology should all be disseminated before thinking about what to do with it. This goes for observations, formal student evaluations, and for ratemyprofessor.com. And for crying out loud, never check that web site while

the semester is in session!   We have to realize that praise is at best a temporary distraction, and if allowed to it leads to complacency. That said a piece of negative feedback on there was particularly apt. The student stated, Professor Ussia "talks a lot every class (despite telling you he won't at the beginning of the semester)." Of course, this person was 100% correct, damn it. It is perhaps still the best guidance I have ever received, and it has changed my approach in the classroom greatly. The point is that finding meaning within our own stories, both the successes and failures, enriches educational practice. I would be lying to say that I haven't failed to reach students, and that I've never tormented myself over what I should have said and done during the classroom. It sucks to do these things; it's humbling and fills one with a sense of failure. When teaching and tutoring works well it is one of the most wonderful feelings in the world. However, the flip side of this is those moments where it went wrong. In a privatized and consumerist world, we have the option of choosing the non-painful, unchallenging option.

4. Discovering a way to instill a quality classroom experience, not just for students at progressive institutions and departments, and not just for those who win the registration lottery, but for all students at all institutions should be the primary task for my generation of Ph.D.s.

One of the many disparaging things about working at a writing center is that it gives me an awareness of the disparity of quality between different classes, often in the same department, and, in some cases, in spite of a concerted effort to ensure baseline standards for all. For me, this is just another depressing fact about the state of my

profession today. The sum total of all of this is an awareness that the validity of the status quo is no longer self-evident. I am honestly not sure how this item on the list will be accomplished. I am sure, however, there will be (metaphorical) blood. Charges of the violation of academic freedom and a culture wars steel cage death match will undoubtedly ensue as the result of any such effort, but I am afraid it has to happen.

Likewise, there seems to be a silence within graduate education and institutions themselves to let people know that they are not cut out for this business, or when those who have been around too long need to step away. However, these difficult conversations need to happen.

5. Teach with transparency. Don't avoid the dreaded, "Why are we reading this?" question. Make it the focus of instruction.

One of the great accomplishments of critical theory is that it opened up for discussion the author's ideological motivations as they become manifested in the text. Unfortunately, our own pedagogical discourse is often beyond reproach. After all, hacks like Hawthorne and Shakespeare have ideological bents that must be uncovered, yet I am convinced some of my colleagues believe we're fair and equitable post-ideological subjects. Our motivations, conscious or unconscious, are seen as fair, just, and at the pinnacle of human reason. However, who doesn't have a story to tell about a "progressive" colleague who is as elitist and exclusionary as the Tea Party masses they decry. Likewise, who doesn't have a story where a colleague confides in them with a story that begins, "I'm not prejudiced but . . ." As both a writing tutor and adjunct faculty member, I not only get to hear that story, but I also get to hear it when the student says to

me, "I don't think he/she is comfortable with me," in reference to the same classroom situation. No matter what, our desires do have a politics attached to them. Even if those desires are for democratic instruction, a high degree of literacy for all students, and critical inquiry, we have to realize that those are value systems that not everyone believes in. No, our desires and intentions should be spoken, and if they are unspeakable, then they should not be acted upon. Paulo Freire advocated for transparency because it tears down the boundaries between teacher and student, and he continues to be correct. According to Freire, through transparency, the student becomes more of a full partner in learning. Learning becomes more purposeful, and often struggling students have an easier time negotiating the complicated subculture of academia that we are so familiar with but is so alien to them.

As an adjunct, I am not afforded the opportunity to pick my own course materials for most classes. Therefore, when I scored a coveted core curriculum literature survey course, I was faced with the prospect of teaching *The Odyssey*. Among other things, I had to actually read *The Odyssey* for the first time. One of the things I had to convince myself of was the continued relevance of this text. I then realized that my students faced the same dilemma. Traditionally, I begin every semester of *The Odyssey*, and I begin my unit on *The Odyssey* with an entire class dedicated both to introducing the text and a discussion of why we still bother to read *The Odyssey*. The conversation, is honest, open, and turns into a larger discussion of the value of literature. At my university, this course is the last English course they ever have to take. Some students come to class on the first day pumping their fists announcing this fact. To them, this class represents English's last obstacle to their academic and professional freedom. They are allowed to voice this. I

make my case, and humbly ask them not to agree with me but to at least hear me out. And in the world of profit and pleasure, I explain the difference between things that are important and things that are good. I promise to discuss the importance of every text as an example of the evolution of human ideas and as a tool for understanding key concepts for understanding our world and the course material. I also promise to do so in a way that always keeps the lives we live now in mind. This sets a positive tone for the remainder of the semester.

6. Never "Punt." They hate movie day. They're hungry for someone to talk to them.

Likewise, the cost of college often leaves students with a keen sense of value and entitlement about what college should be. How could they not? One of the unique things about the university where I teach is, as an urban campus, elevators are important part of getting around. This often means standing in extremely close proximity to my students; the normal rules of professional personal space apply. And in this space, crammed with a dozen or so other students, personal conversations are public. I hear way too much about their personal lives and what they think of my colleagues. One thing that I began to notice was students talked in rather dismissive terms about classes where the instructor just showed a film. If a student who cut class asks what they missed, all too common response is, "Nothin', we just watched a movie." When I ask my students about this, they agree. In spite of popular perception, and the occasional pleading of some, a great many of my students hate it when instructors come in and press play. In the era of Netflix, Hulu, and bit torrents, students have unprecedented access to visual texts. With the cost of college, why pay for what one can watch for free? If I do utilize a visual text,

I often only show clips or I balance film and discussion, splitting a film between two classes, and leaving significant time for classroom activities to compliment the screening. Pressing play is just another form of the educational monologue Freire was trying to warn us about. Besides, we never have students read novels in our classes. Why should films be any different?

7. PowerPoint is the new yellowing lecture notes.

In her TED lecture "The Danger of the Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "The danger of stereotypes are not that they are incorrect, but that they are incomplete." Even the most staunch advocates for the professoriate have to admit that there is a great deal of truth in the stereotype of the professor with the yellowing lecture notes, inching towards retirement, teaching the exact same class since 1960-whatever. I had this professor more than once, and it was utterly dreadful, a class without joy or the possibility of growth and discovery. He seemed just as bored as me up there. However, there is a new menace spreading across academia, the non-performative use of technology. Contrary to the popular dogma that today's young people demand a high-tech pedagogy, college students have an ambivalent attitude towards technology in the classroom and in their lives. They love and hate it equally. A student once told me that breaking his iPhone and not being able to get it replaced for two weeks was one of the most profoundly transformative experiences of his entire life. He described the experience as finally learning how to live. Likewise, the use of technology in the classroom can be wonderful and horrible. Technology allows for wonderful possibilities; it also allows for a professor to create good-looking course materials that can be saved

and used again and again without yellowing. Even if the color scheme becomes dated, that can easily be remedied. Students reserve a special distain for PowerPoint, and I mean a "from hell's heart I spit at thee!" kind of hatred. Copied online course shells that have been recycled from semester to semester are the same kind of dreadful, unresponsive pedagogy. Technology may help one to "put on a good show," but that pedagogy is not always performative in nature. The re-use of technology turns the class into a monologue. The result is a class that, while better looking and involves a cool iPad, is just as distant and unresponsive as the babbling old grandpa with tenure and his yellowed lecture notes.

8. Realize that the negative student behaviors you like to complain about are manifestations of our mainstream culture.

If you haven't gotten it yet, privatization has re-negotiated our social contract and not for the better. Our young people are the products of the world that has been created for them. Their negative behaviors are manifestations of some of our most deeply held values. "For someone growing up in America now, there are few available alternatives to the cool consumer worldview. My students didn't ask for that view, much less create it, but they bring a consumer weltanschauung to school, where it exerts a powerful, and largely unacknowledged influence" (Edmundson 280). Nothing improves classroom etiquette than making the bizarre, yet ubiquitous, behavior of people in the world a subject of inquiry. Discussing the breakdown of a social contract makes students aware of the existence of one. By transparently positioning the classroom as a space apart from the outside world, students can come to see how there are other models for living,

resisting the hegemony of privatization. Besides, I was no angel as an undergraduate, and I doubt you the reader were either.

9. There is nothing wrong with a little grim determination; sometimes it's all we have.

In the world of consumerist fun reinforced by privatization, we can never have a down or a dull moment. Motorola created the concept of micro-boredom as a way of getting people to use their phones for five minutes at a time, creating a solution to a problem no one knew they had, and launching the application software revolution. Privatization promises pleasure, and lots of it, a constant stream of it. Fun is one dictated form of behavior; it silences other possibilities. Mark Edmundson calls this the "tyranny of the cool" (281). The tyranny of the cool resists frustration, confusion, boredom, anger, and passion--all of which can be meaningful educational opportunities. Sometimes, students should leave class feeling poorly. A student in the class mentioned in Chapter 4 wrote in her semester journal, "P.S. Even though I left this class depressed, confused, and drained many times, I absolutely loved it." This is one of the most positive bits of feedback I have ever received.

In *The Lonely American*, Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz point out, "When the brain is functioning well, it has a wide array of alarm systems that alerts the individual to danger. If those alarm systems are healthy, people are not always happy" (172-3). In many respects, to embrace critical pedagogy and scholarship is to plunge into the depths of these alarm systems. We have to embrace the "frenemy" that is unhappiness. Much of this document was often borne out of depression and anger. Parts

of this document that have generated the most positive feedback often came from some very bad feelings, and this certainly shades my experience of the positive feedback. We cannot align ourselves fully with the consumerist notions of feel-good convenience. Throughout this project, I have chronicled some of the different ways our notion of feeling good all the time has created a great deal of unhappiness. I am now saying that embracing that dissatisfaction is an important step for getting out of this situation. I'm not saying that we don't laugh in every single one of my classes. It feels good to feel good, but there is much more to life and this profession than that.

As professionals, we must embrace the fact that sometimes this is an exhausting and utterly thankless undertaking. It's hell and it's hard, but if the work has meaning, then it's worth it. On the back cover of Henry Rollins's tour journal *Get in the Van* is the quote, "I have found that you can deplete yourself every night and still be able to get up and do it again. You have to keep rising." This is how I approach every day of every semester. As a member of the band Black Flag, Rollins was beaten up by skinheads, harassed by the police in almost every city the band played, and once was stuck on a European tour without anything to eat for several days. Black Flag existed so far out of the mainstream that they faced incredible resistance and hardships, but through perseverance, they created a new subculture that eventually changed the course of musical history. When exhaustion and thanklessness has meaning it is endurable, even rewarding. A day of good teaching makes me feel like I just boxed twelve rounds. I got into this profession because I liked books and media and, honestly, I didn't know what else to do with my life. Since then, it has become so much more. In the process, it has been a serious detriment to my personal health, as well as my relationships with others.

The notion of the fulfillment of duty has made all of this worthwhile. However, from years of talking shop with my contemporaries, I have learned that the notion of turning a hobby into a career motivates a lot of graduate students to enter this profession. How many fully make the transition into true professionals?

10. Realize that the university is one of the last remaining and visible remnants of the public sphere. Never forget what has been entrusted to you, and if we are to recover from Neo-liberalism, perhaps the best opportunity is from the campus outward.

As members of the university, we are one of the few remaining representatives of the public sphere. Our very existence resists the hegemony of the values of privatization. We are now in a fight to maintain our existence. Privatization has left us scared and anxious. It deprives people of some very basic human needs, even as it fulfills manufactured wants. The wreckage can be seen everywhere. Under privatization, one of the few responsibilities remaining for the state is security. In the culture of fear's conception of public space, this means the rise of a security state which has evolved into a very serious threat to basic human rights (Newman). Other responsibilities, such as the care for the well being of others, have gradually eroded, impacting the quality of life for everyone. The waste generated by consumerism threatens the survival of life on the planet. Legions of anxious, insecure, and lonely people are sitting on living room couches across the land, unsure of what to do, afraid to go out or take a chance. We can speak of our chronic dissatisfaction, but there is a paralysis keeping many from acting against it. The free-flowing capital of globalization has devalued lifestyles for the

workers in the Global North and devalued the lives of workers in the global South. The

wreckage is everywhere and increasingly hard to ignore. It is the responsibility of

educators to provide insights and alternatives to this hegemony, because there are limited

channels for other paths of resistance. Our very position as educators drafts us into being

representatives of the public sphere. And while I have addressed the ways in which the

public sphere has been privatized, we need eliminate privatization's influences our

behavior in one of the few remaining remnants of the commons.

    This project has been a chronicling of the unintended consequences of an

economic intuitive.   Writing about privatization has been as much an act of exclusion as

an act of inclusion. The hegemony of privatization silences many other possible

consequences and obscures both the texts we read and the way we read them. There are

other possibilities, and if we read with privatization in mind, there is much more work to

be done. Perhaps, this project can serve as a template for future exploration. If nothing

else, I hope I have left you with two ideas. First, the effects of privatization are harmful.

And secondly, fuck that shit.

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