

# TXSTUR



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# Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal

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# DEAR READER,

We are excited to present to you the Spring 2020 issue of the Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal (TXSTUR). As former editors and authors for this journal, it has been an honor to serve as this year's managing editors. We anticipate TXSTUR to continue to develop further in the years to come and to continue featuring the excellent undergraduate research occurring here at Texas State University. This year's publication reflects years of effort toward promoting undergraduate research at Texas State. We hope that TXSTUR inspires students to believe in their intellectual endeavors and strive to share their research with others.

We would like to especially thank Dr. Ron Haas for his dedication to TXSTUR and his mentorship, as well as Dr. Heather Galloway and the Honors College for their unending support of the editorial team. We would also like to thank all the incredible undergraduate students featured in this issue; we are so proud of our fellow Bobcats and the work they have produced. Finally, we thank our editorial board and faculty reviewers who worked to ensure quality above all else. The journal would not be at the caliber that it is without this collaboration. Because of the unusual semester that we have had, we are especially grateful to everyone choosing to continue to dedicate their time to the journal amidst a global pandemic. This edition of TXSTUR demonstrates the range of undergraduate research happening at Texas State. With articles ranging from focus on epic poems and memes to nuclear weapons and the effect of news bias, this year's edition highlights a variety of voices.

We look forward to seeing the new realms of research Texas State students will explore in the future and encourage our readers to consider publication of their own work in TXSTUR. View our previous publications and find out how to get your work published at our Undergraduate Research website, [txstate.edu/undergraduateresearch/txstur](http://txstate.edu/undergraduateresearch/txstur).

**SINCERELY,**

**KAITLYN BENACQUISTO & KATHRYN MCDANIEL**

*MANAGING EDITORS, TEXAS STATE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL*

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# A DISHONEST WARDROBE

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## FASHION AND COSTUME IN GEOFFERY CHAUCER'S "GENERAL PROLOGUE"

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BY COURTNEY LUDWICK

REVIEWED BY DR. SUSAN MORRISON

EDITED BY KAITLYN BENACQUISTO AND KATHRYN  
MCDANIEL

This paper analyzes fashion in medieval literature as a means of self-representation that reflects the wearer's honesty or dishonesty concerning their struggle with societal status. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer depicts a wealth of characters who capture this honesty and dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century, mirroring dress and self-representation in modern society. How one chooses to present themselves to the world is not only a reflection of themselves. It is also a reflection of how idealized expectations and clothing's illusion affect one's comfort disseminating a true identity. Pieces analyzed include the Knight's armor, the Prioress's gold brooch, the Wife of Bath's red hose and wimple, and other noteworthy costume components demonstrating this Chaucerian concept. However, the idea is paralleled in modern times as well. As brands continue to grow and the apparel industry moves toward fast-fashion models, the lines become blurred, and one can use fashion to either reveal or hide who they really are. In the twenty-first century, clothing can deceive, as copy-cat fabrics and the façade social media and fast fashion facilitate run rampant. In this paper, I assert that dishonest clothing is dress that is selected with the intent or purpose of showing society a form of the individual that is not entirely authentic. Through idiosyncratic apparel descriptions and the use of fashion as a metaphorical device, Chaucer's "General Prologue" serves to highlight this façade—witnessed in both the fourteenth century and today. This paper functions to address the concept of dishonest and honest clothing as it pertains to medieval literature and the implications that arise when viewing the textual evidence under a modern lens.

In another world—in another time—kings, queens, and the noble class were the celebrities of the fourteenth century. Fashion was important as ever, and the clothing someone wore mattered. It was, and continues to be, a representation of a person's place in

society. However, clothing is not always honest. In Chaucer's "General Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales*, the wide range of characters exploit fashion and show the world who they want to be rather than who they really are. This medieval world parallels the one we live in today.

In both medieval and modern society, fashion is a means of self-representation that reflects the wearer's honesty or dishonesty concerning their struggle with societal status. How one chooses to present themselves to the world is not only a reflection of themselves; it is a reflection of how idealized expectations and clothing's illusion affect their comfort disseminating their true identity. As brands continue to grow, the apparel industry moves toward fast-fashion models allowing for the manipulation of dress through integration of cheaper fabrics, knock-off designs, and the rise of social media influencers who presents a façade of themselves to society. The lines become blurred, and one can use fashion to either reveal or hide who they really are. Through idiosyncratic apparel descriptions and the use of fashion as a metaphorical device, Chaucer depicts a wealth of characters who capture the honesty *and* dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century, mirroring modern societal projections of dress and self-representation.

Primarily, Chaucer's contextual descriptions regarding the costume and traits of his characters disclose revealing information about the dishonesty of clothing in the fourteenth century. In turn, the modern reader can connect this with the modern era we live in today. One example of this can be seen in the Knight and the Friar. Regarding the former, Chaucer describes the fourteenth century's chivalric ideal:

*Of fustian he wered a gipoun,  
Al bismotered with his habergeoun,  
For he was late ycome from his viage,  
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.  
(I.75-78)*

One word that is especially important within this passage is "bismotered." The Middle English Dictionary defines it as "bespattered" or "soiled" (MED). Through use of this word, Chaucer

emphasizes the blood-stained armor to demonstrate that the Knight's worthiness is directly tied to his competence in battle and gives the reader their first glance at honest clothing. This honest clothing reconciles the character's real face with the mask shown to the world, and in the Knight's case, his face and mask are unequivocally the same. Echoing this sentiment, Mitchell posits, "...an excellence of strength or power (worthiness) is needed for efficiency

How one chooses to present themselves to the world is not only a reflection of themselves; it is a reflection of how idealized expectations and clothing's illusion affect their comfort disseminating their true identity.

or effectiveness (virtue)...the Knight's bravery is almost synonymous with his efficiency in action" (9). In other words, the Knight shows himself through the virtue of effectiveness in battle and never claims to be anything other than what he is; he never exploits his dress to amend for his downfalls—whatever they may be.

However, the Knight is not the typical character in the society Chaucer describes. In fact, he is a reprieve from the vast majority of characters attempting to hide their downfalls from the world through a selection of clothing specifically designed to trick society into seeing the mask and not the face. One example of this concept is the Friar, who does a good job of presenting this mask

to the world. Chaucer depicts him as a man who "...was lik a maister or a pope" (I.260). Chaucer continues, describing the Friar's dress, "Of double worstede was his semicope..." and paints a picture of the character in exceptionally made clothing and expensive fabrics (I.261). Here, the Friar's costume does not represent him; it represents his unease with his societal status in the fourteenth century. Gerald Morgan encapsulates this idea in his work, stating, "With the Friar there is a marked descent in both the social and moral orders. The double worsted is a good if not fine material but even so at odds with the ideal of evangelical poverty" (2). Although the Friar is poor—although he is expected to wear modest cloths and simple fabrics—his dress sharply juxtaposes this societal expectation of poverty. Rather than embrace his authentic self, the Friar chooses to wear dishonest clothing that draws attention to the fact that he is uncomfortable with his societal status, neglects his duties to the poor although his very title suggests the opposite, and is concurrently aware of how fashion plays a role in portraying this status and lack of concern to the world. Through fashion, individuals tell the world who they are without saying anything. By the contrast between the Knight and the Friar, Chaucer makes the primary distinction between projecting oneself through clothing in either an honest or dishonest way.

The Prioress, the head of an order of nuns, serves as yet another Chaucerian example of a religious figure selecting clothing that challenges their previously established role in society. In the text, Chaucer describes the Prioress as being "...gauded al with grene,/ And theron heng a brooch of gold ful shene..." (I.159-160). Rather than don the religious dress typically worn in an Abbey, the Prioress disregards her role in society

and embraces garish and gaudy costume. Rigby further examines this, arguing, "...it is not (as some critics have claimed) the Prioress's dress which the poet criticizes but rather her failure to live up to the inner moral standard..." (1). So then, it must be assumed that, through her dress, her amorality is publicized and proven to be of a lower standard than fourteenth-century society would expect. Pious, humble, and devoted are a few words which one might attribute to a prioress; however, Chaucer's Prioress, through dishonest clothing, contrasts this expected persona as her vanity in fashion prevails over her consecration to religion.

Likewise, the Monk exhibits comparable traits through costume as well. Of his dress, Chaucer describes:

*I seigh his sleeves purfiled at the hond  
With gris, and that the fineste of a lond;  
And for to festne his hood under his chin  
He hadde of gold ywroght a curious pin... (I.193-196)*

Similar to the Prioress, another religious figure is seen rejecting the typified traits their occupation possesses and instead uses fashion to show the world who they want to be rather than who they actually are. Morgan argues, "The Monk is hardly less of an impressive figure, worthy indeed to follow the Knight in tale-telling on the evidence of 'grys' and 'gold' in his array" (2). In other words, the Monk's clothing is "worthy" enough that he, in the fourteenth century, could stand next to the Knight and be viewed as just as impressive a figure. This concept appears in the Merchant's dress as well. Chaucer states, "...he was in dette,/ So estatly was he of his governaunce,/ With his bargaines and with his chevisaunce" (I.280-282). Here, a similar contradiction is evident as the Merchant—in debt and

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## People exhibit what they want the world to see— whether it's a true reflection of themselves or not.

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reduced to nothing but the clothes on his back—wears clothing that broadcasts precisely the opposite to the world.

However odd this may appear, we do, in fact, witness the same exact occurrence in the twenty-first century as well. These oddities—these portrayals of people and the facilitation through dishonest clothing—happen every day. Throughout the text, Chaucer's characters don dishonest clothing, and today, fast fashion, the rise of style influencers, and the effect of social media allow people to don dishonest clothing as well. In the twenty-first century, clothing has the ability to deceive, as copy-cat fabrics and the façade social media and fast fashion facilitate run rampant. This façade is most prominent when viewing celebrities, and the best modern example of this proves to be none other than musician Taylor Swift. Swift is known around the world, but *how* she is known is dictated by her dress. Her fashion has evolved throughout the decades she has remained in the spotlight, and the clothes she wears greatly dictate how she is viewed by society. Pop culture researcher Lyon posits, "The concept... could also explain why now that Swift is in pop music, she distances herself away from that identity by not using Southern features in her songs or in interviews" (14). In other words, Swift dons dishonest clothing—or clothing that is selected with the intent or purpose of showing society a form of the individual that is not entirely authentic—in order to keep her public persona intact. As seen in Chaucer's work, through the characters' deliberate choices to wear

dress that is inconsistent with their own societal status or authentic self, this concept is nothing new. However, the revolutionary inventions and technological innovations of the modern world have allowed dishonest clothing to grow at an increasing rate that has affected self-representation similar to what is seen in Chaucer's "General Prologue."

Concurrently, the modern closet of the twenty-first century is not so different than the medieval wardrobe of yesteryear. For centuries, humans have been polishing their self-image and subsequently advertising that polished version of themselves to their family, friends, and the rest of the world. In some cases, as seen in Chaucer's Friar, Monk, and Merchant, the changes made to oneself are extreme; in other cases, the polishing is barely noticeable. However, these changes made to oneself and the psychological factors influencing self-representation in both medieval and modern society affect how a person sees not only themselves but others as well. Psychologists Hajo and Galinsky, echo this sentiment in their findings, stating, "The current research provides initial support for our encloded cognition perspective that clothes can have profound and systematic psychological and behavioral consequences for their wearers" (5). In other words, dishonest clothing has the potential to alter "self"-identity and truly change the wearer's view on themselves and the world around them.

The Wife of Bath exemplifies the concept of encloded cognition, and

Chaucer describes her clothing and the woman herself to be representative of sexual prowess (I.445-475). One distinct article of clothing proves to be her red hose—hose that are a clear indication of a deviant and sexual nature (Renn 1). George Renn builds upon this idea, stating, “consistent with and amplifying that view, the red hose may also serve as a self-administered example of the allopathic folk medicine ‘doctrine of signatures’” (2). Here, the hose appears to be an example of the Wife of Bath’s view of herself, and this self-administered image very clearly aligns with how Chaucer and the reader view her as well. Another important piece of clothing encapsulating this idea is none other than the Wife of Bath’s wimple—the headdress adorning the character’s head, neck, and sides of the face. Chaucer states, “Hir coverchiefs ful fine were of ground;/ I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound/ That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed” (I.453-455). As a cloth maker, the Wife of Bath knows the impact fashion has on the individual *and* on society, and she uses these articles of clothing, such as the red hose and the wimple, to dictate how she is viewed by society. Further, these articles of clothing which have come to represent her sexuality have also come to represent the Wife of Bath as well—fully and indefinitely.

As one uses fashion to broadcast their self-image to the world, the distinction becomes blurred. Instead of simply broadcasting traits, an individual wishes to show people or wishes to possess, one ends up becoming their clothing. The lines become altogether

unclear, and fashion takes hold as self-representation becomes skewed. In the modern world, the Wife of Bath appears within everyone. People exhibit what they want the world to see—whether it’s a true reflection of themselves or not.

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**Centuries have passed since the fourteenth century, but the clothes hanging in the closet — and the people selecting the fashions and costume — do not seem to have changed much at all.**

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Psychologist Galinsky posits that, “We think not just with our brains but with our bodies... clothes invade the body and brain, putting the wearer into a different psychological state...” (1). As the years have gone by, the rules of fashion and the act of embracing or rejecting one’s true self through costume have remained largely the same. The

twenty-first century sees the wearer approaching dress as a means to embody their self-identity how they choose to—whether that has honest implications or not—and exhibits how comfortable or uncomfortable an individual is with societal status and self-reflection. Moreover, this self-reflection sheds light on the fashion choices of the individual and reveals how society has taken ahold of the apparel industry and transformed fashion into not only an art but into a means of deception.

Chaucer’s wide variety of characters and the descriptions allocated to them throughout the “General Prologue” provide the reader and the modern century wearer with the primary distinction between honest and dishonest clothing and how that relates to self-representation in both the medieval and modern time periods. Through contextual study of the Knight and the Friar, Chaucer paints a rich picture in which the Knight’s honest clothing sharply contrast with the Friar’s dishonest apparel. The differentiation

between the two provides the reader with their first glimpse into the medieval closet where dishonesty hangs. Through Chaucer's thorough and idiosyncratic descriptions of the wealth of characters within *The Canterbury Tales*, the distinction and the implications that arise are made apparent. Centuries have passed since the fourteenth century, but the clothes hanging in the closet—and the people selecting the fashions and costume—do not seem to have changed much at all. The selection of honest and dishonest fashion has not evolved much since Chaucer delved into his work and characters. People within modern society exploit fashion just as people within the medieval era did. Overall, the deceit that hangs in the medieval closet parallels the contemporary world. Upon peeking inside both closets, they would remain identical—both in the individual's self-perception and consequent self-representation within society and fashion.

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# WAITING FOR DAT BOI: AN ABSURDIST DEFENSE OF INTERNET HUMOR

BY AUBREY CLYBURN  
REVIEWED BY DR. KEVIN GATES  
EDITED BY ANNEKE PATERSON

Internet humor is difficult to define, and it seems not to have been academically codified yet since it is so new. In general, though, its identifiers tend to be that it is often dark, intentionally confusing, and almost indecipherable to older generations

While the generation gap is nothing new, it has been sharpened by the disparity in technological literacy and the development of an internet culture that often excludes older generations, especially “boomers.” In reaction, this gap often manifests in accusing Gen Z of blindness to the real world or dismissing them altogether. In an effort to bridge that divide, this paper describes and analyzes “internet humor” using the framework of a post-World War II phenomenon, the Theatre of the Absurd, and treats that phenomenon’s response to the postwar landscape as an analogue to the current landscape. This paper contends that internet memes are an artistic reaction to the chaotic, doomsaying world that Gen Z is growing up in. It establishes a schema in which those struggling to connect with young people could unlock the secret to understanding how Gen Z looks at, laughs at, and participates in the world around them.

Over the past decade or so, an abundance of literature has flourished on the topic of millennials: which industries they are responsible for killing, what they think about certain political issues, and opinions of every kind on their characteristics as a demographic. Now a new generation is about to get the brunt of social analysis, statistics, and op-eds trying to explain why they are the way they are. Meet Generation Z: the current high schoolers and young adults born after 1997. These are the kids for whom the internet and social media have always been present, and who have developed an online culture that frankly baffles older generations. As a result, they are often branded as ignorant or indifferent to the real world by those outside that culture. However, to dismiss them this way is to discard a valuable opportunity to understand what makes them tick. A framework in which to do this can be found in a theatrical phenomenon from the era of the G.I. Generation: the Theatre of the Absurd.

It might be called Gen Z humor or “internet humor”: the weird collective sense of humor belonging to the generation that grew up on the internet. It does not pervade the entire vastness of the internet, of course, but is exemplified on websites like Tumblr and Twitter, the spawning ground of memes: places where younger people gather and interact. Internet humor is difficult to define, and it seems not to have been academically codified yet since it is so new. In general, though, its identifiers tend to be that it is often dark, intentionally confusing, and almost indecipherable to older generations. Much of it seems like nonsense, but creating art that challenges its audience by disorienting them is nothing new. Internet humor’s closest extant cousin in the visual art world might be Dadaism, the movement arising after World War I

that emphatically rejected logic, reason, and hierarchy, and was made to draw a reaction from its audience (Gaudin). After the next world war, the performing arts world responded with its own genre-defying school that reveled in its lack of structure: the Theatre of the Absurd.

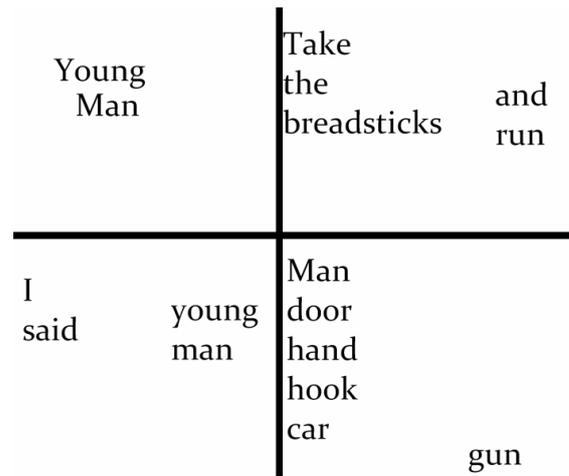
The Theatre of the Absurd was born out of the existentialist philosophy of the 1940s, which sprang from the tensions of living in the post-WWII era (Culíí). Stable-seeming institutional frameworks, such as the church and the state, failed to protect people from the chaos of the war, leaving the survivors with a world that did not make sense. Furthermore, the horrors of wartime and the Holocaust, plus the added threat of nuclear annihilation, brought to the forefront the idea that human life was fragile, easily destroyed, and possibly arbitrary (Culíí). Existentialist Albert Camus, writing in 1942, outlined his viewpoint in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in which he compared the human condition to the pointless eternal task of pushing a boulder up a hill and having it roll back down every time (“Absurd Existences” 216). Without intending to create anything like a “movement,” but all operating out of the same recently decimated world, a number of individual playwrights over the next couple of decades began to express this philosophy in their works. Critic Martin Esslin, in his 1962 article “The Theatre of the Absurd,” took the term “absurd” from Camus and used it to try to codify what was happening in this new theatre-that-was-not-theatre.

Absurdist plays illustrate the meaningless chaos of human life by depicting characters engaged in some kind of profoundly pointless exercise, whether that is waiting for a person who will never arrive (*Waiting for Godot*), or continually setting up and pretending an elaborate murder (*The Maids*). The

play is carefully set up not to make sense: time, setting, character, and other such elements, which in conventional theatre might be fixed and followable, are either variable or completely unstated (Esslin 3). For this reason, the Theatre of the Absurd is sometimes called “anti-theatre” (Culíí). In Harold Pinter’s *Endgame*, Hamm asks what time it is and Clov replies “Same as usual.” Setting, if there is any at all, is so vague and ill-defined as to be essentially meaningless: *Waiting for Godot* is famously staged near a country road with one tree. Characters may have defined traits or relationships, but even those are not reliable: the Martins of *The Bald Soprano* appear to be perfect strangers, but discover through comparing their lives that they are in fact a married couple. Language, too, is meaningless. Much of the dialogue lives in repetition & distortion – Esslin calls it “the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases” (5).

The conventions of internet humor, while still elusive to anyone who has not grown up within them, display parallels to the conventions of absurdist theatre. The most ubiquitous unit of internet humor – the meme – relies on repetition and distortion, which are the linguistic habits of the Theatre of the Absurd. Time and place are not only undefined; they do not matter in the slightest in a meme. Characters may appear very specific, but in general it does not matter who they are— only the expression on their face is significant. For example, even if the meme is a picture of SpongeBob, it is not important to the joke that the character is SpongeBob; what matters is the feeling he appears to convey, which can then be captioned with whatever relatable situation or topical quip the meme-maker desires. The content is mostly referential to existing ideas and cultural concepts, but quickly becomes so warped, inverted, and cross-pollinated

with other memes that to all but the most plugged-in viewer, it is virtually meaningless. One example is the meme in figure 1:

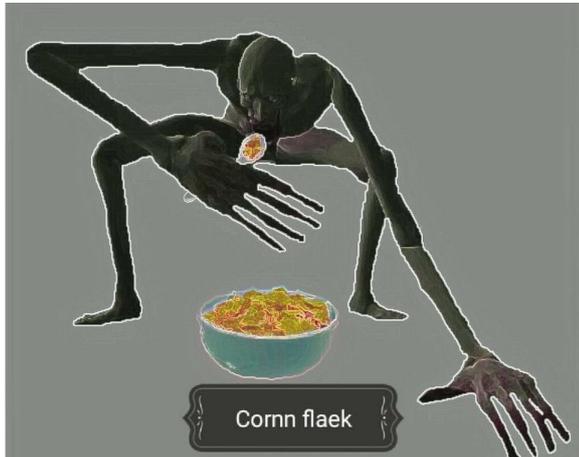


**Figure 1.** “Memeception.”  
 @plaid-n-converse, *Tumblr*, 3 Aug. 2016, <http://plaid-n-converse.tumblr.com/image/148396874485>

This image references four previous memes. One is parodying the lyrics to “YMCA,” one is the “(shoving breadsticks into my purse)” meme, one is an attempted creepy internet story that gradually devolved in coherence and ended in the words “Man door hand hook car door,” and the format is a reference to a cartoon called “Loss” that became a meme. It appears clever to someone who knows all the references being made. To anyone unfamiliar with the layers of meaning embedded in this image – anyone who lives outside the culture of Gen Z’s internet – it appears to be complete nonsense.

Crucially, this intricate senselessness is what Generation Z loves. They revel in this “giant emptiness of meaning,” a “giant race to the bottom of irony” (Bruenig). They think it is absolutely hilarious. The more inexplicable it is to the out-group (i.e. older generations), the better. Madeleine

Gaudin, managing arts editor of the Michigan Daily, aptly notes that “Memes are better when they reference other memes. Jokes are smarter when they reference other jokes.” A step further in, internet humor that exists outside the confines of a meme structure can be even weirder. Often, even to its target



**Figure 2.** “Cornn flaek.” *Reddit*, 3 Jul. 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/8vy13u/cornn\\_flaek/](https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/8vy13u/cornn_flaek/)

audience, it is not supposed to make sense.

In fig. 2, unlike the previous meme, there is no deeper layer or hidden reference out of which someone could make some meaning. It may be alarming, discomfiting, and/or hilarious, but not sensical. It is emphatically not supposed to make sense. It is supposed to make the viewer feel something, and not necessarily something they want to feel. The same idea is evident in the culture of Tumblr text posts, which are, again, hard to categorize in a scholarly manner, but can be summarized by this Tumblr post:

*“one of the weirdest ways that language is evolving in response to the internet is that “bad words” just*

*do not have the same impact anymore. i constantly forget that some people think ‘[f\*\*\*] you’ is a terrible insult so threats and insults have to start getting really out there if the person wants to even mean anything. if a person told me to die i’d shrug it off but if i opened a post’s tags and saw “op i will sneak into your house and replace all your shoelaces with cooked pasta” do you know how shaken i’d be? do you know how upset i’d be if i saw “op is the personification of the look you share w other people in the grocery store when some dude is causing A Scene™ for no reason.”*  
 (@feywildwest)

This phenomenon of crafting content to disarm and unsettle the viewer aligns exactly with the effect of absurdist plays on their audiences. People like to know when and where they are, and absurdist plays remorselessly rob them of their bearings, leaving them uncomfortable at best and angry at worst. Bereft of all logical indicators and faced with a situation that

**The most ubiquitous unit of internet humor —the meme—relies on repetition and distortion, which are the linguistic habits of the Theatre of the Absurd.**

does not – in fact, cannot – make sense, the average viewer of an absurdist play is left bewildered, struggling for meaning, and deeply, existentially uneasy. The difference with Gen Z is that they find that effect funny. Even when they are the ones being directly unsettled, they are ready to laugh about it, even if they cannot explain exactly why. A modern audience of teenagers watching *Waiting for Godot* would probably be in stitches watching the tramps try to reckon with

# They grew up on the internet. Since they were born, every part of the world has known all the terrible things happening in every other part.

the nonsense around them. It would be like experiencing one giant, extended meme: funny, baffling, and intensely relatable.

Why do they match up so well? What is it about living as a member of Generation Z that makes them *like that*? Absurdism centers on the Sisyphean exercise: continuing to try and achieve a task that has no meaning. The next generation up,

millennials, live under what BuzzFeed culture writer Anne Helen Petersen calls “millennial burnout”: working incessantly harder to make it in a job market, housing market, etc. that is set up for them not to. Gen Z is in a similar, if not worse, situation.

Nothing is promised to Gen Z except uncertainty and the threat of disaster, sensations that were endemic to the postwar landscape in which the Theatre of the Absurd flourished. Not only are they looking forward to crushing student debt, if they don’t die in a school shooting, but they will only have a couple of years to enjoy it before irreversible climate change wipes out the world as they know it. And they have always known this. They grew up on the internet. Since they were born, every part of the world has known

all the terrible things happening in every other part. Millennials were promised an easy future if they worked hard, only to discover it had all been empty (Petersen). Gen Z has no such illusions.

Even in the face of this uncertainty and disaster, they are neither lazy nor apathetic, but politically and socially active. Recent years have seen a swell in student activism comparable to the

1960s, around issues from gun violence to environmental justice (Jason). Young people like Greta Thunberg, the Parkland students behind #NeverAgain, Mari Copeny (“Little Miss Flint”), and others have become the face of current issues like climate change and

gun control. Gen Z knows the world is ridiculous and meaningless, but they are determined to try and make it better anyway. They are absurdists to their core. They see their Sisyphean situation for what it is, and just as Camus advocates, joyfully continue pushing their boulders uphill. The nihilist despairs at how terrible, complicated, and fragile the world is; the existentialist notes the unknowability of its meaning and strives to create meaning anyway; the absurdist laughs at how pointless it all is, makes a

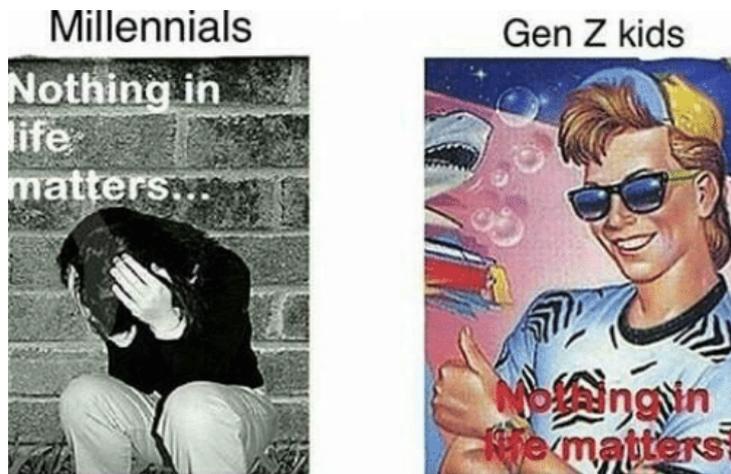


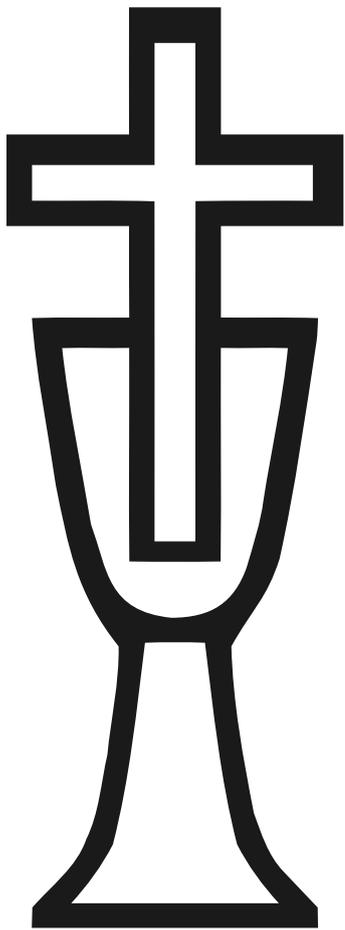
Figure 3. “Gen Z Kids.” @iskinaary, Tumblr, 23 Jun. 2017, <http://iskinaary.tumblr.com/post/162180467010/gen-z-kids-dont-give-a-single-fuck-and-theyre>

meme out of it, and keeps on pushing. There may be no inherent meaning to life, but that realization also means they are free, “and this release expresses itself in laughter” (Esslin 13). The unique outlook of this generation, as compared to millennials, might be best expressed in the meme pictured in figure 3.

All things considered, it seems as though the artistic ideals (or lack thereof) of the Theatre of the Absurd might be exactly the framework with which to understand Generation Z. The conventions of absurdist theatre are familiar principles to young people raised in the culture of the internet, and they are able to find hilarity in the bizarre and unsettling world of that theatre. They recognize the comic figure of the Absurd because they see it in themselves. Their gloriously indecipherable memes can be understood as a product of the doom-laden uncertainty of the world they are growing up in, a philosophical embrace of the senseless chaos they have been given. Viewing internet humor as an artistic movement in reaction to this world will not only allow older generations a glimpse into the minds of their successors, but it should also draw admiration to the youngest generation. Gen Z are absurdist heroes, triumphing over meaninglessness by refusing to let it crush them. Anyone wishing to understand or relate to the kids these days has only to look through the absurdity to the heart of meme culture.

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# AND THE WINNER FOR BEST ABORTION GIRL IS:

## Performance and Religious Identity in Evangelical Hell Houses

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Hell Houses have terrified spectators for the last forty years. Developing first as a religious haunted house and eventually morphing into a sensation, Hell Houses have been a topic for many researchers due to their ability to scare people into belief. However, much of this rhetoric is reductionistic of Hell Houses, claiming they are formed only to scare. The research laid out here tries to understand the connection between identity creation and performance through the analysis of George Ratliff's 2001 documentary *Hell House*. The Evangelical Christian identity is laced with

historical subtext and built through a multitude of religious figures and movements. Specifically, three religious figures or movements are fundamental in understanding Hell Houses: George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening, Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostal movement, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Performance is one tool harnessed by preachers in the Evangelical Christian tradition. My research attempts to explain that Hell Houses are not just events made to scare, but to construct Evangelical Christian identity and a political agenda through performance.

Since 1991, the Trinity Church in Cedar Hill, Texas, has performed a “creative alternative to the traditional haunted house” that features varying hellish scenes that range from year to year and offer “real life situations” meant to be “ambiguous” for the spectators (“Hell House”). Hell Houses have been described as nothing more than “a spatial sermon that culminates in a virtual tour of Hell.” These attractions portray “young Christian actors moaning and writhing in the flickering redness of special effects” (Jackson 42). Prior research on these performances depicts them as bastions of fear mongering used to incite terror in the viewers in a ham-fisted effort to inspire conversions. Prior research additionally focuses on the fear-based “scare-to-salvation” and “religious feelings” produced through viewing these performances (Jackson 42). For example, fear is what first comes to mind when seeing a depressed adolescent commit suicide or an AIDS victim die in the hospital. While such a visceral reaction is appropriate, research which focuses only on this reaction is ultimately reductionistic; it serves to explain away Hell Houses as a simplistic expression of Evangelical intolerance.

There is more to these performances than simply arousing fear in the unbaptized and unchurched; both watching and performing in a Hell House bolster the “saved” and “unsaved” identities central to Evangelical Christianity. Fear and performance together, therefore, create this identity for those who participate—an identity that is explicitly political. From the research, the Evangelical Christian identity can be defined as non-denominational, conversion-focused, and aimed toward social transformation (Carter and Porter 4). Moreover, through analyzing the 2001 documentary *Hell House* directed by George Ratliff, this paper will argue

that Evangelical Christians perform Hell Houses not simply as a means of fear-based conversion, but also as a means of creating and cementing Evangelical Christian identity as an integral component of a larger political agenda.

## **Understanding Hell Houses and Primary Source *Hell House* (2001)**

Hell Houses represent a twist on the regular horror spectacles of the Halloween season. Hell Houses originated in 1972 from the Reverend Jerry Falwell’s youth ministry at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. His event was titled Scaremare and was “designed to illustrate the consequences of sin with documentary realism in the context of a haunted house” (Bivins 132). Scaremare was ultimately more of a religious haunted house but was equally influential in the development of Hell Houses, such as the one at Trinity Church.

More recently, Ratliff’s 2001 documentary was filmed in the height of Hell Houses’ popularity. At the start of the film, the audience is first introduced to the Trinity Church community in the preliminary planning phases of the Hell House. Planning for the Hell House begins in August in preparation for a public opening in early October. For most Hell Houses, there is a range of seven to ten scenes. There is a great deal of discussion surrounding the exact content of these scenes, but Tim Ferguson, Trinity Church’s youth pastor, states that the Hell House deals with themes of “family violence, suicide, abortion, drugs, alcohol, [and] drunkenness” (qtd. in Ratliff). A major focus is placed on themes culturally relevant at the time; for example, at the 2000 Hell House depicted in the documentary, a scene inspired by the Columbine Shooting is

portrayed. After selecting the relevant social themes, the church implements a creative twist, making the scenes explicitly religious. Following scene development, scripts are written for each respective scene. What then ensues is a complex auditioning process where a great number of church congregants vie for specific roles. There are only four major female parts, with the “suicide girl” and “abortion girl” among the most prized by the congregants (Ratliff). Copious numbers of volunteers assist with the physical labor in the production, as there are complex set designs and an intricate ensemble of technical and acting roles.

For many of the individuals involved in the production, this work is not only theatrical, but spiritual as well. Ratliff’s documentary focuses both on the Hell House event and the spiritual perspectives of the church’s congregation. The burning question throughout the documentary is “Why do these Evangelical Christians believe what they believe? Why do they think this is appropriate?” As noted by Jason Bivins, Brian Jackson, and the documentarian Ratliff himself, Hell Houses certainly aim to produce fear in their audience. Brian Jackson, a researcher in English rhetoric, states in his article on Hell Houses that such events employ “*argumentum ad baculum*” or the “warning that some bad or scary outcome will occur if the respondent does not carry out a recommended action” (44).

Jackson links this contemporary religious technique with similar efforts to arouse fear through religious sermons in the First Great Awakening, citing a connection to Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a prominent Protestant preacher during this period and was known for cementing “hell fire rhetoric” in his sermons. This rhetoric would later be influential in serving as “a prototype”

for Hell Houses (Jackson 44). Bivins, a religious studies scholar, posits in his 2008 book that “erotics of fear” are at play, where Hell Houses gleefully represent “sin and evil” to “establish security of conservative evangelical culture and belief” (141). Such emphasis on producing fear as a primary means to conversion is evident in the way Hell House participants discuss their work in the documentary. Applying this idea to youth pastor Tim Ferguson, the documentary shows him rhetorically asking his committee, “Is our youth ministry, and even our church, driven by fear? No. Is fear a part of it? Absolutely.” Ferguson later states in an orientation meeting that “we’re competing for lost souls” and “we’re trying to partner with God to bring them to eternal life” (qtd. in Ratliff).

Many scholars, therefore, are taking the statements of the Trinity Church at face value and stating that this event is primarily about fear-based conversions. However, more is going on here. Perhaps if it were actually all about fear, there would not be such a rush to play “abortion girl.” There is a complex interplay between performance, identity, and religion on display in the documentary which remains largely unexamined by contemporary commentators. What this paper seeks to understand is how Hell Houses reflect

**There is a complex interplay between performance, identity, and religion on display in the documentary which remains largely unexamined by contemporary commentators.**

the roots of the Evangelical Christian identity historically and what is the nexus between performance, identity, and political agenda.

### **Evangelical Christian Identity**

As with the understanding of any widely encompassing identity, religious identity is fluid and can be understood best through its historical context. To understand the development of contemporary Evangelical Christian identity and its deployment in the production of Hell Houses, we must discern three historical events in Evangelicalism in America: George Whitefield and the First Great Awakening, Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostal Movement, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. These events are not the only pivotal times through which Evangelical Christians have cemented performance as a foundational part of their identity, but their effects continue to be evident in the Trinity Church community.

In the history and development of Evangelical Christianity, George Whitefield was a well-known English Methodist preacher. Whitefield was a revolutionary in his religious innovation of "rhetoric and communications" during the period of American history that has come to be called the First Great Awakening, roughly between the 1730s and 1740s. The purpose and importance of the First Great Awakening was the creation of a "new religious enthusiasm" amongst the church (Carter and Porter 1). The spread of Evangelical Christianity was influential in the transformation of social norms. Whitefield's ability to persuade was particularly influential in this transformation toward an Evangelical spirit. His presentations to huge audiences were meant to catalyze a "dialogue between the speaker and the hearer." Whitefield, unlike some of his contemporaries, understood the "rhetoric of sensation" and was able to rouse the

passions of his spectators (Carter and Porter 4). This resulting blur between church and theater would be influential not only to the eventual creation of an Evangelical Christian identity, but also to the legacy of sensationalism that would contribute to the modern Hell House. A sermon that particularly exhibited his theatricality was centered on the Biblical scene of "Abraham Offering His Son." During this famous sermon, Whitefield stopped and wept to "momentarily halt the discourse" (Carter and Porter 4). Without prescience, Whitefield would usher in revivals, theatricality, and performance as institutions in the Evangelical Christian tradition.

Roughly a hundred years later, Evangelical Christianity would continue to transform. The Pentecostals were a religious movement born out of the Azusa street revivals in Los Angeles. Although starting on the West coast, this movement spread rapidly throughout America and the global South, particularly after the 1914 meeting in Hot Springs, Arkansas, during which the movement became separated into several other denominations. The Pentecostal movement was a theology and religious practice. While not every Evangelical engages in Pentecostal style worship today, most Pentecostals see themselves as part of the Evangelical Christian movement. In fact, there are hundreds of Pentecostal denominations today (Ahlstrom 820). Components of Pentecostal practice influenced the larger understanding of Evangelical identity. The use of "performance" as a part of everyday church was a large aspect of the Pentecostal influence. Ministers used their authority to "call down spontaneous eruptions of speaking in tongues" which was characteristic of these worship services (Fitzgerald 212). The purpose of speaking in tongues was to reinforce a belief that

“the supernatural was real, present, powerful, and often even visible” (Bauer 46). However, this defining aspect was not the only distinctive feature of this church. They also have “a strong belief in divine healing, a distrust of medical care, and an extremely Puritanical code of personal behavior” (Ahlstrom 820). Compared to non-Pentecostal services at the time, the performative aspects of the Pentecostal tradition were very distinct. The Pentecostals’ religious evangelism and these unique practices did not deter attendees. Rather, small aspects of Pentecostalism disseminated throughout other churches in forms of folk religion or popular beliefs about the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals’ adherence to these religious practices was influential in cementing a “theological[ly] conservative” identity and outlook (Ahlstrom 820). These factors were influential not only in forming a religious identity, but also in impacting performance through the practice of speaking tongues. While Pentecostal Christians do not consider them a performance, these various actions represent an outward manifestation of what are supposedly internal states.

Aimee Semple McPherson was a Pentecostal emblematic for her use of performance. During the late 1920s and 30s, her style of preaching utilized the increasingly popular performative aspects of the Pentecostal movement. Semple McPherson was a product of the Pentecostal movement and converted in a revival. She has been characterized as “a prophet, evangelist, storyteller, and performer” (Maddux 295). Her style of church became its own denomination of the Pentecostal movement, known as the Foursquare Church. During the development of her church, certain distinctions emerged among Evangelical Christians. Evangelical discourse increasingly included “a narrative, experiential framework toward reaching

more people” that thrived “in revivals and worship services” (Maddux 295). She would later become a popular preacher and sought to bring the “Christian gospel to mass audiences” either through revivals or her Angelus Temple (Maddux 306). These massive revivals featured hundreds of believers who “spoke in tongues and convulsed on the floor” (Maddux 312).

In 1926, McPherson was accused of faking her kidnapping to Los Angeles police and was prosecuted by a grand jury, but her case was later dismissed by the Los Angeles District Attorney. Her sermon the following Sunday after the grand jury verdict featured “seven young actors made up as demons, rising out of painted craters, and holding a meeting to discredit McPherson’s character.” The sermon ended with two more actors dressed as angels where “one brandished the sword of truth, while the other carried a chain to bind the devil and his lies” (Bauer 53). These theatrical performances served a clear message that the Devil sought to ruin her reputation; although she was never convicted, the mere accusation of her wrongdoing was enough for her to use her religion to create a particular narrative for her followers. In the broad perspective of Evangelical Christianity, she was influential in popularizing performance and cementing it as part of conversion technique, which would later impact the development of Hell House performances.

Lastly, Jerry Falwell’s impact on the political aspects of contemporary Evangelical Christian identity was monumental. Falwell’s political activism was catalyzed following the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Although common perception of the religious right view *Roe v. Wade* as the catalyst for their political involvement, it was in fact this case as well as *Green v.*

*Kennedy* in 1970 and *Green v. Connally* in 1977. When the federal government started to enforce desegregation in public schools, private religious white-only K-12 academies were formed in retaliation. The result of these two latter cases was the United States district court for the District of Columbia ruling that “racially discriminatory private schools are not entitled to the Federal tax exemption provided for charitable, educational institutions” (Balmer). This situation started the fundamental undercurrents for the religious right and Falwell’s Moral Majority.

Later in the 1970s, Falwell worked with Paul Weyrich, founder of the Heritage Foundation, and other religious conservatives to politically advocate against school desegregation and galvanize religious conservatives. His 1979 formation and organization of the political organization and action group Moral Majority defined, inspired, and mobilized a “Christian agenda” against what he saw as the rising tide of secular humanism. In addition, Falwell

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## Falwell’s impact on Evangelical Christianity transformed their beliefs into something explicitly political.

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and Weyrich worked with Francis A. Schaffer, a conservative political activist, to goad fervor over the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* court decision (Balmer). Most political observers at the time did not anticipate the rise of the Christian right. Religion had previously been relegated to the private sphere and understood as something separate from politics. However, a growing tide of people such as Pat Robertson, Phyllis Schlafly, and, of course, Jerry Falwell himself began to push back against what they saw as a

culture that “had fallen into evil ways” and “jeopardized their covenant with God.” Falwell pushed for Christians to become involved in their government or “lose their freedom”(Fitzgerald 307). By politicizing Evangelicalism, Evangelical Christians gained a platform to persuade society toward their identity. This persuasion was funneled through cooperation with politicians such as Ronald Reagan. Falwell’s initiatives reverberated throughout Evangelical Christianity. He even started the process of convincing fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and conservative Southern Baptists to “work for common goals without compromising their theology” (Fitzgerald 318). Falwell’s impact on Evangelical Christianity transformed their beliefs into something explicitly political. As a result, Falwell’s impact on the Evangelical Christian identity is crucial to understanding the purpose of Hell Houses.

When combining the historical developments in Evangelical Christianity and the conclusions of the documentary, there is a clear pattern of tools that church leaders have used to build identity. In the very beginnings of Evangelical Christianity, George Whitefield established theater and sensation as a powerful tool to connect to congregations and elicit religious devotion. Aimee Semple McPherson and the Pentecostals took this revivalism and added other performative actions to continue belief. Lastly, Jerry Falwell’s political organizing shifted the agenda of Evangelical Christianity. The culturally conservative politics of Evangelical Christians combined with the performative aspect of revivals provide the optimal breeding grounds for the Hell House. As we shall see in the next section, they go beyond merely

fear-based conversion efforts to act as an important force to build identity within Evangelical Christian circles.

## Performativity and Hell Houses

As a theatrical experience, Hell Houses are a performance aimed at transforming culture. In one sermon shown in Ratliff's *Hell House*, the head pastor states, "Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to infect the culture. We are set to do the same thing Jesus came to do... We are here to infiltrate the culture. We are here, to expose the futility of selfishness and the demonic influence." However, a great deal of this paper is trying to understand how such performative aspects relate to the development of the Evangelical Christian identity.

Though focusing primarily on the development of gender, Judith Butler is a pioneer in theorizing performance as a constructor of identity. Butler argues that gender, and indeed all identity, is a fundamentally performative act—a trait which she calls "performativity." Performativity can be thought of as a nonverbal social action meant to regulate identity. Butler posits that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (34). While Butler theorized primarily about gender, we can apply the idea of "performativity" to a wide variety of identity constructions. As gender is performative, we may argue that the Evangelical Christian identity, and all religious identities for that matter, are also constructed through performativity. Hell Houses, therefore, represent a site of performative construction of identity. For example, Butler discusses how Drag is an exaggerated performance of the female

identity (185). Likewise, Hell Houses are an exaggeration of religious devotion. For many, the drastic depiction of Hell in our unwise actions is the only way to convince others of salvation. These depictions reinforce a dichotomy between the "saved" and the "unsaved," thus reinforcing an Evangelical Christian identity through the performance of Hell Houses. In the latter half of the *Hell House* documentary, it is reiterated that the crew is "competing for lost souls" and that they are "trying to partner with God to bring them eternal life" (Ratliff).

Just as gender is a construction of social institutions, religious identity is a construction of institutions such as the church and its rituals. Butler argues that "gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the ideas of gender" (190). With respect to religious belief, this identity would not exist without the rituals and performances of the religion. Evangelical Christians speaking in tongues, attending religious services, and putting on Hell Houses are all constructed facets of religious identity. The "punishments that attend with not agreeing to believe in them" are many when speaking of religious identity (Butler 190). The agenda, religion, and ideology are all tied to social community; failure to participate in these religious acts leads to ostracism and isolation from the community. This threat of isolation is a psychological exploitation

**Just as gender is a construction of social institutions, religious identity is a construction of institutions such as the church and its rituals.**

by Hell Houses. Furthermore, by performing in and spectating a Hell

House, individuals are reminded of their damnation, religious identity, and personal values. The revivals utilized by Whitefield and Pentecostals play into a similar psychological aspect that Hell Houses do when concerning community. When spectators finish the tour of the Hell House, they are asked to reaffirm their faith based on the experience. Ultimately, they are asked to conform to this Evangelical Christian identity and truth. Although Hell Houses are not the only factor to identity creation, they play a part in the same vein that revivals do.

Butler states that gender is an act, with this performative action requiring repetition. Religious identity, too, is built through “reenactment and reexperience.”. Those that perform in Hell Houses perform each scene repeatedly. With each meeting, rehearsal, and tour the actors “ritualize” the experience (Butler 191). They are convinced of the legitimacy of their feelings towards abortion, homosexuality, and religion. Religious identity, just like gender, is determined by time and the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 191). This identity building goes beyond Hell Houses and encompasses the whole church. The repetition of church attendance, Holy Communion, and even the songs sung in community meetings also feed into this identity over time.

Attendance of the Hell House is also a public action. The pressure to conform to religious identity espoused by the church is received by spectators and the crew. Involvement, technical advising, and acting to large audiences builds this identity. The “appearance of substance” Butler argues is where is the audience and the performer “come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (192). We can rightly assume that in the conclusion of the Hell House that those who performed the characters and

those that witnessed them are further tied to the religious identity of Evangelical Christianity. The relationship between Hell House performers and spectators is a two-way street that reaffirms or changes the identities of both parties.

Butler’s concepts of performativity, when applied to Hell Houses, explain a complex aspect not explored by previous research. Hell Houses use psychological exploitation, repetition, and public action to build pieces of Evangelical Christian identity for individuals. In addition to supporting preexisting concepts of identity, those who enact Hell Houses use performance to shift the current political narrative to their own beliefs.

## **The Politics of Hell Houses**

Hell Houses do more than simply reinforce Evangelical Christian identity, they also explicitly orient that identity toward political action and social transformation. The cultural politics of Hell Houses are an overlooked aspect of their performance. A great deal of the beliefs espoused by Evangelical Christians and specifically Hell Houses are deeply conservative. The connection can be drawn back to Falwell’s Moral Majority between the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Robertson’s Christian Coalition in the 1990s. These two movements not only cemented the idea that Evangelical Christians had a culture to fight for, but also strengthened the conservative ideals already present amongst them. This cultural fight was even more poignant in the context of *Hell House*. Since *Hell House* takes place in the aftermath of 9/11 and other tragedies such as the Columbine shooting, there was a push to reassert conservative Christian values amongst Evangelical Christian communities. Evangelical Christians saw these tragedies as *opportunities* to gain converts. In Dave Cullen’s book *Columbine*, he describes

how Evangelical Christians descended on Columbine. Evangelical Christians saw it as “an obligation to stand up for Jesus,” and one Evangelical Christian pastor even approved of “using the massacre for recruitment” (206). This period cemented a political conversation about the Evangelical Christianity and conservative political values.

Cultural politics, Evangelicalism, and the concept of performativity combine to build a potent formula for identity creation in these Christian communities. In Ratliff’s documentary, one scene connects the moralizing and political agenda of Hell Houses. The spectators are introduced to a young gay man dying of AIDS in a hospital room assisted on his side by his female friend. A demon leers over him, mocking him for “choosing” his gay lifestyle, insinuating that it was the cause of his AIDS. Just after we are introduced to this young man, a young girl is brought in hemorrhaging from a botched abortion pill. This dichotomy is critical in understanding the Evangelical Christian political agenda. In the boy’s final moments of life, he is tormented by images of Hell, and his female friend urges him to “give [his] life to Jesus.”. He yells “I hate you, God” and rejects faith, and it is implied the demon in the hospital room takes him to Hell. Just as the girl is about to die, she pleads “God help me” and is saved in her final moments (Ratliff). The scene clearly communicates that Evangelical Christians understand what will damn a person to Hell and that an adherence to their identity is the only salvation.

The images of the scenes described above serve a purpose. Politics are integral to the creation of a group identity, just as action and performance contribute to an individual identity. By presenting these contrasting images, the audience is forced to accept that members of the LGBTQIA+ community

are in fact deserving of going to Hell for their poor choices. In a scene from the documentary, a group of teenagers confronts the security guard after the performance, angry at the suggestion that the gay man would go to Hell (Ratliff). This situation reasserts a claim made throughout the documentary that Evangelical Christians can know with certainty what activities will damn people to Hell. Most Evangelical Christians who attend a Hell House are either believers or half-way to becoming a believer. The performance serves to construct a moral sensibility for Evangelical Christian spectators; they are “good” and their secular opponents, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are “evil”. Thus, Hell Houses help Evangelical Christians maintain their beliefs and political agenda by communicating them to other people and making it clear that they believe these views come from God Himself.

There is great historical context that overlays the social dynamics of the Evangelical Christian church community. Falwell wrote that America faced a moral crisis that impacted the sanctity of the family. He claimed that abortions, homosexuality, and drugs were all proof of a movement toward an “amoral society where nothing is absolutely right or absolutely wrong” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 366). The larger argument was that Christians needed to take up arms “against social ills.” The Christian coalition urged a “pro-family” political viewpoint and the protection of “traditional values” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 366). The close connection to institutions of power such as the President reinforces the connection between Evangelicalism and conservatism. But overall, this political agenda is part of building the Evangelical Christian identity that exists within the context of Hell Houses. It reiterates that some are deserving of Heaven and some

are damned to Hell, with this attitude in line with the conservative political agenda. The purpose of Hell Houses is to tie together the Evangelical Christian identity, religious performativity, and the political agenda of this group.

## Conclusion

In the last scene of the documentary, Ratliff leaves us with the Evangelical Christian understanding that the end times are near, and our salvation should be of utmost importance. This urgent reiteration of evangelism connects to the understanding that those who have viewed a Hell House must conform or be damned. The whole documentary serves a purpose to reinforce the institutions through which identity is created. The people who participated are also the products of the performance. From its start in 1991 to 2001, the film states that 75,000 people have visited the Hell House at Trinity Church, with 15,000 converting or recommitting (Ratliff).

Within the context of the history and politics of Evangelical Christianity, Hell Houses play a unique role. Just as other Evangelical Christian communities use performance, so does the community who attends Trinity Church. Hell Houses use fear as a tactic not only to urge attendance in their congregation, but also to reinforce identity. Identity, as discussed, is complex. There are multiple psychological, social, and religious tactics used implicitly and explicitly by Evangelical Christian communities. Although the Trinity Church and any community that performs Hell Houses would say they only serve a religious function, that perspective would be reductive of the history and research surrounding these performances. They reinforce what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. Hell Houses moreover serve the political agenda that Evangelical Christians enforce in their community; according

to them, their political viewpoint is not a gray issue, but black-and-white. When spectating and performing a Hell House, personal salvation is on the line. These performative experiences show that it takes constant work to maintain the Evangelical Christian worldview, which might disintegrate otherwise. In the larger perspective, Hell Houses are a facet of a constant effort to justify beliefs and communicate them to a wider audience beyond true believers. After all, salvation is on the line.

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# BEHIND THE SCREENS: A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN FILMMAKING

By Mackenzie Acree  
Reviewed by Alan Schaefer  
Edited by Heather Hansen

The following paper explores the often-ignored role of women in the film industry in both European cinema of the 1960's and the international Hollywood of today. The thesis focuses on an understanding of the underrepresented work of female directors and crew, and how this affects the current climate for women filmmakers in Hollywood as well as the future of diversity in the film industry. The paper describes the extensive contributions of such highly praised film editors as Denise De Casabianca, as well as female directors of the era (which were much fewer and further between) like Agnès Varda, who was a key player in the French New Wave. It then moves into the modern era with a statistical analysis of current Hollywood gender demographics and focus on the work of acclaimed director Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to win the Academy Award for best director. The paper concludes on a prescriptive note, calling for the promotion and incentivization of diversity in both the stories told on screen and the people working behind the camera in Hollywood.

When Alice Guy-Blaché became the first woman to direct a film, the art form was still in its infancy. Her first project, *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896) is considered by respected author and professor of film at Columbia University, Jane M. Gaines, to be one of the first narrative films ever produced (Gaines 1300). Guy-Blaché was a pioneer of this new field and the techniques of narrative filmmaking, but these accomplishments are usually attributed to the big names of the time, like Georges Méliès and the Lumière Brothers (Gaines 1298). The work of women filmmakers has been systematically devalued by the male-dominated film industry, but their contributions have helped shape both historical movements in cinema and contemporary film. Studying and incentivizing women's role in creating cinematic culture will promote diversity and innovation in the film industry and give overdue recognition to those who came before.

While the role of editor and the importance of their work is often overshadowed by that of the director, skilled women have commanded authority in the cutting room since the early days of film. The editing style of a film can entirely change audience perception and the emotional effect a scene may have; the fact that women have often occupied this position is significant because it means that more cinema contains the contributions and perspectives of skilled women than is typically thought. Denise de Casabianca is one such example, having worked on such projects as *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1961) and *La Religieuse* (1966). The former, directed by Robert Enrico (a contemporary of the New

Wave directors and their auteurist film theory), was made originally as a short film but was adapted into an episode of *The Twilight Zone* in 1964 ("Twilight"). De Casabianca would also bring her expertise to the television adaptation. Her work on the latter with director Jacques Rivette is full of emotional turmoil that oozes out of the screen; one can rightly infer that the distance and sobriety with which the film's lengthy scenes are cut is her doing although, like the work of many editors, these choices are usually credited to the director. This is just one example of how male-centered auteur culture in experimental cinema idolized the director while diminishing the importance of other roles, including editing, which coincidentally were often occupied by women.

One notable exception to this rule is that of Nicole Lubtchansky's work on *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), one of Rivette's later but still relevant additions to the New Wave canon. The film is considered an experimental feminist classic, and critics credit much of its visual appeal to Lubtchansky's "tight" editing, calling her work "the backbone of the film" (Martin 60). Its whimsical scenes and literary references, including a few to the rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and the films of David Lynch, are a refreshing callback to the influence of literature on French film. Lubtchansky's editing work in *Celine and Julie* left a lasting impression on the cinematic culture.

In some cases, the director and editor of a film have been one and the same. Věra Chytilová, a graduate of the Czech Film and TV School of the Academy of

**Studying and incentivizing women's role in creating cinematic culture will promote diversity and innovation in the film industry and give overdue recognition to those who came before.**

Performing Arts (FAMU), both directed and cut her 1966 film, *Daisies* (Martin 129). The editing style of the film is half ridiculous and avant-garde, half dead serious; a key feature of this is the pattern of cutting from urban to rural backdrops and from monochrome to brightly colored overlays in the middle of scenes. Her specific style is most evident in the stark contrast that exists in the film's dialogue, scenery, and presentation. The restaurant scenes specifically exemplify this, showing the girls' exploitative and mean behavior at dinner with numerous men they are pretending to date undermined with bright, happy color overlays across the frame. Chytilová was a pioneer of experimental visuals in the Czech New Wave. Like many of her circle, Chytilová faced backlash from the communist-controlled government over the subversive material of her films. *Daisies* was banned in Czechoslovakia until 1967 for its images of food waste and anti-authoritarian sentiments expressed by the characters (Rapold). Chytilová's subversive subject matter in her political and artistic works contributed immensely to the experimental New Wave culture in Czechoslovakia.

Agnès Varda is the only female director of note to come out of the French New Wave, and her influence as the so-called mother of the experimental movement was enormous. She received the Palme d'honneur at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, an honor similar to that of the Academy's Lifetime Achievement Award which is presented to those heroes of the industry who have not previously been recognized. But why had her work been overlooked for so long? One can infer that the industry's undervaluation of art created by women had more than a little to do with it. Her most famous films, including *La Pointe Court* (1955) and *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), epitomize the movement's clean, effortless style and

conversational grace; the former actually predates (and likely influenced) the foundational films of the genre, including Jacques Rivette's *Le Coup de Berger* (1956) and Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (1958). In *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography, and Art*, a 2018 book on the renowned director, author Rebecca J. DeRoo argues that Varda's work was not only influential but served as a "projection of cultural history that illuminated multiple disciplines" through the often-ignored political aspects of her film career (DeRoo 7). Her explorations of and challenges to established aesthetic traditions and cultural politics would become part of the essential discourse of the French New Wave.

For an example of Varda's subtly infused political and visual choices, one might turn to her most well-known film, *Cleo from 5 to 7*. The main character's agonizing afternoon plays out in almost real time, an uncommon and experimental technique for the time. The political significance of the film comes in its acknowledgement and critique of the Algerian War, as the main character's unlikely companion is revealed to be a soldier headed to the front in Algiers. This backdrop of conflict is conspicuously absent from some other notable films from the same time and movement, including Jean-Luc Godard's famous 1960 film, *Breathless*. Aesthetically, the audience sees the point of view transition over the course of the film from the subject gazing at Cleo to Cleo commanding the gaze of the camera; she moves from being objectified, a woman being seen, to being the subject of her own narrative, seeing her world with her own agency (Martin 63). The innovative ideas and techniques in *Cleo from 5 to 7* and her other films make clear Varda's directorial prowess. Had she been a man, she would likely have been recognized far before that 2015 Cannes tribute.

Women have worked in film since its inception and have had their roles systemically downplayed, but things have changed in contemporary times, right? Well, not quite. In an article for The Criterion Collection, Girish Shambu notes that women were forced out of editing and directorial positions in the industry in the 1920's due to the rise of the male-dominated studio system in the United States (Shambu). The numbers of women working behind the camera in Hollywood are rising, but they're not what one might expect. An annual study published by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University (SDSU) found that, overall films produced in the 2018-2019 award cycle, women made up only 31% of staff. Specifically, only 26% of directors and 21% of Editors were women (Lauzen). This means that women currently make up less than a third of creatives in the film industry while comprising half the population. Independent films fared only slightly better, a margin of 2-3%, according to that same report. It is crucial to note here that the SDSU study did not include information on the gender composition of any major film studio or production company boards, the majority of which have been headed by men since their founding. Female directors are able to expand their work but cannot quite break even in Hollywood, and this disparity is chief among the reasons why. It appears that the culture of Hollywood (and international cinema) has not yet progressed far enough past the previous era.

**This means that women currently make up less than a third of creatives in the film industry while comprising half the population.**

One notable example who stands out among these contemporary female directors is Kathryn Bigelow, best known for her action films including *Point Break* (1991), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). She has had a remarkable impact on Hollywood, becoming the first woman to receive the award for best director at the 2010 Academy Awards (Tikkanen). She was only the fourth woman to be nominated for the honor. The importance of Bigelow's work lies in her ability to succeed in the male-dominated field of action films; the majority of her projects are driven by rugged male characters engaging in stereotypically masculine activities, like going to war and engaging in violent criminal behavior. The few that do include prominent female characters do so without the nuance that might be expected from a renowned director. For instance, her 1989 film *Blue Steel* starring Jamie Lee Curtis is centered around a female police officer who is stalked by a murderer. While Curtis's character is the focus, she is reduced to the trope of the 'strong female character' under which she must be stoic, tough as nails, and just masculine enough to pull it off while still being attractive to men. Simply put, she gets to take her shirt off and get the bad guy all in one movie. This same pitfall can be seen in Jessica Chastain's role in *Zero Dark Thirty*, although to a subtler degree.

While Bigelow's films leave something to be desired from a feminist standpoint, they certainly have their appeal, and part of their draw seems to be their focus on popular action themes (military, crime, etc.) without the burden of contemporary politics. The most salient instance of this is *The Hurt Locker*, an Iraq War drama, which seems to glorify the adrenaline and comradery

of conflict while placing no blame on the shoulders of its American heroes (Tikkanen). Despite their flaws and what one may consider directorial negligence in the area of social conscience, these films remain exceedingly popular and continue to shape and impact action cinema. In a way, Bigelow has played the male-dominated studio system with her infiltration of the action genre to inexplicably advance the cause of female-driven filmmaking.

A slightly different way that new filmmakers can impact the current cinematic culture is by creating for untapped markets. This is almost exactly what Varda, Chytilová, and their contemporaries were doing in Europe in the 1960's: diverging from the established genres of film and experimenting with techniques, forms, and dialogue in a new way. Today, there exist numerous opportunities to stray away from the established genre landscape while centering the stories of women and minorities. One of these newly claimed niches is that of female superheroes, whose films are being helmed largely by women. Both *Wonder Woman* (2017) and its upcoming sequel were directed by Patty Jenkins. Hiring female directors seems to be one more front on which DC Comics and Marvel Entertainment are happy to one-up each other, as exemplified by the release of *Captain Marvel* (2019), co-directed by Anna Boden. Another example of this divergence from mainstream filmmaking is the recent work of Greta Gerwig, which centers familial relationships between women and coming-of-age narratives as opposed to the male-gaze specific requirement of endgame romance. In *Ladybird* (2017) for instance, the main character's romantic interest ends badly, and her sadness redirects her towards her relationship with her mother. These newly opened genres are

the best opportunities for women and minority filmmakers to bring innovation to the film industry and, in doing so, honor the history of women who were at the forefront of experimental film movements decades before.

As the film industry moves into an era of consolidation by certain large studios, there have to be certain tactics that the moviegoing audience can utilize in order to promote the works of women. The fastest way to a corporation's values will always be through its profits; thus, the best way to promote the production of female-led and centered films is for moviegoers to pay to see them. According to *New York Times* contributors Brooks Barnes and Cara Buckley, lack of financial incentive is the most cited reason for the current lack of jobs for female directors (Barnes). Film audiences have a duty to vote with their dollar and make a point to see female-led films in theaters. That is the only way more of these amazing projects will be funded and produced for us to enjoy in the future. Women have been at the forefront of experimental film and major cinematic movements throughout history, across borders and national cinemas, and have made pivotal impressions on their respective scenes. Now, the new generation has the opportunity (and one could argue responsibility) to push the industry in a new direction, towards innovation and diversification.

Film audiences have a duty to vote with their dollar and make a point to see female-led films in theaters.

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# MASTERY OF FEAR

## ASSESSING THE LIKELIHOOD OF NUCLEAR TERRORISM

BY VINCENTE VILLARREAL

REVIEWED BY DR. THOMAS DOYLE

EDITED BY BRIDGETTE ABBOTT

The attacks on September 11th brought terrorism home for the American public and fear over nuclear weapons have been present since the first atomic bombing in August of 1945. These two combined are the explicit fear of a number of national security experts and the international community as a whole. But how warranted are these fears over nuclear terrorism? This paper examines the likelihood of a terrorist organization pursuing and acquiring nuclear weapons and finds it to be very low for a number of reasons. First, the desire of terrorist groups to acquire nuclear weapons is often assumed without considering if doing so will advance their goals or missions. Next, of those that would pursue these weapons, many are limited by a number of strategic and technical constraints. Finally operating under the assumption a terrorist organization is able to obtain a nuclear weapon, this paper shows their options following acquisition are extremely limited and threaten the survivability of their group. A survey of numerous terrorist groups and their capacities find nuclear weapons to be beyond their capabilities. Beyond this assessment, this paper aims to apply a critical lens to the dialogue that often surrounds nuclear terrorism and urges the reader to do the same.

The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 brought terrorism to the forefront of the mind of the American public. The damage created by hijacked airplanes struck fear into the hearts of not only the United States population, but the international community as well. As per the nature of terrorism, these acts brought the horrors of war to the United States and prompted citizens to wonder: If this happened in New York and Washington D.C., where could it happen next? This is how nuclear weapons became tied to fears of terrorist attacks. Howard Baker and Lloyd Cutler, co-chairs on the Department of Energy Task Force, stressed the importance of evaluating the standing policies with Russia to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. In their 2001 report over the U.S. Department of Energy's nonproliferation programs with Russia, they asserted:

*The most urgent unmet national security threat to the United States today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-usable material in Russia could be stolen and sold to terrorists or hostile nation states and used against American troops abroad or citizens at home. (Baker and Cutler 11)*

Since the release of this report, both terrorism and nuclear armament have only become more widespread and the risk of nuclear terrorism has only increased (Early et al. 916). It is a gross oversimplification, and one often tied to nuclear weapons, to have to describe nuclear deterrence as good or bad. Nuclear deterrence is a policy which states nuclear weapons are utilized to dissuade an aggressor state from attacking another state through the weighing of retaliatory punishment (Sagan and Waltz 5). The state is dissuaded by the potential consequences of attacking, which in the prospect of nuclear catastrophe would

almost certainly outweigh any potential advantage or benefit of attacking another state. In this, the presence of nuclear weapons both threatens and preserves international security (Sagan and Waltz 12).

Through nuclear deterrence, the world enjoys a peace maintained outside of conventional war forces. Smaller countries with less expansive militaries can achieve a position as a world player simply by having access to these weapons (Sagan and Waltz 12). This encourages diplomacy over military force, a clear win for less militarized countries and a slight upset for countries which have historically used force to accomplish their goals. International security overall is maintained, showing nuclear weapons' fear-inspiring power also inspires extreme caution (Sagan and Waltz 8). However, the caution created by nuclear deterrence works in a limited capacity. Deterrence relies on a state's ability to weigh consequences, in which a few assumptions must be made. For one, the actors must have fixed and defined territories. The ability to deploy and retaliate against a nuclear attack operates under the premise that an attack to one, fixed territory will result in an attack against the offending, fixed territory. Including terrorist in this trade off completely upsets the nuclear order, as the majority occupy no fixed or defined territory (Walker 5). A terrorist group's acquisition of nuclear weapons would, for the first time since the inception of nuclear weapons, create a scenario where the warhead could be detonated without a country's ability to respond with their own retaliatory strike. It is for this reason that multiple security officials have listed nuclear terrorism as a top threat to national and international security (Committee on Homeland Security 3). Looking back on his three years sitting on the Committee

on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Senator Joseph Lieberman noted that “the threat of a nuclear terrorist attack on the United States is growing faster than our ability to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack on our homeland” (1). But how justified is Lieberman’s assessment of danger? How likely is the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons by terrorist organizations? A detailed look at the issue would reveal that the likelihood of a terrorist organization being able to acquire nuclear weapons and use them is very low.

First, the desire for terrorist organizations to acquire nuclear weapons is often assumed without considering why the organization actually wants to obtain nuclear weapons. Terrorist organizations, like any organization, have a wide range of goals, many of which are not advanced by the possession and use of a nuclear weapon. Second, the desire for nuclear weapons must be combined with the ability to acquire nuclear weapons. This is best examined through a lens of costs, which show that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorist organizations is made even more unlikely due to the costs associated with obtaining and maintaining these weapons. That section will also focus specifically on organizations that have expressed their desire for nuclear weapons and the feasibility of their desire. Lastly, there must be an assessment of the terrorists’ strategies following acquisition.

The world has never seen a nuclear weapon in the hands of a non-state actor; therefore, much speculation surrounds what a terrorist group would do if it had a nuclear weapon. An assessment of their options following

acquisition show that there are a limited number of options. The extraordinary effort required to obtain nuclear weapons with reference to the limited options available to an organization after acquiring serve to further show why the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons by terrorist organizations is very low.

## Definitions

Nuclear terrorism is defined as the acquisition and use or threatened use of nuclear weapons by a terrorist organization (Iqbal 10). There are specific parts of this definition that must be emphasized. First, nuclear terrorism can include both the use and threatened use of nuclear weapons (Iqbal 38). Analyzing threatened use requires an examination of the intersection between capability and attack conditions (McIntosh and Storey 289). This intersection is one that will have sufficient analysis dedicated to it in the third section, the simple understanding that threat of use falls under the umbrella of nuclear terrorism will suffice for now. The second part of the definition concentrates on the “terrorist organization.” While an individual terrorist actor could hypothetically gain access to nuclear technology, the possibility of this is so slim as to make it negligible. As such, this paper will focus its analysis on the possibility of nuclear terrorism only with reference to terrorist organizations.

The scope of this paper excludes other groups such as death cults, millenarian groups (groups that believe the end of the world is impending), and racial or ethnic hate groups. The separation between the groups goes further than ideological differences or varying levels

**Terrorist organizations, like any organization, have a wide range of goals, many of which are not advanced by the possession and use of a nuclear weapon.**

of political acceptability. Guelke notes the “normative difference” between these groups and terrorist organizations, in that “the term, terrorism, carries a connotation of absolutely illegitimate violence” (181). Even more important than the lack of goals that align them with terrorist organizations, death cults, millenarians, and hate groups have a number of more easily accessible resources outside of nuclear weapons to help achieve their goals (Sagan and Waltz 86). The last definition to outline is that of nuclear weapons.

A nuclear weapon is described as a bomb or missile that uses nuclear energy to cause an explosion (Levi 2). Note this definition does not include weapons that utilize radioactive materials and conventional explosives to create an improvised nuclear weapon, also known as dirty bombs (Naseer and Amin 390). Analysis will also be dedicated to dirty bombs with reference to a terrorist organization’s ability to develop a nuclear weapon or improvised nuclear device in the second section, but note the definition of nuclear weapon for the framing of this work does not include dirty bombs.

## **The Desire Assumption**

The first contention relies on the understanding that the desire of terrorist organizations to acquire nuclear weapons cannot be assumed. Terrorist organizations have a wide range of objectives in correlation with their reason for existence. Terrorist groups often analyze their goals and the best ways to achieve them, as these organizations “can be treated, theorized, and understood as strategic actors” (McIntosh and Storey 290). Furthermore, scholars also note that “many terrorist organizations also appear to be risk-averse: the emphasis is often on the group’s survival” (Cameron 12). For both of these reasons, the majority of terrorist organizations assess their

goals strategically and have assessed that their goals are typically not advanced by nuclear weapons. Dr. James Forest from the Center for Security Research and Technologies has identified a number of strategic and practical constraints for organizations pursuing chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons (52). The following section will focus on the strategic constraints, while the next point will focus on practical constraints:

## **Strategic Constraints**

Strategic constraints identify the leverage of power between terrorist organizations, their constituents, and the international community as a whole (Forest 57). In the case of nuclear weapons, terrorist groups must decide if the pursuit and use of nuclear weapons will assist them in achieving their overall goals “faster or more efficiently than other means” (Forest 57). Most terrorist organizations find that their goals are not strategically advanced by the possession or use of nuclear weapons.

One strategic goal of theirs is to maintain material and moral support in their constant struggle, and their potential use of nuclear weapons puts that support at risk. All terrorist organizations, to some degree, receive assistance from outside individuals or groups (Koehler-Derrick and Milton 910). The extent of this support, however, will play a large factor in an organization’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons. Another group that does not benefit from the use of nuclear weapons would be terrorist organizations that fight for the removal of a group or occupation of a territory. This is the case for a number of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. These include Jaish-e-Mohammad, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, and Lashkar E-Tayyiba, all of which concern themselves with “the occupation of Indian Kashmir, as well as the ejection

of coalition forces from Afghanistan, Porous, and ill-defined borders in Kashmir...” (Khalid and Kayani 19).

The ultimate goal of these organizations is ridding the area of outside influence, a goal that is not advanced by the use or threatened use of a nuclear weapon. Terrorist organizations developing a nuclear weapon strategy with the goal mentioned above have two options: use the weapon against the forces currently occupying the area or attack the enemy state directly on their own soil. The organization’s attacking of their own area is counterproductive, as doing so would only harm the current inhabitants and make the land inhabitable for decades to come. That leaves attacking the enemy state directly as the only viable option. The strategies that are likely to be utilized in a terrorist organization’s targeting of an enemy state will be discussed in section three, but note the inherent difficulty in planning, financing, and executing an attack on foreign soil. The difficulty is not reason enough to rule out a terrorist nuclear attack as a possibility, but the current success of achieving their goals through other means is. What are these other means? Starting in order of most easily executed:

#### ***Propaganda and Media Recruitment***

This is a strategy utilized by groups like ISIS and al-Shabaab. Terrorist propaganda serves the function of radicalizing the general population and encouraging action against the occupying state or offending party (Maras 4). In more recent years within the early twenty-first century, there has been an increased reliance on social media and electronic communication to achieve this goal (Maras 6). The continued success in these fields make it likely that terrorist organizations will continue using propaganda and electronic media as a means of achieving

their goals. Aside from propaganda and media recruitment working as a strategy, these both have the lowest risk of loss for any of the strategies described.

Terrorist organizations—like any organization—require members to execute its mission. As such, successful terrorist organizations are required to organize their efforts in a strategic way (McIntosh and Storey 290). Risking members and resources in the pursuit of a nuclear weapon when current media and propaganda strategies are working does not strategically benefit a terrorist organization. The shift from propaganda and media strategy would be seen when those channels no longer serve as a viable option or when they no longer achieve the goals of the organizations. It is at this time that they would most likely begin to shift to the next option.

#### ***Guerilla and Disruptive Tactics***

This is a strategy that was utilized by groups like Hezbollah with significant success (Allison 35). In May 2000, “Hezbollah launched a sustained guerrilla war against the Israelis, eventually forcing them to withdraw from Lebanon,” and gaining hero status for themselves in the process (Allison 34). The standard premise for this strategy to be effective relies on the organization’s ability to inflict maximum harm while sustaining minimum damages and the secrecy integral to their survival. Damages to resources include members, finances, equipment, and weapons necessary to continue tactics (Laszlo and Tibor 70). Guerilla and disruptive operations are seen to be most effective in areas where the terrorist organization is familiar with the landscape or terrain, which has contributed to the success of terrorist campaigns in Syria and Libya by the Islamic State (Whiteside 15). Their knowledge of the area makes them a superior combatant against occupying or foreign forces (Whiteside

4). From the militia group during the American Revolution to the Vietcong during the Vietnam War, modern terrorist organizations will use guerilla tactics in a similar way to feed into a “revolutionary war doctrine,” under which their struggle is linked to that of the oppressed heroes during great wars (Whiteside 5). This tactic directly targets a force’s desire to continue a foreign engagement, as the principle goal isn’t destroying the enemy, but targeting them “politically and psychologically” (Whiteside 6). Guerilla and disruptive tactics become undesirable for a terrorist group as their own damages become too high to sustain (Forest 56). Whether as a factor of the damages or the length at which the unconventional war has been waged without a foreseeable end, they will begin to pursue other means of achieving their goal. It is at this point that terrorist groups will advocate for stronger means. .

#### ***Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)***

WMDs have been the expressed desire of a number of different terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (Hess 91). Nuclear weapons are included in the category of weapons of mass destruction, which are often described as CBRN weapons: chemical, biological, radiological, and/or nuclear weapons capable of inflicting significant harm or damage (Hess 93). These weapons in the hands of terrorist organizations have been the explicit fear of a number of countries; this fear has even inspired military campaigns to prevent such a situation, as seen with the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Bahador et. al 5). Few terrorist organizations, however, have placed nuclear weapons at the top of their list of desired WMD (Chapman 119). Nuclear weapons are hard to procure and maintain, made evident by only nine of 206 sovereign nations possessing them currently. Chemical, biological,

and radiological (CBR) weapons seem to be the preferred choice for terrorist organizations desiring WMD for a number of reasons. For one, they are easier to obtain than nuclear weapons (Chapman 113). Terrorist groups have better access to the materials necessary for CBR weapons than they do for a nuclear weapon, with some organizations even claiming to have been able to weaponize chlorine (Chapman 114).

Beyond obtainment, nuclear weapons have to be protected from detection by nations and non-governmental organizations. Nuclear weapons contain distinct signatures and there are a range of technologies able to detect special nuclear material (SNM) (Egidi 10). There are currently nine technologies part of the nuclear detection portfolio, and “some detection technology is advancing faster than many have expected” (Egidi 22). Terrorist organizations lack the established, defensible borders that nations have and the locating of their nuclear weapons stash would result in immediate military action. Setting up the proper facilities needed to hide SNM signatures would not only take time, but also require the terrorist organization to maintain a more fixed position when mobility is key to their survival. These reasons combined make radiological, chemical, or biological weapons sufficiently more desirable over nuclear weapons.

The aforementioned points show a myriad of reasons why the majority of terrorist organizations do not and will not pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons. From the small pool of terrorist organizations left, it could be assumed then that some of them have explicit and serious desire for nuclear weapons.

#### **More Than Sheer Will**

The *desire* to acquire nuclear weapons must also be paired with the

# The *desire* to acquire nuclear weapons must also be paired with the *ability* to acquire nuclear weapons.

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*ability* to acquire nuclear weapons. Through the case study of Al Qaeda, an organization that has expressed interest in obtaining nuclear weapons, it can be seen that this is easier said than done. This section examines factors, outside of sheer will and strategic considerations, that would make it difficult for a terrorist organization to acquire nuclear weapons.

## **Technical Constraints**

Technical constraints identify the aspects of the terrorist organization that would limit their ability to acquire nuclear weapons (Forest 54). The following model operates under the assumption that a terrorist group understands all the difficulty and risks associated with acquiring/deploying a nuclear weapon and is choosing to pursue it nonetheless. This section looks first at the costs associated with acquisition and maintenance of nuclear weapons, either by theft, purchase, or development. Examined after are the organizational structures well suited or ill equipped for acquiring and maintaining nuclear weapons.

Assuming a terrorist organization wanted to acquire nuclear weapons, there are steep costs to overcome in that pursuit. The method that they would take would vary on a number of factors, like “the terrorist organization’s resources, the state assistance they would receive, and/or their exact operational environment and its opportunities” (Volders 1108). Let us examine three primary methods under which they could obtain the weapons and costs associated with each:

### **Acquisition via Theft**

This mode of acquisition is

what drives much of the rhetoric around the necessity for secure nuclear weapons. Nuclear pessimists note that international security is increased as the number of places where nuclear weapons are present decreases (Sagan and Waltz 114). While this train of logic seemingly follows, other scholars have still argued this claim as unfounded. Larger and more established nuclear powers, like the United States and Russia, have maintained their nuclear weapons for years with no theft to this day. While these countries are not exempt from scrutiny regarding their means of securing their nuclear weapons, materials, and technology, the mechanisms they have in place can be assumed to be working and a model that other states can follow (Chubb and Yeo 228). The established nuclear powers are not typically who the international community is worried about. New nuclear weapon states seem to act as the largest risk in the face of potential theft, namely Pakistan (Khalid and Kayani 10). North Korea poses more of a threat for acquisition via purchase and, as such, will be examined in the next paragraph. Pakistan’s military operations in tribal areas have led to continued conflicts with terrorist organizations operating within the country, namely, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Khalid and Kayani 16). Examining the behaviors of Pakistan, scholars note that the country “has instituted a comprehensive, stringent mechanism over a short period of time to mitigate any inside or outside threats” (Khan and Abbasi 50). Pakistan’s threat level posed by its security concerns is by no means reduced to zero, but while “it might be correct that no other state

is more likely to be affected by nuclear terrorism, it is also true that no state other than Pakistan has done more to secure its nuclear infrastructure” (Naseer and Amin 391). Lastly, research has found that the “smaller [the] size of the nuclear establishments, the more easily guarded as compared to larger sizes,” granting a certain security to newer nuclear weapon states with smaller arsenals (Khalid and Kayani 20).

#### *Acquisition via Purchase*

Scholars note the likelihood of a state engaging in the sale of a nuclear weapon extremely low, as doing so would potentially put their own population at risk (Khalid and Kayani, 21). In spite of this, there are states that regularly show no concern for both their own population and the international laws which regulate state behavior. North Korea is a clear example of this. North Korea is a state that presents challenges beyond just its status as a nuclear weapon state. Their string of authoritarian leaders often leaves the international community unsure about its ability to perceive them as a rational actor.

The country’s previous track record does not offer much help, as the country has previously engaged in illicit activities like drug production, counterfeiting currency, and smuggling to help raise money for their regime (Hess 98). However, recent actions by the North Korean Leader, Kim Jong- Un, do show an increased capacity for cooperation. Beginning in 2018, the leader has contributed to “unprecedented changes in the inter-Korean relationship,” engaging in a series of summits and meetings which signal the ongoing negotiations between Kim Jong- Un and other state leaders (Pratamasari 25). For those not convinced by the recent actions of a historically tyrannical leader, another gauge for whether North Korea will engage in the sale of nuclear weapons or

not is to analyze the transaction in a way that weighs the costs and benefits.

North Korea has demonstrated its willingness in the past to engage in illegal behavior to sustain its state (Hess 108). Nuclear weapons, however, present a unique risk to the international community and may potentially have unique retaliation for compromising the safety of other states. The leaking of nuclear weapons could not be done completely in secret as well, as nuclear and radiological material often carry “the unmistakable signature of the countries that manufactured their nuclear material” (Hess 117). North Korea is allowed to maintain itself as an actor within the international nuclear order based on strong international norms covering individual sovereignty. A norm even stronger than sovereignty would be one of maintaining international security with relation to nuclear weapons. It is under this norm that entire continents have banded together to call for disarmament and restraint for nuclear weapon states. A violation of this norm, combined with the death toll a nuclear terrorist attack would yield, would threaten North Korea’s ability to maintain its own sovereignty.

#### *Acquisition via Research and Development*

This mode of acquisition is most often cited when referring to Al Qaeda and its nuclear weapon ambitions. Al Qaeda leadership has explicitly stated that they intended on “developing weapons that could cause large numbers of casualties” (Van de Velde 685). There is, however, a large disconnect between an organization’s intention to develop nuclear weapons and their actual development. Financial costs, access to materials, scientists and engineers required, secure locations, and time act as a few of the hurdles for Al Qaeda to clear in their pursuit of nuclear weapon development.

If they want to actually achieve nuclear weapon development, they will have to rely on their extensive network, which is a network compromised by its shifting in organizational structure following 2001 and explained more extensively in the next section. The reliance on their network also includes approval from the actors involved within the network (Van de Velde 688). The nature of nuclear weapons and retaliation from a terrorist organization possessing nuclear weapons would make gaining support difficult (Van de Velde 688). Al Qaeda, like many terrorist groups, relies on the support of their community for both finances and recruitment (Van de Velde 689). International condemnation of their pursuit for nuclear weapons could alienate their constituency and reduce their legitimacy in the eyes of their allies. For support garnered by the violent actions of these groups, there is “an implicit acknowledgement that violence is not only a tool to influence public opinion, but that violence must be controlled and limited by public opinion” (Browne 11).

When justifying the actions of 9/11, Osama bin Laden was very deliberate in emphasizing the protective elements in his concept of jihad (Ozkaya Lassalle & Akgul 53). Supporters could point to the offenses cited as justifiable means for retaliation. With the exception of nuclear weapons used in response to another nuclear strike, the use of nuclear weapons is almost exclusively regarded as an offensive tactic. Their support is conditional and for Al Qaeda to be successful in maintaining it, their constituency would have to support a view of jihad which justified the destruction a nuclear detonation would reap. None of these challenges make it impossible for Al Qaeda to develop nuclear weapons, but they highlight why other weapons and strategies may be given priority. It

would not be beyond the ability of Al Qaeda to pursue dirty bombs, but the fear of these weapons often supersedes the actual damage of them.

Aside from the difficulty in acquiring nuclear weapons, terrorist groups would also have to analyze their own organizational structure to determine how aligned it is with the acquisition of nuclear weapons. There are a number of structures terrorist organizations can utilize. Certain structures are better than others for coordinating group efforts for a shared goal and, as such, certain structures do not support the goal of acquiring of nuclear weapons. The four most common organizational structures for terrorist groups are, in order of most centralized to least, Bureaucracy, Hub-spoke, All-channel, and Market (Kilberg 810). Since terrorist organizations can be analyzed as strategic actors, the organizational structure that these groups utilize is a key factor in whether their successful in achieving their missions. Whether the way a group of friends could come together to plan a surprise birthday party or how a football booster club could organize after-school sales, some type of organizational structure is required to coordinate goals too large or too complex for one individual to complete. The more complex a goal, the stronger organizational structure required. In the case of terrorist organizations specifically, highly complex goals like destabilizing the military force in a region or conducting attacks on secure locations require well defined structures. Below is an overview of each of those structures:

*Bureaucracy* is the most hierarchical, with established boundaries, clear chains-of-command, systems in place for the transference of information, and set means of the group coming to decisions (Kilberg 813). Examples of terrorist

organizations which have or currently utilize the bureaucratic model would be the Armed Islamic Group, Hezbollah, and the Irish Republican Army (Kilberg 815).

*Hub-spoke* takes a less hierarchical approach, and has a central cell of communication, the hub, in which all communication is vetted through (Kilberg 813). This structure has proven to be especially useful for terrorist organizations based on the ability for one cell to fall without compromising the rest of the organization and was utilized by a pre-9/11 Al Qaeda (Kilberg 815).

*All-channel* networks are further decentralized and require “rapid, dense, multidirectional communications,” which lack strong, central leadership (Kilberg 814). To clarify, there is a leader, but the coordination under this leader is loose and the organization can survive with the leader’s removal (Kilberg 814). Terrorist organizations that use or have used this model include post-9/11 Al Qaeda, Red Army Faction, and the Muslim Brotherhood (Kilberg 815).

*Market* organization is the last organization style and can only narrowly be called an organization, as the groups under Market organization operate with a diverse, sometimes contradictory, set of goals (Kilberg 814). These are often described more as social movements, lacking leadership of any kind outside of their small groups and are only loosely working toward the same goal (Kilberg 814). Examples of this type of organization include the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front, under which the general goal of ecological awareness spurs violent and uncoordinated action (Kilberg 815).

As stated previously, there are certain organizational models better suited for the acquisition of nuclear

weapons than others. The first two models, bureaucracy and hub-spoke, are the best for coordinating and achieving narrow and intricate goals (Kilberg 824). These groups have a centralized leader or command center, and as such can set a shared goal that the rest of the organization is supposed to follow. The acquisition of nuclear weapons, by any of the means examined above, requires sufficient planning and coordination of member efforts to achieve. The second two models are unable to facilitate both the acquisition and maintenance of nuclear weapons. Due to the lack of central communication, necessary details such as how to go about obtaining the weapon, where to hold the weapon, when to transport it, when to deploy it, and even the basic goal of acquiring the weapon in the first place would face serious risk of not being relayed. Ironically enough, while bureaucracy and hub-spoke would be the best models for terrorist organizations to utilize in their pursuit of nuclear weapons, these models are also the least safe models for terrorist organizations to utilize. Safety, in this instance, is in relation to the continued operations and existence of the terrorist organization. Terrorist organizations do not exist in a bubble, and their goals are constantly threatened by counterterrorism efforts (Kilberg 811). Terrorist groups that utilize either model open themselves up to a higher risk of discovery and disbandment. It is a relationship in which “group structure is driven primarily by the need to maximize concealment (to mitigate risk) at the expense of maximizing efficiency” (Kilberg 811). Furthermore, the study found that religious groups, like Al Qaeda, are more likely to follow the decentralized model over centralized (Kilberg 824). The costs of acquiring nuclear weapons combined with the structural organization required for

longevity together present very real technical constraints to the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

### Acquired, Now What?

The last section examines the strategies available for terrorist organizations following their acquisition of nuclear weapons and aims to show that these options for use are both undesirable and far less effective than one would assume. These strategies rely on an intersection of attack conditions and capabilities, outlined by the table provided below and created by McIntosh & Storey (see fig. 1)

The table consolidates the options available for terrorist organizations assuming they both desire nuclear weapons and are then able to acquire nuclear weapons (McIntosh and Storey 292). It is intended to show how a terrorist organization's options are limited by how public they plan on making both the knowledge that they have nuclear weapons and the conditions that will result in them deploying said weapons. It is important to note that each of these

		Capability	
		Public	Covert
Attack Conditions	Public	Blackmail	Latency
	Covert	Opacity	Ambiguity

**Figure 1.** Nuclear Options, McIntosh, Christopher, and Ian Storey. 2018. "Between Acquisition and Use: Assessing the Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism." *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, p. 292.

options are already available to terrorist organizations. They have the ability to make vague threats or direct blackmail

in the status quo.

A unique aspect of a terrorist organization equipped with a nuclear weapon would be the response from states. Due to a non-state actor never having possessed nuclear weapons before, the response to these nuclear options is largely unknown. There are some responses that could be assumed based on previous trends within the international nuclear order. It is important to note that acquisition of nuclear weapons by any terrorist organization would result in unparalleled international cooperation to prevent its detonation (Naseer and Amin 385). Similar international cooperation has been seen previously with the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which was mobilized in 1991 to assist in the securing of nuclear weapons and materials following the fall of the Soviet Union. (Potter & Shields 35). The program helped to peacefully prevent the rise of three new nuclear weapon states through incentives and nonproliferation agreements (Potter & Shields 36). Programs like these indicate

increased collaborative efforts in the face of potential nuclear threats. As stated previously, nuclear deterrence relies on the ability to carry out a nuclear threat against an offending adversary. The offending party, in this instance, being terrorists that do not occupy clearly defined land, makes threats of retaliation obsolete. Regardless of who the terrorists intended target is, the fear that unites nations and people following any terrorist attack would encourage cooperative efforts to suppress the threat and prevent future acquisition of nuclear weapons

by terrorist organizations. This response would be seen in two significant ways.

First, a civilian response would be

that of which would most likely allow for the abridging of freedoms in the name of safety. The Patriot Act, signed into law October 26, 2001, and subsequent laws allowed for changes to immigration policies, mistreatment of foreigners, and the tracing and monitoring of United States' citizens phone calls amongst other items (Smith and Hung 33). The intention of terrorism is to launch an attack against an enemy directly and against the psyche of that enemy as well. For Americans, this resulted in fear, fear so strong that "many Americans felt that giving up a measure of personal freedom was OK, if they gained more security in the bargain" (Smith and Hung 70).

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**In short, the revealing of nuclear weapon capabilities by a terrorist organization would present an irreversible step, both for the organization and the world.**

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Following the release of civil liberties due to fear of nuclear terrorism would be the government response.

A governmental response, both domestic and international, would be one of significant cooperation. The increased surveillance and access to avenues previously blocked by certain individual protections would feed into an efficient military machine that the government could then utilize to suppress the terrorist threat. The international cooperation would allow for the sharing of intel and joint-coalition missions focused on suppressing the threat of nuclear terrorism. In short, the revealing of nuclear weapon capabilities by a terrorist organization would present an irreversible step, both for the organization and the world. Assuming

a terrorist group is able to do so, their next challenge would be overcoming the collaborative efforts of an entire international community.

## **Conclusion**

Widely held misconceptions about the ability of terrorist organizations to acquire and use nuclear weapons have produced a heightened fear of the same. The events of September 11th and subsequent terrorist attacks have inspired a fear of the unknown with unknown consequences. These consequences combined with nuclear weapons create an unfounded line of reasoning which somehow ends with a terrorist group detonating a nuclear weapon in New York, Los Angeles, or any other large city. This reasoning is accepted because terrorist organizations do indeed exist, and nuclear weapons are undeniably present throughout this world. The critical lens applied in this paper conveys how necessary it is to analyze where fear of nuclear terrorism comes from and how realistic the scenarios described are. The majority of terrorist organizations have not and will not pursue nuclear weapons. They are able to achieve their strategic goals by other means or have goals that are not furthered by the acquisition of nuclear weapons. From the pool that would pursue these weapons, a large portion lack the financial capability and organizational structure to make the acquisition and maintaining of a nuclear weapon possible. From those that could somehow overcome all of these factors and constraints, their options for how to utilize the nuclear weapon moving forward are limited.

When writing about nuclear terrorism, Dr. Brian Jenkins, former advisor to the National Commission on Terrorism, noted that when we talk

about the danger of nuclear weapons and terrorist organizations, we talk about how “a hypothetical event produces historically confirmable consequences” (Jenkins 94). Much of the conversation around nuclear terrorism is simply the conflation of all the alarm associated with terrorism and all the apprehension that accompanies the field of nuclear weaponry. Both nuclear weapons and terrorism are abhorrent features of the modern world, but it is critical to assess them in a way that does not allow for fear to dominate the conversation.

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# GIRLS ONLY

## THE USE AND ABUSE OF FEMALE-CENTRIC EVENTS IN PATRIARCHAL RELIGIONS

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This paper examines how an ancient Greek fertility festival called Thesmophoria and Southern Baptist women's conferences both benefit and harm women. Although these events are separated by millennia and religious beliefs, both are female-centric and occur within a dominating patriarchal context. During these occasions, women are led by members of their own group, focus on their religion together, and exclude men from their activities. As a result, these events seem to benefit women by allowing them to leave their homes and interact with other women of their faith without the direct supervision of their male relatives or leaders. However, because these events operate with the permission of the patriarchal society and uphold its values, they are ultimately harmful to women because they do not allow any real changes to be made to the society's structure or values, even if those changes would improve women's lives. While these events are beneficial in a short-term timeline, they function only as pressure valves in the long run as a way to relieve the tension women feel because of the restricting gender roles placed upon them.

A common childhood experience for young girls is gathering together in a backyard or a bedroom and declaring a “girls only” or “no boys allowed” space for themselves, usually to ward off annoying little brothers or create solidarity within the group. This female-centric space gives every girl freedom to speak her mind and time away from her normal responsibilities and family members. Religions can offer similar spaces to women that allow them to express themselves, lead, and practice their faith without the direct supervision of their patriarchal societies. One such opportunity in ancient times was a fertility festival called Thesmophoria that Greek polytheists celebrated, in which women led other women during an exclusively female event to honor the goddess of agriculture Demeter. During the short festival, women practiced their religion without the supervision of their male relations and were even duty-bound to follow the female-centric rituals of the festival. Likewise, the modern-day women’s conferences held by the Southern Baptists mirror this festival in that they provide women a space and time to practice their religion with each other almost exclusively. Both of these events were and are seen as positive opportunities for women in which they can freely practice their religion together within a patriarchal context that otherwise restricts their rights and opportunities to act on their own. However, I argue that both of these events function as short-term pressure valves to relieve the societal tension that women experience and actually create long-term damage by reinforcing the patriarchal values that oppress women in the first place.

In the short-term, the festival Thesmophoria was an exceptional moment in Greek life and culture for women to practice their religion with

each other and without the interference or supervision of their male relatives. As I will explain later in this paper, Greek women’s rights were quite limited even for the wives of citizens, and this festival was an opportunity for women to leave their homes, gather with other women, and recognize their shared female identity. However, it is important to remember that women would not have needed this event if their female identity were not covered up and hidden away during the rest of the year. While aspects of Thesmophoria seem liberating and even touching, the festival’s purpose within the Greek patriarchal society complicates that positive view.

In terms of what scholars know about Thesmophoria, there is evidence of its annual celebration from as early as 2000 BCE across the Greek empire, including celebration sites called “Thesmophorion sanctuaries” and references to the goddess Demeter as “Thesmophoros” (Stallsmith 28). Although the festival was held throughout this massive empire, scholars know the most about the Athenian Thesmophoria in particular. As a result, this paper only addresses the Athenian Thesmophoria, even though some of the ideas would have likely applied to many of the other locations as well. The most important thing to know about the Athenian festival is that only the wives of Athenian citizens were allowed to witness it or participate in it; a man’s presence was so offensive that it was sacrilegious (Stallsmith 28). Out of this group, some women known as *archousai* led the procedures and ensured that it followed the proper rituals. The use of the word *archousai* is significant because it mirrors the word *archon*, which referred to Athens’s male leaders; this word choice means that the women leaders of Thesmophoria were a temporary equivalent of the men who led Athens. (Faraone 25). As a result of

this female leadership, male presence and supervision were totally eliminated from Thesmophoria.

The festival took place in October or November each year as a “pre-sowing ritual” that appealed to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, to provide a fertile harvest for Greek farmers (Stallsmith 28). It was three days long, with the second day being used for fasting and the third day for gathering sacrificed animals and feasting. During this time, women lived together in temporary huts (Faraone 25-6). Although three days is very little time each year, these three days were filled with rituals known almost exclusively to women and practiced exclusively by women. For example, one interesting element that occurred throughout the festival was “shameful talk” which would normally be egregious for citizen’s wives but was accepted in this context as lending itself to encouraging fertility (Stallsmith 29-30). The nature of this speech is not totally clear, but it seems that the women were facetious with each other in a way that was not appropriate in everyday Athenian society. If I had to make an educated guess, I think women were probably complaining about their husbands and Athenian leadership during this time simply because they could. This speech is interesting because it allowed, even required, women to break the codes of conduct they normally followed. Not only could they break the rules, they had to break them to follow the ritual correctly. Outside the unique space of Thesmophoria, women would likely not have had the freedom to speak negatively about their husbands and leadership with people who would understand and commiserate. Within

Greek culture, Thesmophoria stands out as a space in which women could act on their own and act outside the normal societal standards they faced.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the festival was the time women spent fasting on the second day to imitate and respect the grief Demeter experienced after her daughter Persephone was kidnapped and raped by Hades, the god of the dead (Faraone 25-6). Sometime before the festival began, a few women threw sacrificed piglets as well as pine tree branches and cakes into the underground rooms of the sanctuary. On the third day, all of the women collected the rotting remains of those materials and put them on altars available to local farmers, who could then take some of this mixture to enrich their crops for the next harvest (Stallsmith 31-2). The use of the remains is important because it gave Thesmophoria and the participating women a stake in their society or a way to directly contribute to its growth and prosperity. Overall, the festival combined religious elements with rituals that provided practical benefits to the society which supported it.

While the specifics of the festival are not important to modern, casual readers, what does matter about this time is that women lived with each other, led each other, and observed the grief one woman felt for her daughter because of the injustice a man had committed against her. Basing the festival on Demeter and Persephone’s story shows that the festival was an opportunity for women to unite with each other over their shared female identities. Although rape was hardly limited to Greek women, there is certainly a trend in history of

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males raping local women to establish dominance during conquest and of men exerting great sexual control over their wives as a way to monitor society. Thesmophoria stands out in history as a moment in which women recognized and bemoaned the injury done to one of their own by a man. In this context, Thesmophoria is exceptional because women could address these injustices instead of being forced to accept them. Even by modern standards of gender equality, this festival is uniquely female-centric.

As ideal as Thesmophoria seems, its patriarchal trappings are obvious when it is placed in its full cultural context. Athens is famously known as the birthplace of democracy and the common man's voice, yet Athenian women did not have this same experience outside Thesmophoria. For example, the only women in Greece who could use their own names in court were priestesses; otherwise, Athenian women were known through relationships with men such as with their fathers or husbands (Gilhuly 18). In general, women were supposed to fill very particular sexual and societal roles as citizen's wives, had to be sexually submissive to their husbands, and had to maintain a clean reputation through their anonymity and support of their husbands (Stehle 78, Gilhuly 17). In other words, women played a quiet, even passive background role to support their husbands's political endeavours. Thus, any public expression of genuine autonomy was rare, and this limitation changes the kind of power that Thesmophoria had.

Because Thesmophoria was the only time when women had public self-expression in this patriarchy, it did not allow for transformative ideas or actions in the long run. Since their time and ideas were largely controlled by men, women were not able to make effective

changes by themselves in society. Any changes they wanted to effect had to go through men and be enacted by men to be valid. Plus, women only had three days together during the festival, after which they had to return to their husbands and households. Once they were separated into their individual situations, they did not have the same persuasive power that they had as a collective. This arrangement damaged their chances of accomplishing change because individual Athenian men could stop the efforts in their own homes before the movement grew so powerful that it demanded a response from a male collective. Since these women could not change the society they lived in, perhaps they just embraced the time they had away from those limitations and tried to relieve the pressure they felt from their society. As a result, Thesmophoria only relieved that pressure women felt and did not change women's lives for the better outside those three days.

If this is the case, how does it change the way we look at Thesmophoria? Instead of the festival being shockingly feminist in a patriarchal society, I argue it is a patriarchal device that gives women just a taste of their actual wishes so they would be content with the oppression forced upon them. Thus, it was not a marker of equality, but another tool used to oppress women. After all, the religion and society which contained Thesmophoria ultimately supported male superiority; as a result, any female spaces must support maleness somehow or exist with its permission as the festival existed with the permission of the Athenian male leaders. Thesmophoria functioned as an outlet for the female anger and frustration the patriarchy needed to quiet. In a short-term timeline, Thesmophoria was a pressure valve that allowed women to commiserate, have some time together, and feel that they had a stake in their society. Of course, the women did

have a small stake because the fertilizer they made would contribute to their city's agricultural production and thus had a civic benefit. Nevertheless, in the long run, this outlet covered up the year-long oppression women faced by giving them three days of freedom and control. Thus, the festival did not change a patriarchal society, but rather contributed to its continued existence by venting possible resistance to that society. In the end, Thesmophoria was damaging, not because it was inherently damaging, but rather because the society which supported it used it as a tool for continued oppression of women.

Even though Thesmophoria was celebrated millennia ago, the conferences of Southern Baptist women today mirror its exceptional religious opportunity for freedom for women in a patriarchal context; however, over time, these conferences also reinforce patriarchal ideals that limited space for women in the first place. Unlike the single annual event that Thesmophoria was, there are many annual conferences within the denomination available to women. Three examples of recent women's conferences include the For the Church Women's Pre-Conference from the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the Lifeway Women's Leadership Forum with the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Equip training from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary ("SBC Search").

These three meetings demonstrate common characteristics of women's conferences, some of which ultimately reflect the patriarchal elements of the Southern Baptist denomination. For example, the Women's Pre-Conference of 2019 featured four female speakers and was a half-day event that "exists to encourage women who are in the throes of ministry in their homes, their churches, and throughout the world" ("FTC

Women's Pre-Conference"). Likewise, the two-day long Lifeway Women's Leadership Forum hosted female speakers (with just one male exception) who spoke about modern sexuality, ministry, and religious leaders' spiritual health (Student Life). Last, the Equip training event for the upcoming year had not been posted, but its website gave the following description of its events each semester: "These mini-conferences are led by faculty wives or guest speakers who will share from their own experience and wisdom. Speakers at Equip provide practical tips, share personal experiences, and help prepare women to apply their theological education to everyday ministry" ("Equip: Practical Training for Women in Ministry"). These three events are quite similar in their approach to women fellowship; they are all short, host primarily female speakers, and try to encourage women in their ministry efforts and in their everyday lives. In other words, like-minded women have a short opportunity to physically leave their homes, meet each other, and discuss the problems they share. As a result, these conferences are wonderful opportunities for women in the short term to grow in their faith and spend time with other women who wish to do the same.

Within the Southern Baptist culture and even Baptist culture generally, these events are seen as positive opportunities for women to grow as Christians and develop relationships with other women; however, like Thesmophoria, these conferences are a unique opportunity within the religion to do so since the culture is extremely patriarchal otherwise and limits what women can do. From my own experience of growing up in Baptist and Southern Baptist churches, I can safely say that the Southern Baptist denomination has a reputation (that it probably deserves) for being sexist because of its emphasis on men as the

spiritual leaders in a nation, in churches, and in homes, potentially to the exclusion of women from all positions of power or influence. The denomination tends to approach the Bible without considering how a verse can reflect the time and society it was written in and still demonstrate an important principle underneath those historical influences. As a result, some verses about gender roles in the Bible have been, in my opinion, interpreted in undesirable ways which affect how Southern Baptist people talk about the Bible and apply it to their lives. As one women's study scholar explains, this approach truly took form as the denomination fought against the liberal and specifically feminist society that was forming in the mid-twentieth century. She continues to say that that "as the struggle progressed, women themselves broke into factions" and "formed their own disparate groups and organizations around competing concepts of womanhood" (Flowers 8). Thus, this issue of what it means to be a woman and to be a Christian woman is ongoing and formed around a protest against feminism and a more liberal society. Consequently, any opportunities for women within this denomination all stem from a patriarchal urge to define a woman's position below a man's and to contain her to certain spaces where her actions do not threaten the man's position or power.

Despite variance among individually held beliefs about womanhood, certain clear definitions pervade and control the denomination

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and these events. Communications scholar Brian Kaylor examined articles concerning women from August of 2004 to January of 2005 from *The Baptist Faith and Message*, an official magazine published by the Southern Baptist Convention (a body which discusses and suggests official doctrine). He notes that the articles refer to women in three ways as the "submissive wife, fulfilled mother, and secondary Christian" (Kaylor 338). In his text, he then analyzes each role and its implications in the faith. To quote Kaylor's elegant phrasing, these articles imply that "women are supposed to be wives in order to find completion in their lives, and that they must submit to their

husbands' decisions and authority"; that "women not only should be mothers, but should want to be because that is the only way they will be fulfilled in life and it is the best way to serve God"; and that women in ministry are best suited to working with children or in traditionally feminine roles of librarianship, cooking, and singing (Kaylor 342). Despite all of these restrictions, women are still supposedly equal to men under God's eyes and can work in the church as long as they are under the supervision of the presumably male pastor (Cook 190).

Here lies the source of tension and limitations for Southern Baptist women within their faith. Their role in their faith is supposed to be active, but they act only in ways that prioritize their children and husbands. Of course, because having a husband and children is so often tied to the Christian woman's identity, having a

family is seen as necessary to be whole, with few exceptions. However, marriage itself comes with the patriarchal rules of obeying a husband and managing a godly household under his authority. Thus, a woman's place is not on her own in her church and in her society, but under her husband and under her pastor in these places. Of course, this role is reminiscent of the Athenian citizen's wife, a woman in a supporting role for greater good of the society. In both cases, women are supposed to trust the guidance of their husband and other leaders and quietly manage the responsibilities given to them. Even though the denomination tries to honor women in the roles it gives them, it did give them roles that limit the way they can think and act in their homes and in their churches, both places where they should be able to think and act freely.

Because of these restrictions, conferences are exceptionally free spaces in the same ways that Thesmophoria was. For a short period of time, it is acceptable—even commendable—for a Southern Baptist woman to leave her home without her husband and attend an event that her pastor is not leading himself. Moreover, other women in the denomination will be meeting for the sole purpose of trying to improve themselves as Christians in the uniquely feminine roles of wife and mother. The ability to discuss these identities with like-minded people in similar positions is rare outside female-centric spaces like these conferences. For example, the conferences' descriptions that specifically mention households and sexuality imply that these events are supposed to give women a chance to talk about their identities as women without the presence of their husbands. Thus, focusing on these background ideas in a female space leads to women helping each other define their place in their society and learning

how to work well within it. Even though these conferences are not as ritualized as Thesmophoria was, they share the same goal of allowing women to explore their faith and female identities together and without the interjections of their husbands. Overall, these conferences are surprisingly female-centric in spaces and times of male domination.

However, because these women are like-minded and because the topics of these conferences reinforce their preexisting beliefs, these events will likely never transform those beliefs into something more empowering. Like Thesmophoria, these events are problematic because of the limitations the denomination applies to them. Since Southern Baptist women do not often have the opportunity to speak freely within their churches, they will likely try to resolve the problems they face within the framework of their faith instead of reexamining what they were taught about their faith. The fact that a woman can go out of town to attend a conference means that she can share her problems openly and without fear of judgment from those she sees each week since, like all large gatherings of people, Southern Baptist congregations tend to have a few gossips within the crowd. But, because of the limited time frame, it is easier and faster for women to resolve those problems through the faith that they already know instead of genuinely discussing what they were taught in light of what the Bible actually says and implies. While the conferences can help women think about their individual problems, they do not help women consider the gender roles that may contribute to those problems since they are designed to reinforce those roles and the beliefs behind them.

If conferences were as transformative as I wish Thesmophoria had been, Christian women might instead reexamine

what they were taught and what they heard about marriage, gender, sexuality, or womanhood in the Bible while they were apart from the men who benefit from women's indoctrinated submission. If this were the case, women would have the opportunity to reinterpret the Bible's doctrine and, in that reinterpretation, consider whether the patriarchal men and women who taught them added and enforced incorrect doctrine. This new set of eyes could lead to a change in how the doctrine is taught or in how people apply it to their lives. However, like Thesmophoria, transformation does not seem to occur because the events just reinforce the system that made them necessary in the first place.

Even though both Thesmophoria and the Southern Baptist women's conferences seem empowering, they cannot truly change women's lives in the long-term because they exist within a patriarchy and with its permission. As a result, both Thesmophoria and Southern Baptist women's conferences are short-term tools to relieve the oppression women experience due to their patriarchal surroundings. This alternation of relief and pressure creates a self-perpetuating cycle that is unlikely to stop without a major change. While it is unclear how Greek women could have changed their society, there does seem to be a slight movement among Southern Baptist women and girls to leave the denomination or to stop following its particularly limiting rules. For example, as the girls who are raised in the denomination grow up, I notice that they often stray away from the rules and roles that their Southern Baptist families previously enforced. However, this change is not due to the conferences which only reinforce those old beliefs; instead, if this gradual shift continues, it will likely be because young women view those beliefs as unnecessary and

limiting in a modern world.

Neither Thesmophoria nor the conferences are a black-and-white situation where men are nefarious overlords and women are cowering victims. Some Southern Baptist women, and Athenian women in their time, sincerely believe that their way of life is good and have wonderful relationships with their patriarchal husbands. Perhaps such women do have real agency in this cycle if they are indeed choosing to participate and understand what they lose and gain from that way of life. However, the real-world concern that comes from this topic is that some women may continue to fulfill roles and follow rules that harm them, only because they do not know that they can reexamine the principles that supposedly justify those things. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that women who believe in such a lifestyle may pressure other women to do the same and ostracize them if they do not. Events like Thesmophoria and the Southern Baptist conferences could help women by giving them an opportunity for that reexamination without the risk of ostracization, but these gatherings only vent pressure and help that patriarchy to remain in place. If these events were not patriarchal, women could transform the oppressive way they were taught to think about religion into something liberating.

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# THE TRANSFOR- MATION OF THE EPIC FORM THROUGH MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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The paper presents research examining the epic poem format of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and illustrates how Milton's use of the form influences or relates to contemporary epics. This topic involves research on the structure of traditional epics, Milton's use of the form in *Paradise Lost*, and examples of how contemporary epics continue to make adjustments to the form. Considering the influence of classic epics, such as the *Iliad*, *Divine Comedy*, and *Aeneid*, in modern culture, there is a lack of modern examples of the epic form with similar impact. I researched the criteria for epic poems and the existence of modern examples. This paper examines the connections between Milton's epics and its predecessors as well as Milton's influence on modern epics. By exploring what constitutes an epic and how Milton's *Paradise Lost* has transformed the genre and influenced contemporary epics, readers can better understand the importance of *Paradise Lost* and its format.

Some of the most recognizable works of classic literature fall within the genre of epic poetry, but what defines this genre and gives these works their importance? John Milton's use of the epic poetry form in *Paradise Lost* exposes the work's influences and the meaning of the narrative as an origin story. As a prominent seventeenth century intellectual, Milton commented on religious and political issues of the time, such as free will and censorship. These works influenced societal change and his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, is no exception. The influence of classic epics, including *Paradise Lost*, is undeniable, but what can be said of the existence and impact of modern epics? Classic epics, such as Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Virgil's *Aeneid* are staples of literature studies, yet few examples of modern epics come to mind. The structure of traditional epics, Milton's use of the form in *Paradise Lost*, and comparisons to contemporary epics each assist readers in better understanding why Milton chose this format and how it is still in use today. *Paradise Lost* and other classics tend to be considered the end-all-be-alls of epic poetry, but modern epics can hold just as much, if not more, influence on a culture. By examining Milton's use of the epic form in *Paradise Lost* alongside past and contemporary epics, readers can better understand the work and recognize Milton's transformation of the epic form as well as how modern epics continue to do so.

## The Purpose and Structure of Epics

Epics can serve many purposes and are categorized as origin stories that often have themes of nationalism and essentialism. These traits help to define the values of the society or culture in which the epic was written.

Traditional epics would often embody the beliefs of a nation and represent it through its message. As such, epics are meant to explain a society's culture or beliefs wherein the hero of the epic represents nationalistic values through their actions. The journeys within epics "function as re-statements of known and widely held attitudes about the culture and/or the state" (Wacker 126). Epics have the power to set apart and define cultures, but "[i]t was not just cultural difference that made a national epic such a pressing necessity: it was also national pride" or an epic's ability to convey that pride to a larger audience (Crawford 428). The epic form's relation to cultural origins and values accounts for why many epics are highly regarded in the cultures from which they emerge. *Cilappathikaaram*, a second century AD epic by Illangovadigal, follows the epic structure and "is also an important source of information on the arts of music and dance of the ancient Tamil country," reflecting the values of the Tamil language and culture through its epic form (Bagavandas and Begum 222). Regardless of the culture employing it, the epic transcends time by its continued use as cultural expression. Like *Cilappathikaaram*, *Paradise Lost* represents the cultural beliefs of Milton's Christian society through the retelling of a biblical story. Through their representative heroes and journeys, epics convey the values of a culture, as seen from classic epics and *Paradise Lost* itself.

An epic can be immediately identified by its length, lack of rhyme scheme, distinct chapters, and narrative contents. The first epics were performed orally, and this oral format would later shape how classical epics were written. The form's oral origin accounts for its lyricism and use of poetics. The oldest known epic poem is believed

to be the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which solidified many of the rules set for epics. Formatting characteristics of classical epics include the poem's substantial length and use of rhythmic patterns such as dactylic hexameter. Milton himself discusses the epic format at the start of *Paradise Lost*, defining the verse style as a way of contextualizing the work and its influences. In *The Major Works*, an anthology of Milton's pieces, Book I of *Paradise Lost* is preceded by a passage concerning the verse style of the poem, a section that was added to the work's second edition. This explains Milton's influences and purpose for writing in the epic format. The section then prefaces that "the measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin" to connect his work with other influential epics (Milton 355). Addressing the work's lack of rhyme scheme, Milton also argues that "rhyme [is] no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially" (355). He then refers to the "modern bondage of rhyming" and expresses his disdain for the convention of rhyme schemes in long works (Milton 355). In the verse section, Milton credits *Paradise Lost*'s form to the classical epic poem, and further evidence of the genre is seen throughout the work.

Considering the structural ways an epic can be identified, a story can also become an epic in terms of content by following a heroic tale featuring journeys and battles, all meant to tell a civilization or society's origin story. Epics also incorporate religious or supernatural

elements that interact with the hero. This narrative style incorporates the use of heroic figures to tell the tale of an entire people. The journeys of these heroes, whether physically taken or through psychological means, as seen in Homer's *Iliad*, give insight on a culture's values and belief systems (Homer). There is a clear narrative structure featuring character interaction, conflict, and resolutions, although not necessarily of the happy sort. These patterns, including the use of long speeches, invocations of muses, and divine intervention in human affairs, are seen throughout *Paradise Lost* (Milton). These plot devices move the story along and engage the reader in the epic hero's adventurous journey.

Other characteristics of epic poetry include the hero and epic voice of the author. The hero is equally important as the journey itself, and epics such as the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* prove their focus on the hero through their well-known main characters. Considering the purpose of an epic is to establish an origin story for a culture's values, a representative hero is important. The hero is essential in that "the epic status of a poem [depends] even more on the poet's choice of subject than on his adherence to aesthetic principles," and an epic's hero must represent the origins and values of a culture in order to be relatable to that culture (Halmi 590). A strong representative hero ensures the reader's connection to the story, Adam and Eve being the representatives for all humankind in *Paradise Lost*. Not only does the hero of an epic act as a cultural representative, but also as a universally relatable figure for later generations.

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While Adam and Eve's journey to wisdom relates more to the traditional epic hero, many Romantics viewed Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost* for Milton's subversion of the character as complex and integral to the story. Milton writes Satan as a multidimensional character, one that faces self-doubt and pride. By examining the flaws of Satan through the character's own thoughts and voice, Milton portrays Satan as relatable, unlike many previous accounts of the biblical adversary. This subversion of the Satan character as relatable and oddly appealing has since inspired many similar writings of Satan. It is now a modern trope in popular media that Satan is clever, complicated, and charming, giving him more human traits and relatability than traditional depictions. This unique characterization of Satan also relates to Milton's use of epic voice. Lacey Conley examines how Milton's epic voice is involved in the narrative, specifically in its interaction and integration with Satan's character. The connection between the epic voice and Satan is Milton's way of portraying Satan as appealing as even the narrator sympathizes with him and this "distinction between Satan and the Epic Voice is blurred as the poem progresses" (Conley 17). Milton's subversion of the Satan character reveals his own views on the biblical story.

Similar to the epic hero, the author's voice itself, known as the epic voice, is also key for establishing the narrative of the epic. Milton's voice is clear in many sections of *Paradise Lost*, especially in the four invocations. These introductions before major sections of the work outline the plot of the section and expose Milton's presence in the narrative, giving readers an idea of his views concerning the work itself and topics such as church rule and free will (Milton). While this voice is not explicitly identified as Milton, it can

be argued that Milton's personality and literary style show themselves through the poem's epic voice. Overall, Milton's epic voice shows his intentions in the narrative and alludes to his purpose for the work.

### **Milton's *Paradise Lost* Compared to Classical Epics**

Without the popularity of past epics, *Paradise Lost* would not be the work it is. Because of renowned epics like Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, many authors chose to incorporate the epic form into their work. Milton drew inspiration for *Paradise Lost* from classical epics such as these. Considering their influence on the work, literary scholar Michael McKeon argues that "Milton's epic poem is read with and against epic poems of the previous century" (9). But despite groundbreaking work predating *Paradise Lost*, Milton subverted the genre and reimagined certain qualities of the classic epic. At the time of its release, *Paradise Lost* was widely accepted into the heroic poem genre, but looking at the work critically compared to earlier epics leads readers to second guess what makes an epic and how strict these genre regulations are. There is possible harm in strictly categorizing *Paradise Lost* as an epic: "when we situate these texts in the broad generic category 'epic poem,' we attribute to them a formal identity whose integral coherence is misleading" (McKeon 9). *Paradise Lost* encompasses much more than the traditional ideas of an epic, transforming the genre and "complicating perspective on the idea of the epic poem, evoking the genre by parodying it" (McKeon 9). Traditions of the epic poem are seen throughout *Paradise Lost*; through this, "Milton means to equal or surpass the great ancient epic poets," but he also differs from them in many ways (Lewalski 153).

While the work was not necessarily

controversial in the seventeenth century, different generations of readers have reinterpreted the work's messages. The comparison of *Paradise Lost* to even earlier epics shows how revolutionary Milton's work was, especially considering the content. By retelling a highly regarded biblical story, Milton opens the work up to criticism from religious perspectives, especially with his sympathetic characterization of Satan and emphasis on free will. Milton also subverted the militaristic beliefs of England at the time by "[criticizing] Homer, Virgil and medieval epics for making war the only heroic deemed," yet still including the War in Heaven "because epics require battles" (Rawson 434). By including a battle scene in which no actual deaths occur, due to the immortality of those fighting, "Milton preserves epic appearances, while protecting his poem from the epic taint" (Rawson 434). Known to play off of literary standards, "Milton's aggressive approach to inherited literary traditions" is not shocking (Weller 143). Milton's "Book IX of *Paradise Lost* [begins] with a critique of epic presuppositions" leading readers to reevaluate *Paradise Lost* not as an origin story, but as "an immediate and renewable present of spiritual experience" (Weller 153). In this way, Milton preserves and transforms the epic format while also participating in the genre's popularity at the time and leading to the practices of modern epics.

### **Milton's *Paradise Lost* Compared to Modern Epics**

Modern epics continue to transform traditional ideas of the epic form, just as

**As ideologies and cultural ideals splinter across nations, epics become more difficult to come across and define.**

Milton once did. Part of this change may be due to the difficulty in meeting the requirements of an epic. As ideologies and cultural ideals splinter across nations, epics become more difficult to encounter and define. Considering the rarity of agreement on many topics, how can a modern, all-encompassing, nation-representing epic exist? Simply put, most modern epics now cover smaller cultures, groups of people, or fictional societies. Modern epics also "[use] the genre quite consciously to reconstruct the relationship between modernity and tradition" instead of simply relying on tradition to tell an impactful epic (Wacker 133). Instead of classical epics that tell the origins and values of humankind or an entire nation, there

are now epics on the origins of ideologies and fictional universes. Feminist epics explain the origins of feminist ideologies often through a particular feminist icon or fictional woman as the epic's hero. Feminist works and the epic form go hand-in-hand because "[m]any of the traits critics ascribe to a feminine aesthetic characterize the modern long poem," such as defining feminist values (Keller 305). For example, Sharon Doubiago's *Hard Country* is a feminist long poem that follows the traditions of epic poetry by discussing "[a] nation's cultural heritage and her quest for a balanced female-male love relationship within the field of patriarchal power relations" (Keller 306). The poem is separated into sections and follows the heroic themes of traditional epics. By employing the epic form, feminist works such as Doubiago's express the values of the feminist community, just as a

traditional epic would for a society.

Second, modern media such as the *Game of Thrones* series or *The Lord of the Rings* franchise are similar to traditional epics because of their fantasy genre and depictions of heroic journeys. Tolkien recreates the epic by “recycling distinctly medieval stylistic elements,” including “historical linguistics, to create a medieval epic for the 20th century” (Tober 253). However, the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo “does not do what he does merely to attain glory and fame,” subverting traditional epic stereotypes of the hero as prideful and greedy (Mantovani 18). These modern works turn the genre on its head through reimagining heroes and journeys and going beyond the poem format. Filmmakers tackle the challenge of integrating the epic form onto the silver screen by “[employing] a spectacular breadth of space, time, and characters to amplify their effects” in a story of epic proportions (Bryant 71). The “pairing of epic films with long poems bridges popular and literary forms, lyric and narrative modes, feminine and masculine inflections” and results in engaging works of cinema that combine genres (Bryant 71). Movies that feature the identifying qualities of an epic — a hero, journey, and origin story — reflect the integration and transformation of the epic form into contemporary mediums, even if these shifts from the traditional long poem form are not always considered true epics.

Many contemporary epics fall within the mock epic genre as modern versions are often considered satires of classical epics. The term *mock epic* proves that the epic genre is malleable and able to parody itself. Works often use the title of mock epic to their advantage, as a way of reinventing the form. Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* “calls itself an epic or calls attention to its use of epic conventions on more

than a dozen occasions, and thus positively invites readers to assess it in these terms,” and Byron himself referred to the work as a satire of the epic form (Halmi 589).

Many critics argue that *Paradise Lost* itself is a parody of its predecessors; it is not a parody in an insulting sense, but rather in that it expands upon the forms of past epics. In fact, *Paradise Lost* modernized the epic form for the time. Parody is used not to make a mockery of the traditional epic form, but to grow from it. Milton himself parodies the biblical conception of characters such as Satan by writing him as dynamic and oddly likable at the start of the poem. *Paradise Lost* “is mock epic, because it derives from the poet’s ambition to write an imitation of classical epic that can provide a parodic basis for a Christian epic that will far surpass the classical” in which Milton aims to reimagine the biblical creation story (McKeon 11). *Paradise Lost* is referred to as a mock epic for its radical retelling of a biblical story, and contemporary epics are referred to as mock epics for their imitations of classic epics such as Milton’s. By classifying contemporary epics as parodies instead of epics, modern authors are alerting readers to their use and transformation of the form. The use of this term shows the similarities between *Paradise Lost* and contemporary epics and demonstrates how the epic genre builds upon itself and transforms throughout time.

## Conclusion

The adjustments made to the epic form by Milton and his contemporaries show how the guidelines of a genre are merely a starting point for innovative writing. These works, including *Paradise Lost*, employ the epic form in order to transform it into something new and relevant for their culture. In examining the epic form of *Paradise Lost*, through both its predecessors and contemporaries, readers can understand Milton’s purpose in choosing this narrative style to

Milton's integration of revolutionary ideas into the epic poem form paved the way for contemporary epics to blend the genre with new mediums and ideologies, thus modernizing the genre of epic poetry. ....

tell the origin story of humankind. Analyzing the structure, characteristics, and common uses of the epic form allows for better understanding of Milton's intention for *Paradise Lost*. While Milton incorporates traditional features of the epic form, he also transforms the epic genre from its predecessors by redefining the standards of the epic hero and incorporating his own epic voice into the work, thus allowing future works to alter the epic as well. Milton's integration of revolutionary ideas into the epic poem form paved the way for contemporary epics to blend the genre with new mediums and ideologies, thus modernizing the genre of epic poetry.

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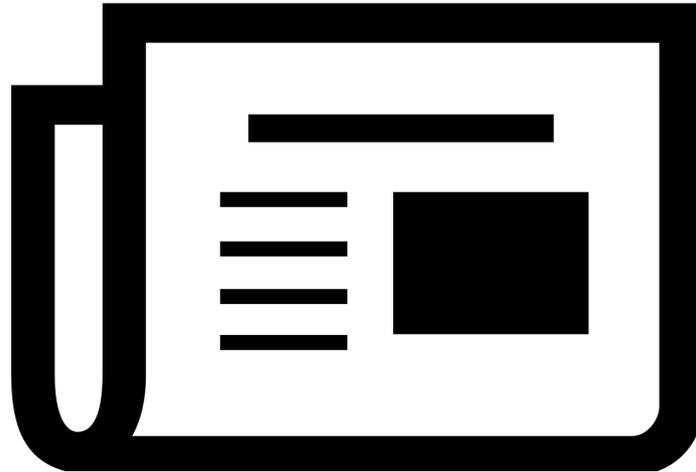
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# AMERICAN NEWS BIAS



## CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICAN NEWS COVERAGE THROUGH THE EVENTS OF THE 2006 LEBANON WAR

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The 2006 Lebanon War, a 34-day long conflict between Lebanon and Israel, was extensively covered by the international press. However, two different narratives predominated the coverage. This paper juxtaposes the different narratives by American and Arabic media outlets, and argues that American media, although considered the freest in the world, actually censors itself through a process known as “the tyranny of the majority.” The implications of this self-censorship demonstrate larger problematic societal perceptions when it comes to understanding the Middle East.

The 2006 Lebanon War caught the world's attention and caused news outlets to produce hours of coverage of the event for audiences back home. However, the drastically different narratives of these incidents offered two opposite perceptions of what happened during the month-long conflict. On one hand, there is the story of a victimized Israeli nation defending herself against terrorists. On the other hand, there's a narrative portraying Israel as the perpetrator and oppressor of innocent Arabs. The American news coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War sheds light on the true nature of American media bias and the unintended consequences that follow it.

Since the integration of media into society, coverage of major news events around the world has played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of how humans and communities interact. While it is widely accepted that news coverage around the world does present local and regional biases in the shared information, the impact and consequences of the American media coverage of an event as small as the 2006 Lebanon War is a minuscule window to a broader issue plaguing American society at the moment. The media outlets' parallel viewpoint with the American government can be illuminated by applying a principle called the "tyranny of the majority." Developed by 19th-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, the idea behind this concept is that public opinion would become an all-powerful force, with the majority tyrannizing unpopular minorities and marginalized individuals.

Tocqueville even goes so far as to say that there is less freedom of discussion and independence of mind in America than in Europe (De Tocqueville 204-213). But before delving into the juxtaposed narrative, it is important to understand the facts of the 2006 Lebanon War and the historical context of some diplomatic relations in the Middle East.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah launched a missile attack against Israel border towns as a diversion for an anti-tank attack on two armored Israeli patrol vehicles. Two of the seven Israeli soldiers were captured, and the others were wounded or killed. After a failed rescue attempt, the Israeli Defense Forces quickly retaliated and responded with massive airstrikes and artillery fire, ultimately leading to a 34-day long

Developed by 19th-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, the idea behind this concept is that public opinion would become an all-powerful force, with the majority tyrannizing unpopular minorities and marginalized individuals.

war. It led to the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the death of many Lebanese civilians, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. The conflict ended with a United Nations-brokered ceasefire on August 14, 2006, although the war formally ended on September 8, 2006, when Israel lifted its naval blockade of Lebanon (Kalb and Saivetz 43-66).

Known as a militant, secretive, and religiously fundamentalist sect, Hezbollah, which stands for the "Party of God," rose to prominence in Lebanon in 1982 during its civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 ("Hezbollah").

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## Following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the media portrayal of Arabs and Muslims has often been negative, as the lines between Arab, terrorist, and religious fundamentalism are blurred.

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Members of the Hezbollah party are predominantly Shia Muslims and have historically worked closely with Iran, the most powerful and largest Shia majority country in the region. They are known for engaging in alleged terrorist attacks, including kidnappings and car bombings. In 1990, following the end of the civil war, the militant group gained access to the country's political power after an arrangement was approved. Although the group's original manifesto called for resistance against the newly formed state of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic republic within Lebanon, it dropped the latter after the 2006 war, affirming as its ideal government a democracy representing national unity. Hezbollah has been considered a terrorist group by the U.S. Department of State since October 1997 ("Hezbollah | Meaning, History, & Ideology"). Hezbollah was also one of the first Arab militias to have fought the IDF to a standstill, making them heroes throughout the Arab world (Chadwick). This regional perception of Hezbollah is further acknowledged in a later discussion of regional coverage of the events.

The state of Israel, proclaimed on May 14, 1948, following the United Nations' Resolution 181, allowed for the split of land in Palestine between a Jewish and Arab State. Although the Jews agreed to the deal, the Palestinians did not. Following the creation of the new state of Israel, five Arab armies invaded the territory in response to the resolution, which many Arab countries saw as unfair to the Palestinians now

forced to live under Jewish rule. The war ended with an armistice in 1949 with Israel gaining some of the territory originally promised to the Palestinians under Resolution 181. Egypt and Jordan retained control over Gaza and the West Bank respectively and the armistice lines held until 1967 ("The Arab-Israeli War of 1948").

Today, many countries in the Arab region have weak or non-existent ties with the state of Israel, which is not recognized by many as a sovereign state. For example, the state of Israel does not have a representative in the League of Arab States; that seat is instead given to the state of Palestine. Alone among its Arab counterparts, Israel quickly established close ties with the United States in the 1970s. The United States was one of the first states to recognize Israel as a newly formed country under President Harry Truman. There is immense support from the U.S. toward Israel, especially in terms of financial support and diplomatic backing (Collins). During a speech to Israel's parliament, former President George W. Bush stated that "Israel's population may be just over seven million. But when you confront terror and evil, you are 307 million strong because the United States of America stands with you" ("President Bush Addresses Members of the Knesset," 2008).

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are blurred. As a result of this portrayal, there was an increase in American hostility towards Arab identity and its many cultural aspects, blending the complex and rich history of the region into a uniform, inaccurate portrait of the Middle East (Alsultany 161-169). In the United States, it is not uncommon to place all Middle Eastern culture under the same umbrella – that all Arabs are Muslims and therefore are all terrorists. It is often forgotten that there are Christian Arabs, Palestinian Jews, and Jewish communities in predominantly Muslim countries in North Africa.

As the hegemon of news coverage around the world, the United States prides itself on having the “freest” media in the world. However, the American media has experienced a constant need for immediacy and a seemingly growing polarization of reporting that has limited the alternative perspectives available to American audiences. In American news coverage, new viewpoints are not informatively introduced; instead, the current societal viewpoints are reaffirmed. Although this trend can be seen in other national media, it is very prevalent in American media and carries many visible consequences. Because the content presented aligns comfortably with American society’s viewpoints, it is widely accepted globally and, unfortunately, people are left to create their own opinions and understanding of the events based on dubious facts (Collins).

Local television, which is preferred by Americans in contrast to national television reporting, presents a unique market that forces reporters to work with more limited coverage time, smaller budgets, and market influencers when compared to the national television news. However, it is important to understand that local news outlets rely on footage from their networks or wire services.

For example, in prepackaged daily reports made by ABC to its affiliates in 2006, footage included images of the battlefield, statements from the Israeli foreign minister and a State Department official, as well as speeches from the United Nations. Generally, most local editors leaned towards the position of U.S. authorities, ensuring an undisputed coverage of foreign events (Cavari and Gabay).

Previous research done by Ammon Cavari and Itay Gabay on the differences in the coverage of an Israeli strike on Beirut, July 20, 2006, by a national network and local network support this idea of disproportionate coverage. The ABC network reported on the disproportionate Israeli actions while the local affiliate in Chicago emphasized Israel’s right to self-defense. The vastly different reporting of the same event means each respective audience absorbed different information and formed different viewpoints of the same event. Because local television tends to align with the U.S. government’s viewpoints, their coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War portrays the conflict as Hezbollah attacks and fully supports Israel’s work at total disarmament of Hezbollah (Cavari and Gabay). This type of coverage is in line with the U.S. government’s longstanding support for Israel, particularly in this conflict. Rather than presenting the various and complex narratives of the war, the American media has chosen to stick to the viewpoint shared with the government and widely accepted by American society. Due to this drastically different coverage, local news that favored Israel, portrayed their actions against Lebanon as justified and normalized the aggressiveness. A small majority of network news defined the issue as Israeli aggressiveness, projecting a slightly more balanced view (Cavari and Gabay).

However, when looking at the coverage of the same conflict through the eyes of a different media market, the painted story of the conflict is not the same. Over the last decade, major Arab news networks have grown their audience in the region and have established themselves as the big players in information distribution. Because they operate so close to the issue in comparison to American media, Arabic news outlets have offered a different narrative through their coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War, more in line with opinions and sentiments proper to the region. Another major reason the viewpoints presented to the Arab world were different was that Arabs no longer had to receive their information from Western media, relying instead on local networks which were established as Arab news networks grew. By 2005, there were 150 Arab satellite channels (Fontana).

By informing their population through more regional lenses, the content presented by those news outlets reflects the opinions and feelings of the local population. Therefore, the influence of the Western narrative of Israel is reduced (Fontana). In this case, the growth of Arab networks has created a new narrative when it comes to news coverage in the Middle East. Locals are getting reports from people in the region and are being informed by experts from their region rather than having to accept Western coverage as accurate and the only source of information available.

For example, look at the coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War by Asharq Al-Awsat, one of two Arabic-language

newspapers published in London and distributed throughout the Middle East. During their July 13 to August 16 coverage, 24 photographs were printed on the front page relating to the war and all but two showed the death and destruction caused by Israeli attacks in Lebanon. This portrayed Israel as the sole aggressor and shows, in the context of Middle East journalism and history, that Arabs have a prejudice against Israel. By focusing their coverage on the destruction caused by Israel and ignoring the actions of Hezbollah, Asharq Al-Awsat aligned itself with the feelings of its readers who sympathized with their Arab brothers under Israeli fire (Kalb and Saivetz 43-66). This biased coverage of the events parallels the coverage of the same war by American media – both entities have chosen to tell the story that will not be questioned by its audience and that aligns with societal views of the key players in the war.

The narrative given by Arabic-language news outlets is the complete opposite of the coverage done by American news outlets, being more in line with Arab perceptions of the facts. While the latter saw the IDF attacks as a right to self-defense, the Arab population, particularly the Lebanese population in the zone of conflict and abroad, saw the IDF attacks, which were backed and funded by the U.S., as the Bush Administration’s final attempt at abolishing Hezbollah (Fadda-Conrey 159-173). Again, the crucial role the regional politics, dynamics, and history play in shaping the information given out to the mass audiences is evident.

**American media shapes the perceptions and ideas society has about the reason for events and is but a piece in an endless cycle where the majority opinion shapes those same ideas and limits the flow of discussion.**

The coverage of the international conflicts by various media in the United States and the Middle East reflects the regional biases and history of relationships with the parties involved. While this is well-known, the underlying consequences of the coverage of the conflict by American media go beyond giving out biased information. American media shapes the perceptions and ideas society has about the reason for events and is but a piece in an endless cycle where the majority opinion shapes those same ideas and limits the flow of discussion.

The misconceptions about this region of the world have even spilled over into U.S. policies. In January 2017, President Trump signed Executive Order 13769, barring entry into the U.S. for individuals from countries like Iran, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan, while also suspending entry of refugees from that part of the world for an indefinite amount of time. The administration claims that the executive order was signed to limit terrorists from the countries involved in the 9/11 attacks from entering. However, none of the countries on the list provided terrorists towards the World Trade Center attacks. The countries which did participate in the attacks (Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates) and countries with which the Trump business and administration worked with or are currently working with (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia) were omitted from the list (Torbati et al.).

The attitude of Americans toward the portrayal of world events in the Middle East is unique. Consider European censorship laws, for example. In December 2019, the French Parliament passed a new law declaring anti-Zionism a criminal offense on the same level as anti-Semitism. Critiques of the bill claim it is a direct attack on freedom of

expression in the country. The U.S. does not have any laws similar to this; in fact, the U.S. prides itself on allowing the greatest amount of speech and encourages healthy dialogue among the different opinions of individuals. However, the consequences of vocalizing opinions that diverge from the majority are much more drastic. As Tocqueville explains it, the “tyranny of the majority” forces those who do not align their views with the majority to engage in self-censorship and self-silencing. For fear of being mislabeled or exiled by their community for voicing an opinion that challenges what the majority believes and has dictated is correct, many Americans keep their thoughts to themselves, taking away from the healthy, democratic dialogue that is expected. Unlike the French, the U.S. does not have laws banning anti-Zionist ideas; however, those ideas are often linked to being anti-Semitic, forcing people to not fully share their thoughts, naturally censoring ideas and opinions without ever implementing any laws. This self-censorship is a direct example of the “tyranny of the majority.”

The local American coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War often aligned itself with the majority responses of the U.S. population. By aligning themselves with the majority, the media outlets were, therefore, presenting an uncontested narrative to their audience. Regardless if it’s voluntarily or involuntarily, the news coverage of the conflict coming from the U.S. followed the majority opinion on the actors in the conflict. Whether the whole U.S. agreed to it, the moral of the story for many viewers was that Israel was defending itself against the aggression from the terrorist group Hezbollah and did not acknowledge the different narratives that were taking place in this complex conflict.

While there was some condemnation toward the damage

done by the IDF on Lebanese civilians, the U.S. government's agenda is the narrative that ended up marking the targeted American audience. To this day, the impact of this "tyranny of the majority" in our perceptions of issues in the Middle East and who the U.S. needs to align itself with is clear to see. Israel is and has been a big ally to America and many of the recent foreign policies of the current administration reflect that ("U.S. Relations With Israel.").

The American news coverage of the 2006 summer war between Lebanon's Hezbollah and the state of Israel, heavily shaped by the politics and dynamics between the U.S. and Israel as well as its societal perceptions of the regions, mirrors the greater issues in U.S. society and the impact news bias has on the information absorbed by viewers. While it is easy to acknowledge that all media is, in fact, biased, the American news networks' far-reaching consequences are apparent today, more than ever. The misperceptions perpetuated in the media about the region's conflicts and culture have shaped the American audience's views of the Middle East, which then impacts the news coverage of the media, pushing the U.S. into a perpetual cycle of misinformation, where the majority opinion rules and all opinions against the standard are dismissed and attacked.

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# BORDER TOWN

## SUBVERSION OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN RACIALIZED STEREOTYPES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

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The stigmatization of Mexican-Americans in the United States can be traced back to racism following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and is continued by many forms of media. Representation of Mexican-Americans in print media through the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century has been extremely stereotyped, often criminalizing Mexican-American men, hyper-sexualizing Mexican-American women or portraying Mexican-Americans as savage overall. While written media can only describe these stereotypes, comics can illustrate them, placing comics in a unique form of print media. When analyzing Eric M. Esquivel's comic *Border Town*, the author along with artist Ramon Villalobos reinforce the criminalization and hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American men and women that could be seen as regressive; however, the frequent subversion of these stereotypes suggests a pro-resistance stance to anti-Mexican attacks. Ultimately, *Border Town's* pro-resistance stance to anti-Mexican sentiment can be seen through the subversion and reinforcement of traditional use of Mexican-American stereotypes in this comic. In essence, this essay demonstrates how late nineteenth-century germ theory, stigmatic criminalization of Mexican-American men, and hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American women, transferred from social contexts to comics that Eric M. Esquivel subverts in his comic *Border Town*. Fundamentally, *Border Town* challenges traditional anti-Mexican stereotypes in comics by including Mexican-American characters who question the way they are stereotyped, manipulate their stereotypes to protect themselves or another, and then become socially accepted by those they protect.

Comic book characters like Wonder Woman, Captain America, Batman, Black Widow, and Wolverine are common white superheroes seen in a comic bookstore or on the big screen. The absence of comic book characters of color, in general, is not seen as a societal issue because comic books are perceived as fun narratives for children. However, comics historically have been used by the dominant white culture to degrade and stereotype individuals they perceive to be lesser. Finding Mexican-American protagonists like Wildcat (Yolonda Montez), Blue Beetle (Jaime Reyes), or Green Lantern (Kyle Rayner) is difficult. Furthermore, finding research on Mexican-American characters in comics is not readily available. So, why focus on comparing past and present comics with Mexican-American characters? Analysis of Mexican-American stigmatization highlights white normative values that have foundation in racist ideology. For example, in the comic, *Border Town*, author Eric M. Esquivel emphasizes that “Human monsters. Strange invaders from a foreign land, consumed by hate and compelled by a curious compulsion to send Aztlan’s native people...back home’...” (Esquivel 3). The “human monsters” Esquivel alludes to is white culture, therefore, it is important to analyze the past view of Mexican-Americans in comics to understand how Esquivel both used and subverted stigma and stereotype to subvert white racism.

The struggle of Mexican-Americans in the United States can be traced back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and continues today in many forms of media. For the purposes of this

paper, Mexican-Americans, as defined by the Smithsonian can be described as a group of:

“people [in the United States that] have a familial link to Mexico or Mexican culture... [including those] in the territory conquered by the United States in the Mexican-American War...[and] recent immigrants”. (Smithsonian 3)

Representation of Mexican-Americans in comics and non-fiction political cartoons has been extremely stereotypical often depicting Mexican-American men as criminals, hyper-sexualizing Mexican-American women, or portraying anyone of Mexican descent as savage. The ability of comics to portray these stereotypes both visually and textually suggests Mexican-Americans are continually stereotyped because of white American ethnocentric ideals following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, “that [ended the]... calamities of the [Mexican-American] war”(Yale Law School). When examining the comic *Border Town*, the author Eric M. Esquivel and artist Ramon Villalobos depict

**...comics historically have been used by the dominant white culture to degrade and stereotype individuals they perceive to be lesser.**

Mexican-American stereotypes in the protagonists Frank and Julietta as criminals, hyper-sexualize Aimi, and portray Quinteh as the “dirty” or “primitive” Mexican-American. However, the author and artist then subvert the traditional use of the aforementioned stereotypes to underline their continued presence in society today.

Ultimately, *Border Town* challenges traditional anti-Mexican stereotypes in comics by including Mexican-American characters who question the way they are stereotyped, manipulate their stereotypes

to protect themselves or another, and then become socially accepted by those they protect.

Racialized stereotypes of Mexican-Americans have a long run in print media and increased in severity following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. This treaty ended the Mexican-American War and added most of northern Mexico to the United States. With the movement of the U.S.-Mexico border, many once Mexican citizens became U.S. Citizens on paper but not in practice. According to sociologist and historian David Montejano, “[white settlers] in the Southwest brought with them a long history of dealing with Indians and blacks” suggesting that the massive acquisition of land from Mexico would bring with it years of segregation, racism, and policies that would deeply affect Mexican-Americans (Montejano 5). The notions of racial inferiority of Mexicans by the by culture traveled to the Southwest where Mexican-Americans were seen as “peones” (Montejano 76) directly translating to peons. White culture labeling an entire group as peons suggests the view of Mexican-Americans as “dirty,” “inferior,” or “bestial”. Furthermore, The Mexican-American “peones” would become the baseline for the anti-Mexican sentiments (Montejano 76). The belief Mexican-Americans were inferior eventually transferred to comics and is expressed through stereotypes seen today. The following section will analyze how late nineteenth-century germ theory, criminalization, and hyper-sexualization was used to stigmatize Mexican-Americans and will review examples of the aforementioned stereotypes in print media.

### **The History of Three Stereotypes**

White Americans labeling Mexican-Americans as “peones” in Spanish

suggests ethnocentric ideals that aided in the reinforcement of many stereotypes (Montejano 76). This section will focus on how the germ theory against Mexican-Americans was used to segregate them, the criminalization of Mexican-Americans, and the hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American women transferred from social contexts to comics, illustrating a continued form of oppression.

Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexican-Americans in the 1850s to 1900s were criminalized and expelled from cities across the Southwestern United States. The criminalization of Mexican-Americans became so ingrained in Southwestern white culture that it can still be seen in comic book characters today, suggesting a lasting form of oppression. The deep-seated hatred of Mexicans following the Mexican-American war led to “[Mexican-Americans in great numbers being] driven from Austin in 1853 and again in 1855, from Seguin in 1854, from the counties of Matagorda and Colorado in 1856, and Uvalde in 1857” (Montejano 28). Many, if not all expulsions were under the accusations of Mexican-Americans being “horse thieves and consorters of slave insurrection” (Montejano 28), suggesting the hatred of Mexicans contributed to a mass criminalization of all Mexican-Americans. Through criminalizing an entire group of people, white Americans laid the foundation for the Mexican-American criminal stereotype still evident today.

An example of this dynamic is evident in the Frito-Lay company mascot in 1967. Frito Bandito perpetuated the criminalization of Mexican-Americans, therefore, continuing the stereotype from the mid-1800s. Brian Behnken and Gregory Smithers argue in *Racism in American Popular Media* this character was often seen during the 1970s stealing “a

package of corn chips and then [sneaking] off to lay in the sun and drink tequila” drawing from the criminalization of the 1800s and perpetuating the stereotype of the Mexican-American criminal (122). Although the Frito-Lay company eventually retired the Frito Bandito in 1971, the prevalence of the racial stereotype from the 1800s highlights the criminalization of Mexican-Americans and subsequent stereotype that became so ingrained in American society it was used as a revenue-generating icon (Behnken and Smithers).

Pop culture icons are nothing new to American media and racial stereotypes perpetuated in them are no different. Similar to the Mexican-American criminal stereotype, the “dirty” or “primitive” Mexican-American stereotype permeated into the dominant culture and is still seen today. In the years following the mass criminalization of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, the segregation of Mexican-Americans in the 1920s to 1940s was heavily influenced by the germ theory of the late nineteenth century. David Raney defines germ theory as “[non-white skin] traits [thought to be] infections.... casting [non-whites] as ‘dilution[s]’ or ‘pollution[s]’” to the white gene-pool (Raney 3). This theory aided in the establishment of the “dirty” or “primitive” Mexican-American stereotype that Dana Berthold suggests was achieved by labeling Mexican-American behaviors:

*“that fall outside of, and thereby threaten the most carefully guarded categories of social classification including [the cleanliness of] races, classes, genders, and sexualities” making anything related to the word Mexican synonymous with “dirty” or “primitive”. (Berthold 10)*

The influence of germ theory led to white Americans segregating Mexican-Americans to parts of town that

“expressed the social hierarchy [of the area]” (Montejano 168). Furthermore, the influence of germ theory made it so Mexican-Americans were only allowed to shop at certain locations at certain hours, and “were expected to be back in [the] Mexican [side] of town by sunset” (Montejano 168). The result of segregating Mexican-Americans denotes white Americans did not recognize their citizenship and established a social hierarchy that created “an Anglo world and a Mexican[-American] world... [where the only] point of contact [with white Americans was] ... the dusty fields” (Montejano 168) highlighting that white Americans viewed both Mexican and Mexican-Americans as “dirty” or “bestial” for working in the fields and therefore felt they deserved to be isolated, underlining late-nineteenth-century germ theory ideas. Germ theory acted as a way for white Americans to justify the segregation of Mexican-Americans which resulted in their feeling as if they are temporary guests in the United States.

When looking at comics, the otherization of Mexican-Americans and the feelings they had following their segregation is evident today in two ways. First, many Mexican-Americans feel like they are visitors. Through the comic “El Border Xing” published in 2018 by Jaime Cortez, the influence of germ theory and segregation from the 1920s to the 1940s is seen contributing to this feeling. On the bottom of page 113, the bold text font is shaped into the American flag. By itself, this image could be read as just another American flag; however, the words “En la frontera, (on the border) [Mexican-Americans in the United States] feel less like citizens and more like tentative guests” (Cortez 113) making this quote a profound statement on the feelings of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest an example of how the influence of germ

theory and the segregation of Mexican-Americans in the 1920s to the 1940s affects them today. The flag underscores how Mexican-Americans pledge their allegiance to the United States. When coupled with the text saying Mexican-Americans feel like they are visitors in the United States, this quote suggests the presence of germ theory which has become so engrained in Southwestern racial ideals it perpetuates the “dirty” Mexican-American stereotype today.

Additionally, by looking at Gus Arriola’s comic *Accidental Ambassador* the bestial nature of Mexican-Americans is suggested in a strip from May 1943. The main character in this strip, Gordo, is drawn as an oversized man known as the “greatest bean farmer een Mexico” with slick black hair even though Gordo is from the United States (Arriola). Through Gordo, Arriola reinforces the view of Mexican-Americans as giant dirty beasts by making Gordo’s stature too much for the donkey he is riding. Furthermore, when looking at Gordo’s nephew Pepino in the same strip, the idea of Mexican-American bestial nature is reinforced as this small child is working in the field tirelessly, again reinforcing this idea and alluding to the presence of germ theory. Although Arriola aimed to “introduce Mexico to his readers as to counteract

common misconceptions [of Mexico and its people]” (Fajardo 123), his depictions of Gordo’s large stature and Pepino’s toiling subtly reinforce stereotypical views of Mexican-American men as bestial. Together by comics highlighting the feeling of otherness Mexican-Americans have in the United States and their bestial depiction, the modern allusion to germ theory demonstrated that notions of racist ideology can permeate into a culture, causing lasting effects.

In addition to the racialization of Mexican-American men in the United States, Mexican-American women are hypersexualized with textual emphasis placed on their beauty and illustrative emphasis on their cleavage in comics. To understand hypersexuality in comics, I will outline three attributes the collective male gaze attributes to Mexican-American women and why the third attribute is so prevalent when the second if

the most prized. Author Alicia Gaspar de Alba underlines that the “patriarchy assigns three attributes to the [Mexican and Mexican-American] feminine gender: la madre [the mother], la virgin [the virgin], y la puta [the whore]” (51). La madre represents the godly purity, reservation, and obedience to the father that women should aspire to



**Figure 1.** Gordo Seeing Color. Arriola, Gus and Robert C. Harvey. *Accidental Ambassador Gordo: The Comic Strip Art of Gus Arriola*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

when the second if the most prized. Author Alicia Gaspar de Alba underlines that the “patriarchy assigns three attributes to the [Mexican and Mexican-American] feminine gender: la madre [the mother], la virgin [the virgin], y la puta [the whore]” (51). La madre represents the godly purity, reservation, and obedience to the father that women should aspire to

be once they are old, therefore making women's purity a spiritual ideal that can be perverted. Whereas, la virgín is the physical representation of la madre in younger years that could have her purity corrupted and become la puta. Although there are three archetypal feminine attributes applied by the patriarchy, women in comics are often depicted as the hypersexual puta to fulfill male sexual fantasy or desire even though men want la virgín so they are culturally accepted.

The hyper-sexualization of women can be seen in Gus Arriola's *Accidental Ambassador*, where the women are used to pleasure the readers and characters in the text (see fig. 1). For example, in a strip from May 2, 1943, Gordo and his nephew Pepino discover that their comic is now in color and are exploring their new colorful world when they see three women in the distance, Gordo comments "eet's going to be fon" (Arriola) while gazing at the three women. Arriola's text from Gordo does not immediately sexualize women but insinuates that looking at women in color will be more fun than looking at women in black and white, suggesting women are sexual creatures for Gordo and the larger male audience to conquer and gawk at. Furthermore, when looking at the drawn image of these women from the 1943 comic strip, their hyper-sexualized caricature is emphasized by Arriola. Each of the women has the same face with form-fitting clothes that emphasize the women's breasts suggesting their innate sexual nature. Overall, Arriola's comic strips underline the lasting la puta stereotype and hyper-sexuality of women with Gordo viewing women as objects to conquer and drawing their breasts as the main aspect of their body to be viewed.

## Analysis of *Border Town's* Main Characters

The comic opens with the protagonist, Frank, traveling to his new home in Arizona. The following day at his new school, Frank is met by another main character, named Quinteh, and the two quickly share a greeting before the main antagonist of the story, Blake, shoves the two apart. Later that day, Frank enters a class where he meets the final two characters, Julietta and Amy, before shouting that he is half-Mexican. Following Frank's outburst, Blake is told about it and challenges Frank to a fistfight after school because Blake is a white supremacist. During the fight between Frank and Blake, Esquivel introduces creatures from Mexican folklore seen as large demons that come to destroy the world. From this moment on, the comic focuses on the biracial protagonists Frank, Quinteh, Julietta, and Aimi who fight against the creatures from the Aztec underworld, avoid immigration issues, overcome racism, and fight to protect each other.

The stereotypes in section one both intentionally and unintentionally reinforce anti-Mexican sentiment in comics and printed cartoons. In Eric M. Esquivel's comic *Border Town*, the author and his artist Ramon Villalobos reinforce the criminalization, hyper-sexualization, and "dirty" or "primitive" Mexican-American stereotypes; however, these stereotypes are subsequently subverted through the main characters embracing them to then win victory over an attacker, highlighting the complexity of stereotyped race in comics. The following subsections will analyze each of the main characters individually to highlight the nuanced nature of the stereotypes' subversion.

### **"Dirty" or "Primitive" Mexican-American Stereotype**

The usage of germ theory otherizes Mexican-Americans based on the perception of them as “dirty” or “bestial.” When looking at Esquivel’s comic *Border Town*, he uses racially insulting language that stems from germ theory, which reinforces the racialized idea of Mexican-American’s bestial nature. In conjunction with the artist Villalobos’ racialized drawings, the aspects of germ theory are carried forward to racialize the character Quinteh; however, the acceptance of his strength as a virtue later in the comic subverts the “dirty” or “primitive” Mexican-American stereotype.

Analysis of Quinteh’s biracial background demonstrates how Villalobos’ drawing of him reinforces the “dirty” or “primitive” Mexican-American stereotype that evolved out of the 1920s to the 1940s segregation of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. In the second issue of *Border Town*, there is a flashback to a conversation between Quinteh and his mother in which she tells him that “[his] Kiowa ancestors...would dance to push their own souls aside, and make room inside their hearts for spirits who didn’t know fear” (Esquivel 3). Through his mother’s encouragement, he puts on a luchador mask that fulfills the same purpose the Kiowa dance would. Years later in the first issue of *Border Town*, Quinteh still wears his mask when he is separated from Frank by the white supremacist, Blake. During the separation, Blake glares menacingly at Quinteh and asks Frank if “[the] incredibly retarded hulk” (Esquivel 9) hurt him. This scene reinforces the bestial nature of Mexican-Americans in two ways. The derogatory remark of calling Quinteh an “incredibly retarded hulk” (Esquivel 9) directly insults his bestial size and nature, mirroring the idea of Mexican-Americans as “dirty” that grew out of the segregation of from

the 1920s to the 1940s. Additionally, the depiction of Quinteh as inferior is enhanced though the artist Villalobos’ drawing him as an oversized man, with a large barreling chest, and dark slick hair. This depiction is similar to the image of Gordo seen in Gus Arriola’s *Accidental Ambassador* that racialized Mexican-American men as oversized with slick black hair, and dumb. Together the racialization of Quinteh and insult towards his intelligence emphasizes that this character is designed to be perceived as inferior to the white student, Blake.

Although Quinteh is stereotyped, near the end of issue one, writer Esquivel subverts the racialized depiction of Quinteh by having him save Frank. During an encounter with Blake, Frank is about to be shot before a supernatural demon police officer arrives to break up the fight by attacking Blake and moving to attack Frank. Before Frank is mauled by a demon, Quinteh steps in and places the demon in a headlock, giving Frank enough time to begin his escape. The racialization of Quinteh in this scene is still the same as before, and the germ theory idea that would see Quinteh’s bestial nature as “primitive” and useless is subverted through Quinteh embracing this strength to stop the demon briefly to allow his “new friend Frank” an opportunity to escape (Esquivel 20). Quinteh’s bestial characterization could continue to be emphasized by more derogatory remarks after he helps Frank; however, at the beginning of the second issue of *Border Town*, Frank comes to Quinteh’s rescue, underlining the acceptance and acknowledgment of Quinteh’s strength, therefore, subverting the traditional primitive brute stereotype that evolved out of late-nineteenth-century germ theory. The artist and author’s awareness that Mexican-Americans are often stereotyped as brutes in conjunction with Quinteh’s

awareness of his strength allows the stereotype of the brutish Mexican-American to be subverted, transforming Quinteh from a stereotypical brute to a stalwart defender.

### **Criminalization of Mexican-Americans**

The second major stereotype in *Border Town* is the criminalized view of Mexican-Americans by white culture. Esquivel reinforces the criminal action through Frank's fight with Blake and Julietta's criminal actions and undocumented status. Although these characters are criminalized, the author subverts the stereotype by having both characters comment on their criminalization suggesting that to subvert and change a stereotype it must be noted.

Esquivel subverts the criminalized Mexican-American stereotype against Frank during his fight with Blake because Frank knows when to stop the fight and is not the aggressor, suggesting that white racists are the true criminals. Upon arriving at his new school, Frank interacts with the racist student Blake who thinks Frank is white due to his skin tone. However, later in issue one of *Border Town*, Esquivel illustrates Frank yelling he is half-Mexican (Esquivel 12). Upon hearing this, Blake punches Frank because "[he] misrepresented [himself which] embarrassed [him] in front of [his] boys" (Esquivel 13). This attack on Frank reinforces the idea of the Mexican-American criminal as Frank charges Blake, getting only inches away from his face and then agreeing to fight him after school. Frank's willingness to fight and making that known suggests the idea of the violent Mexican-American criminal in the United States. Esquivel continues the stereotype during the fight after school when Frank calls Blake's friends a "little gang of white-powerpuff girls" (Esquivel 16), illustrating a verbal attack

and reinforcing the Mexican-American criminal stereotype. Furthermore, Esquivel subverts the stereotype during the fight after school, when Blake throws the first punch and Frank retaliates afterward, again making the white supremacist the aggressor and the Mexican-American the defender. During his retaliation, Frank kicks Blake and exclaims he knows "what happens if [he bashed Blake's] brains out in the hallway on [his] first day of class...[because he knows] this from experience" before he stops the fight and turns to head home (Esquivel 17). Additionally, Esquivel solidifies the subversion by having Blake pull out a gun and threaten to shoot Frank, delineating that the true criminal is the white supremacist and making a social commentary that the criminalization of Mexican-Americans is a stereotype that has been perpetuated by racist bigots.

In addition to Frank subverting the Mexican-American criminal stereotype, the character Julietta could reinforce the criminal stereotype because of her undocumented status; however, Julietta avoids attention because she is aware of this criminalization and does not want any trouble. Some may say that her undocumented status reinforces the criminal stereotype because she is disobeying American law, but her existence in the story is primarily to underline the undocumented immigrant experience not to perpetuate the Mexican-American criminal stereotype. When Julietta is first introduced, she is a reserved and jaded teenager making her way through school. She is often seen making comments towards Frank trying to discover who he is and she could be seen as a secondary character; however, after Quinteh is hurt by the demon police officer that is going to attack Frank, Julietta picks up a gun on the ground and shoots the demon police officer. By firing a gun while undocumented, she commits

“a felony that could get [her] and [her] entire family arrested and deported” (Esquivel 21). This demonstration of her breaking the law could be read as another Mexican-American in the United States engaging in criminal activity reinforcing the criminal stereotype. Furthermore, Julietta’s criminalization is enhanced in issue two when she pulls the gun from her backpack to shoot a demon that is attacking her friends. This action ultimately reinforces the stereotype that Mexican-Americans in the United States will commit crimes and suggests that white Americans will criminalize her and other Mexican-Americans regardless of any defensive circumstances present because of white ethnocentric views of Mexican-Americans.

Although Julietta is criminalized in issue four, when giving her back story, Esquivel highlights the stereotyped view of undocumented Mexican-Americans by emphasizing Julietta’s undocumented immigrant experience. For example, in issue four of *Border Town* when Julietta discovers she is undocumented she withdraws from society because she realizes that as a “Latina. Black. And undocumented” (Esquivel 5) woman she will be stereotyped as a criminal or inferior. Julietta further subverts the stereotype as after committing her crime she yells at Frank who says no one will “give a fuck about [her] shady immigration status” (Esquivel 5) to which Julietta responds with “to [Americans, undocumented immigrants] already are [seen as a] ‘alien species’” (Esquivel 5). Through Julietta’s comment about her immigration status and the knowledge of her past, Esquivel’s subversion of the traditional idea that

Mexican-Americans are criminals who do not know anything better than crime and the commentary that the criminalization of Mexican-Americans perpetuates their otherization by white Americans. It could be argued that Julietta reifies the criminal stereotype because of her actions. However, Rubén G. Rumbaut, notes that “[undocumented] immigration is associated with lower crime rates and lower incarceration rates” underscoring that the perceived stereotype is not reflected in the real world (Rumbaut 2). Therefore, this statistic reinforces Esquivel’s subversion allowing the depiction of Julietta’s undocumented Mexican-American experience to make a larger statement than the perceived criminal stereotype.

### **Hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American Women**

The third and final stereotype I analyze in Esquivel’s comic *Border Town* is the hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American women. Using text, Esquivel creates a scene that sexualizes Aimi, and Villalobos draws her with the reader’s view looking up her skirt. The hyper-sexualization of Aimi can be read as stereotyped; however, Esquivel has her carve an ancient Aztec symbol into her face subverting the stereotype as she destroys her beauty. Additionally, after she carves the mark into her face, Villalobos moves from drawing Aimi in a skintight skirt to a baggy sweatshirt and jeans, underlining the subversion of the hyper-sexualized Mexican-American stereotype by desexualizing the exoticness that is desired. Some could argue that the change in her clothing to jeans and a baggy sweatshirt is sexist,

**...white Americans will criminalize her and other Mexican-Americans regardless of any defensive circumstances present because of white ethnocentric views of Mexican-Americans.**



**Figure 2.** Image of Aimi Carving into Her Face. *Border Town*, Esquivel, Eric M., Ramon Villalobos and Tamra Bonvillain, Vertigo, 2018, <https://readcomiconline.ru/comic/border-town-2018/3/21>.

however, Aimi is sexualized because *she* looks “exotic”, not her clothing, so by covering up what is sexualized, Esquivel subverts the hyper-sexualized stereotype of Mexican-American women.

When looking at the character Aimi, her sexualization is seen through Esquivel’s sexually suggestive text and Villalobos’ suggestive drawings. In the third issue, Aimi is called into the principal’s office where sexualization begins with

the principal who, while carving an apple, tells Aimi she is “exotic [and] to tell [him] anything” (Esquivel 19). The first part of this encounter underlines the principal’s racism and sexual desire for young women and emphasizes the sexualization of this young Mexican-American woman. Esquivel continues to reinforce the sexualization of Aimi when she seductively takes the knife from the principal. Esquivel’s decision to have Aimi seductively disarm the principal by suggestively grabbing his knife underscores the stereotyping of Aimi and the perpetuation of stereotyping Mexican-American women. Furthermore, when looking at Aimi on page 20 of the same issue, we see she is sitting with her skirt pulled up, only covering her genitalia with her crossed leg. The artist’s depiction of her covering her genitalia sexualizes her for the audience, principal, and readers, underlining her hyper-sexualized depiction and perpetuating the hyper-sexualization of Mexican-American women.

Although Aimi is initially hyper-sexualized and perpetuates the stereotype of hypersexualized Mexican-American women, Esquivel and Villalobos subvert the stereotype by illustrating Aimi carving protective designs into her face and changing what she wears. At the end of issue three, Aimi takes the knife the principal was using and comments that “creepy old men like [the principal] have told [her she is] exotic” (Esquivel 20) underlining a sexualization unique to women of color denoting the sexualization is based on Aimi’s outward racial identity. Aimi’s comment on the stereotype emphasizes that she is aware of the powerful effect it has on herself, women of color, and men. After Aimi acknowledges the stereotype, she carves “an ancient Aztec glyph for warding off monsters” (Esquivel 21)

into her face causing the principal to writhe back in pain (see fig. 2). Aimi's action symbolizes the subversion of the hyper-sexualized stereotype through the literal destruction of an example of that stereotype. Furthermore, after Aimi carves the glyph into her face, her outfit changes to represent the subversion of the stereotype. In issue four, when we see Aimi again, Villalobos draws her to have long jean shorts and a loose hooded jacket illustrating that since she has subverted the stereotype her sexualization will end. Together with her symbolic destruction of the stereotype and change in clothing, Esquivel underscores the subversion of the hyper-sexualized Mexican-American woman stereotype.

### **The Future**

The United States has a long history of anti-immigrant sentiment ranging from the "era of [immigration quotas] and regulation of 1882-1924" to twenty-first century anti-Muslim and anti-Mexican sentiment (Behdad 155). Regardless of the time period, Mexican-Americans become targets for racist stereotypes and immigration policies like those mentioned following the "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo." Writer Eric M. Esquivel and artist Ramon Villalobos break down the aforementioned anti-Mexican sentiment by subverting the traditional view of criminalized Mexican-American men, hyper-sexualized

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Mexican-American women, and bestial nature of Mexican-American men in their comic *Border Town* by having the characters vocalize their awareness of their stereotype before embracing it to defend themselves from an attacker. The reinforcement and subversion of criminalized Mexican-American men, hyper-sexualized Mexican-American woman, and bestial depiction of Mexican-American men emphasizes how prevalent stereotypes are of Mexican-Americans in the Southwestern United States today.

Although the subversion of the stereotypes in this comic effectively makes social commentary about Mexican-American experiences in the Southwestern United States, we will never know if this subversion is continued in later issues of the comic due to its cancellation after Eric M. Esquivel was accused of sexual misconduct. According to Graeme McMillan of the *Hollywood Reporter*, "Cynthia Naugle.... wrote about being 'sexually, mentally, and emotionally abused' by.... *Border Town* writer and co-creator Eric M. Esquivel. The cancellation of *Border Town* and its last two issues is problematic as the only examples of subverting the stereotypes are in the scenes described, and the accusations against Esquivel only leave a representational gap of Mexican-American protagonist representation in comics. For now, we wait as only time will tell if subversive works like Esquivel's will comment on Mexican-Americans in the Southwest United States or if this population will continue to be racially stereotyped as a form of oppression.

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