ENGL 4384: Senior Seminar
Student Anthology

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# Getting a Life

## Introduction
by Emily Hipchen

Fragmented No More: The Land and its Role in Native American Literature
by Krisha Bryan

Fictionalizing Genealogy: Crafting an Autobiography in the Age of Ancestry.com
by RaeAnna Hogle

The (Anti) American Dream: Fatal Obsessions of Material Wealth or Self Reliance in John Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*
by Erin Mayo

Outlaw Identity and *Breaking Bad*
by Kaela McCarter

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”: Mass Media’s Influence on African American Mourning and the Canonization of Black Martyrs in the African American Community
by Stephen Foster Smith

## Contributors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Lives We Get
by Emily Hipchen

If you’re an employer who needs smart, creative workers, a 50-page honors project on a 19th century French poet might be just the thing you want to see from one of your job applicants. Not because you’re going to ask him or her to interpret any poetry on the job, but because you may be asking him or her, at some point, to deal with complex material that requires intense concentration.

—Michael Bérubé

What I have not quite learned yet is what I am going to do with my life. When I tell people that I am graduating with an English degree, the most common response is “So, what are you going to do with that?”

—RaeAnna Hogle

My Parents’s Vision for My Life: Reproduction and a Clean, Well-Lighted Place

1. A married couple to raise me.
2. Health, happiness, safety.
3. Wealth.
4. A career in opera.
5. A husband.
6. Perhaps I would be a doctor?
7. I was good at arguing. Too good. Lawyer?

My Vision for My Life: Cardiology to Keats

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to make sick hearts better. My friends wanted to be princesses or David Cassidy’s girlfriend. I wanted to cut people up to save their lives.

I drew anatomically correct hearts, memorized its parts, the names and functions and diseases of the valves, the chambers, the coronary arteries. I learned the names of all the bones, the three bones of the ear like the tools in a blacksmith’s shop—the incus, the malleus, the stapes. I was eleven years old when they led me around school like a show pony, every kid allowed to point to a part of the body and me describing the hard part in it.
My junior year of college, as we all had to, I took a career placement test. Teacher, musician, artist. I took it again: artist, teacher, preacher.

My biology professor, looking at the results, set me a thinking task: imagine, he said, your life as a cardiac surgeon. Imagine you’re cutting up a heart you can’t fix. Imagine the patient dies. Imagine having to do it again, and again, and again. Imagine the person you would have to become to do that.

I switched majors, discovered Keats, Beowulf, Shakespeare, and Austen. I love hearts. But I won’t fix them.

You Will Survive Your Choices
You ate all six doughnuts. Again.
You got drunk and called your ex.
You bought a car and it doesn’t run.
You got married. Again.
You can’t get into the grad program you want.
You had a panic attack at the hairdressers.
You are now a redhead.
Your major doesn’t train you for something.
You became a Buddhist.
You decided to come to college.
You decided to leave college.
You moved to Wyoming.
You failed chemistry. Again.
You have a cigarette.
You take up with that girl you never stopped loving.
You leave her.
You decide to form a band.
You stayed out with the band the night before taking the GRE.
You will not get into any grad program at all.
You take the first job you can find.
You move in with your girlfriend.
You choose to lose your job.
On Saturdays, you watch fireflies instead of cooking dinner.

Identity Categories
“I’m a professor.”
“What’s that?”
“Well, actually I’m an academic. Which doesn’t make it clearer. I don’t have a job so much as a vocation.”
“Like a priest.”
“Well, if God is a book. My job is to look closely at books. Or to make them. Or both. Also, I don’t wear robes. Wait, I do! I have robes.”

Emily Hipchen
“So exactly like a priest.”
“Better robes. Less fasting and less actual flagellation. Celibacy not required.”

**Getting a Life**

I designed this class both as a thinking exercise for the students who chose it and a way to help them organize the thinking they were already doing as they faced commencement. I wanted them to look with an informed perspective backwards at their lives in college while they looked forwards into the new lives they were making. I wanted them to think: What is my life? What have I done to have one? I wanted them to encounter communities of people analyzing lives, asking how you know you have one, whether the life you have is the one you want, what forces conspire against the life you imagine having, how you may or may not have chosen your life. How some of those choices were made without your knowing it, how they might have been made before you were born or by people you might not know.

The only way to think about your own life is to imagine other people’s, which is another way of saying that the more lives you see, the better you see [the possibilities of] your own. And the more lives you see in an informed way—that is, with a framework and vocabulary suited to discussing lives—the better you can describe, change, accept, rail against, mold, and use as art the one you’re making. It was my hope that in presenting students with that framework, and with lives in several forms, they would continue productively imagining their own lives less fearfully—more pragmatically maybe, but also more creatively.

Because this is a capstone English course, its purpose is embedded in the context of typical English-class activities and skill building. We wrote (and rewrote, and supported each other’s writing, and talked about writing, and read drafts out loud); discussed theory and analysis and the ways we could contribute our own ideas to the general intellectual conversation; and applied what we learned across a broad spectrum of literary and para-literary texts. The reading and writing helped students focus their interests and communicate their current intellectual and practical obsessions: where they belonged in the places they came from and were going to. Anxiety about being trammeled up in some other person’s idea of their life (and fear of the consequences of freedom). Questions about what the past can give them, how the present influences them, how their futures might play out. What in the world they might communicate about what they love best in their lives.

What they produced is in your hands, and is not there, either—simply because they’re living it.
Fragmented No More: The Land and its Role in Native American Literature

by Krisha Bryan

Critical Preface

As long as I can remember, I’ve loved words. Words interested me beyond degree: their spellings, how they sounded and even how the letters of the words were shaped. I became fascinated with the idea of writing words (although to this day I still have the most abominable handwriting). I remember my mom would make me write out my letters and words every day after school and though it was tiring, deep inside I enjoyed it. As I grew older, the popularity of computers began
to soar and instead of writing words, I learned how to type them. I’ll never forget the name of the typing program: Mavis Beacon. Initially, I used the program at school only, but I loved it so much that I would use it at home, too. Experiences like these nurtured my love for words.

Notice, I continually say “words” and not reading because I never developed into a committed reader. Honestly, I never much cared for reading. Don’t get me wrong, I was awesome at reading: I knew how to pronounce every word, read at a steady (and often-too-fast) pace, and comprehended the meaning somewhat. However, I never gained a true love for words until I became an English major. While I appreciated words, it was only at the surface level. As I begin to take classes that caused me to think critically, analyze meaning, and display all that thinking onto two, three, ten pages — true love bloomed. After all, you really get to know words when you spend that much time with them. I began to dig deeper into the meanings of words and investigate their origins. It wasn’t enough to know that “will” was another word for desire, but that in Shakespeare, the definition of “will” was endless, leading you on paths toward moral agency and sexuality (among many other things). It was physically taxing and mentally exhausting to push past the obvious connections and relations between texts and themes. Even when I thought that I had surely pushed far enough, I would get feedback saying I needed to push harder. Many, many long nights I sat at my sorry excuse for a desk staring at my computer screen, silently screaming and wracking my brain for more, for something. Often (very often) so many ideas, connections, and themes would fill my brain that I couldn’t focus on just one. They all seemed to swim around in my brain and evade me at every casting of my net, much like brim in a pond. More often than I like to admit, I would question whether I was smart enough to tackle such a major. I felt as if every student in my class knew something I didn’t; it was as if there was a secret meeting that I wasn’t invited to where all the wonders and magical skills of how to be an English major were taught. Nevertheless, I pressed on. I reminded myself that English and literature were always my best subjects and that I had the smarts to get this degree.

Then a day of affirmation unexpectedly came for me. I was taking a Native American Regional Studies class and the literature captured me like none other. Born in the boondocks, down a three-mile dirt road and thirty minutes away from any sign of civilization, I spent most of my childhood frolicking through our cow pasture, picking cattails and pretending to read in our (indefinitely) unfinished tree house. Nature was my home (especially since we weren’t allowed inside unless we were dying) and I saw this reflected in Native American literature. I tried to read the novels for the class, but I kept getting caught up in how the language was used: it

Krisha Bryan
Fragmented No More

was so beautiful and descriptive and filled with oh so much meaning! I had finally found my niche. I was amazed to discover a genre that fused nature and writing together and I was even more amazed to find that the words in these novels carried such heavy and intense but subtle meaning. I knew I was on to something, and that thought was affirmed when my professor pulled me aside after class one day. We had recently written a short assignment and I focused on how the words describing the landscape also represented the characters’ inner struggles. My professor praised my work as sophisticated writing because many students never achieve the level of specificity that I had. After that, I remember walking outside, breathing in the cool air, and thinking, “yes, this is where I’m supposed to be.”

Now, it would be great if I could say everything was just peachy from there, but of course that’s not realistic. However, given I had that affirmation, it made me stronger and more willing to continue my long journey. See, I’ve been in this college game for a while now and over the years many people have doubted and degraded my abilities and my worth. At the time of that class, I was taking eighteen hours and exhausting every drop of effort I had within me to finish college and finally to get my degree. My professor’s words that day may have been insignificant to him, but they changed my entire outlook on college. In addition, realizing my strength helped me to write better papers because I was more invested in them. I began to see every work as a project rather than a grade and I spent more time on each one. Sometimes, it is the little things that mean so much and make such a big impact on our lives.

Fast-forwarding through the many ups and downs of my college career, this semester, Spring 2013, has proven to be another growing phase for me. For one, my enjoyment of words as a child has come to fruition twenty years later with the help of a grammar class. When signing up for another eighteen hours this semester I thought: “Sure, why not…I like grammar…I think.” I figured it would help me with my papers in other classes (and indeed it has) but I never expected to see my love of words rooted in grammar. In retrospect, that seems pretty obvious, but at the time I thought grammar was just about punctuation. I’ve realized that I am really into linguistics and learning about the etymology of words (go figure). Now, I am even considering going to graduate school for applied linguistics or teaching English as a second language—venues I never would have explored had I not taken this simple grammar class. Senior Seminar, the capstone, has truly lived up to its name as well. Many thoughts wandered in my head about what a senior seminar could consist of and how the professor would teach. Much to my surprise, Senior Seminar has tremendously furthered my skills as a writer and as a person in general. The theme of the class, Autobiography, initially appealed to me because I thought it would be
interesting to be in a class where we talked about our own lives. At the beginning of the semester, however, I felt as if I had made a mistake in choosing this seminar and felt misled because we were not talking about our lives but the lives of others. We were reading about gender, performativity, adoption, addictions, talk shows . . . everything but what I thought we were supposed to be reading. Fortunately, it didn’t take long for me to realize that all these things strive to answer the question of what constitutes a life. I began to love the class because it forcefully challenged my intellect and personal views. The first text we read, Getting a Life, gave me so many headaches and made a dictionary my best friend, but in the end was vital to the rest of the class, other classes, and my life. It was the foundation for all the other texts we would read throughout the semester and I saw a connection of all the themes and theories not only in every text, but all around me in society.

My mind and perspective is forever changed because of all my English classes, but specifically Senior Seminar. Now, I can’t look at a TV show or a film and just think, “This is great,” because my mind instantly begins to parse out the underlying purpose, messages, and symbols and connect them to other works. At times, I feel aggravated that I can’t be normal, but then again, I’ve never been normal and I am grateful to know that I think in such a way because of the potential my knowledgeable and devoted professors saw within me. Senior Seminar also helped me grow as a writer. Before this class, I didn’t see myself as a writer and that showed in my work. Senior Seminar took me out of my comfort zone with the reading aloud of responses and caused me to once again seriously consider what I was putting down on paper. As a result, our class became intimate really quickly because we all confessed our mutual fears to each other. The intimacy of the class helped me to finally break that thought barrier of my work as inferior to others.

Overall, my time as an English major has matured and readied me for the career world more than I ever thought possible. The techniques of critical thinking and analyzing have become a part of my identity and I will carry those skills to any job in any field of work. As I am finishing out my time as a college student, Michael Bérubé’s quote continues to play on repeat in my head:

Well, strange as it may sound, if you’re an employer who needs smart, creative workers, a 50-page honors project on a 19th century French poet might be just the thing you want to see from one of your job applicants. Not because you’re going to ask him or her to interpret any poetry on the job, but because you may be asking him or her, at some point, to deal with complex material that requires intense concentration—and to write a persuasive account of what it all means. And you may find that the humanities

Krisha Bryan
major with extensive college experience in dealing with complex material handles the challenge better—more comprehensively, more imaginatively—than the business or finance major who assumed that her degree was all she needed to earn a place in your company.

Works Cited
We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest. More than remembered, the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs, a resource on which we draw in order to keep our own act functioning. It is not the ever-present “Other” which supplies us with a sense of “I.” It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real.
—Paula Gunn Allen, “Iyani: It Goes This Way”

Importance of Land in Native American Culture

Land is an important element of Native American culture. As Allen states, Native Americans believe the land is an essential aspect of their being. The major areas in Native American culture are agriculture, spirituality, and stories with land unifying all three. It is hard to discuss each element separately since Native Americans view all things as one. Therefore, when discussing the agricultural aspect, stories and spirituality are bound to arise as well, and this goes for every category. First, the land is the cornerstone of Native American sustenance. Traditionally, Native Americans lived solely off the land, depending on the land to bear crops and trusting in the rain to sustain those crops. Agriculture was such a big part of Native American life that some dialects formed their language around agriculture. For example, James Treat states that the Mystoke language named the months of the year after seasonal observations, activities related to agricultural production, and
times for gathering fruit (Porter 34). That Native Americans formed a language after the natural movements of a landscape supports the assertion that land is an important aspect of their culture and identity. Gary Paul Nabhan relates a story about Native American agriculture in his book, *Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation*. Nabhan visits the Tepehuan people in Nabogame, Chihuahua who have diverse plants because “generation after generation of plants, and of animals, and of local knowledge about them, have formed an unbroken chain across the ages” (34). Nabhan implies the benefit of traditional Native American agricultural techniques, as well as describes the process. The phrase Nabhan chose to use, “generation after generation,” not only highlights tradition, but it also refers to Native American identity. Since the land is an essential aspect of their identity, they must stay with that land and take care of it.

Nabhan also talks about a certain plant called *maizillo*, which means “little corn.” The *maizillo* grows amidst the regular flint corn and is visible after the regular corn has been harvested. Nabhan notices that the seeds within the *maizillo* have a little spike that the Tepehuan call *kokoñi usbidi* which translates to “raven’s planting” (34). Apparently, tribes in the area believe the *maizillo* protects their crops. The legend is that the raven tries to trick the Coyote from eating all the crops. Therefore, *maizillo* looks like corn, but has a “weedy, untamed bent to it” (34). Clorinda, the Native American woman who showed Nabhan to the *maizillo* tells him, “There’s the *maizillo*. . . . You will begin to see them. There are many” (34). This is significant because since the *maizillo* protects the corn and many are present, then the raven has blessed her tribe/village with crops. This passage from Nabhan illustrates how agriculture blends with stories and spirituality. The part about the visibility of the *maizillo* only after harvesting the regular corn is interesting because it acts as physical evidence that their sacred spirit is watching over them. Native American spirituality is rooted in this idea of physical evidence, as revealed in Nabhan’s story.

Native American origin stories are another example of this concept, which solely exists to explain how they came into the world. Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie say that origin stories, “give Native American people their sense of place in the world and establish human relationships with existing environments” (qtd. in Porter 31). Origin stories establish these human relationships with their environments by including a certain landscape or land element that connects physical evidence with spirituality. For example, N. Scott Momaday tells the Kiowa origin story in his work *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. He says that the Kiowa tribe came into the world through a hollow log when a pregnant woman got stuck coming through it. Thus, this story explains why their tribe is so small (16) and offers the sense of place in the world, as Kidwell and
Fragmented No More

Velie discuss. Another task this origin story accomplishes is that it gives reason to something otherwise unknown. In the same work, Momaday tells a story about the Kiowas’ spirituality. The Kiowas believed in a sacred idol called Tai-me, which was the sun. The story explains how the Kiowas are connected to Tai-me. In this story, a young Kiowa girl follows a beautiful and unique red bird up a tree until she ends up in the sky. By the time she is in the sky, she has grown into a woman and the red bird turns into a man. It turns out he is the sun and wants to marry her (22). The different land elements within this story—such as the bird, tree, sky, and sun—are what Kidwell and Velie call the “physical manifestations of spirituality.” Many stories in Native American culture exist to explain why the landscape they live in contain certain elements. Porter gives examples of these types of stories; she says, “The great monolith in Wyoming . . . is where seven Kiowa sisters took refuge when their brother turned into a bear. The Black Hills in South Dakota were pushed up when the land was pounded during the great race between the two leggeds and the four leggeds” (31). These stories harken back to the notion mentioned earlier of having physical evidence for stories and spirituality.

While discussed already, spirituality is one element of Native American culture that, like the land, subsists in everything. Robert Nelson discusses the land’s foundational purpose in Native American spirituality. He says, “the most fundamental act of spiritual vision that one can experience is the act of seeing oneself as a living part of the living place where one’s life takes place” (268). Nelson equates the land to “spiritual vision,” which is important because a Native American who sees himself as Nelson has described has acquired a sense of unity within him. Porter recognizes there are common elements of indigenous spiritualties, specifically, “a sense of kinship with all things, including the animate and inanimate, and specific reverence for certain symbols and materials such as tobacco and medicine bundles” (4). The key phrase here is “animate and inanimate” because that means all-inclusive. Native Americans do not see a separation between land and humans. In other words, every object—plant, rock, and human—has a purpose and plays a role in Native American spirituality. This notion is much different than the “Euro-American” mindset. The Sioux figure Luther Standing Bear elaborates on this difference: “We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as wild. Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful” (Porter 30). The main point of this quote is the idea of unity, which is present in Native American culture. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that Native Americans do not differentiate between “earth/cosmos, public/private space, city/country space”
This process of unifying all things causes Native Americans to see the land as a “basic source of identity” (31). Woven within the land is Native American identity. This identity is unified with the physical land, but spirituality and stories bond the pieces of identity together. For instance, in Momaday’s novel, *House Made of Dawn*, his protagonist, Abel, suffers from a fragmented identity. The narrator says, “he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it” (53). This statement indicates that separation from the land causes fragmentation within one’s self since “Place, self, and community are so intimately linked that loss of territory constitutes a deprivation and fragmentation of psychic strength” (Porter 31). In leaving his land and immersing himself in a different landscape and culture, Abel caused a division between him and his homeland. The word Momaday uses, though—“attuned”—suggests that through a process, Abel could regain his unity with the land and culture. This is where spirituality and ceremony come into play.

This theology carries into Native American literature, which counters the traditional narrative structure that “has been shaped by Aristotelian theories of composition. . . . Landscape . . . function[s] as a ‘setting’ for a narrative, while the issue of identity might be a part of ‘character’ development. . . . However, in many recent Native American novels, particular landscapes function not only as the ‘settings’ of the narratives, but also as ‘characters.’” (Nelson 271). When we apply this concept to Native American fiction, it makes sense for authors to create landscapes that are catalysts for extreme action. Both Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko utilize the landscape in their novels to follow the reconciliation of the protagonist’s fragmented identity.

**Hybridity**

Like connections to the land, another common thread in contemporary Native American literature is the issue of identity. Many novels include a broken or fragmented protagonist who cannot reconcile an internal division. Immersion within another culture in which a person is not fully accepted brings about identity fragmentation. Within a postcolonial American society, this immersion, which fosters hybridity, has become synonymous with Native American culture. Any study of American history exposes the forcing of cultural hybridity upon Native Americans. However, contemporary Native American fiction challenges this concept by creating a world in which one can choose his or her perspective on hybridity—to either eliminate or embrace it. Throughout Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Abel struggles with the concept of hybridity. The novel leans heavily on the elimination of hybridity in order for reconciliation to occur, a position Homi Bhabha best defines. Bhabha’s book, *The Location of Culture*, coins the term “hybridity” and defines it
as having “no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures” (113). Here Bhabha states that hybridity has no “truth.” Momaday’s novel illustrates Bhabha’s sentiment through Abel’s inability to unify Native American and white ideals. On the other hand, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony rejects Bhabha’s position and embraces hybridity in order to facilitate reconciliation. Silko proposes that a person’s immersion in a particular culture makes that culture a part of that person. Thus, for Silko in Ceremony, in order to mend internal fragmentation, hybridity is essential.

Self as Land in Momaday: Rejecting Hybridity

In Momaday’s novel, Native American culture takes precedence over white culture. This notion is drove home by the many descriptions of the landscape and its importance. Momaday uses elements of the land to imply that a complete return to Native American ideals is the only way to reconcile Abel’s fragmented identity. In the beginning of the novel, Abel’s grandfather, Francisco, travels to pick Abel up from town. In this scene, Momaday uses elements of the landscape to contrast between Native American culture and white culture. For example, Francisco drives a wagon pulled by two horses in order to get to town. Later on, once he gets there, the contrast between Francisco and white society intensifies by the presence of motorcars that allow comparisons between the “wagon and the mares” and the “sharp wheeze of the [automotive] brakes.” In addition, Momaday uses diction with negative connotations when referring to white society, such as, “whine” “strange” and “sharp.” Momaday chooses these words in order to show the alienation between white and Native American societies and indicates how white society exacts struggle by saying “the mares pulled easily” (7) when Francisco is on the wagon road, but then, “The roan mares strained” (8) when he has to come up on the pavement, representative of white society. All this language subtly indicates that in order for struggle to dissolve, one has to leave the pavement and go back to the wagon road essentially—go back to pure Native American ideals and away from white ideals.

Momaday also suggests that Abel’s identity was fragmented before he left for war by his ignorance of his specific ethnicity and the landscape to which he belonged: “He did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway” (11). While Abel’s father was a Native American, he was from another tribe, which made him an “outsider.” This concept ties into the idea that only particular landscapes have meaning to various tribes, which is what Nelson called that “living place.” Since Abel’s father was from another tribe, he was an outsider to their lifestyle and was not in tune with their ceremonies and traditions. In addition, tribes have stories for particular elements of the landscape in which they live. Kidwell and
Velie say, “The rock formations, for example, scattered to the north of the Navajo reservation are the remains of the monsters slain by Child of Waters and Monster Slayer” (qtd. in Porter 31). Only the Navajo tribe would know this legend, and it is in this sense that Abel’s dad was an outsider. Thus, even before the war and the imposition of white ideals, Abel was pre-fragmented because he did not know his father or his father’s tribe and thus cannot feel complete. Momaday again uses landscape to reveal this: “The bright red walls were deep, deeper than he could have imagined, and they seemed to close over him” (11). This quote describes how Abel felt while exploring the land as a child. The color red is significant when thinking about Abel’s family background, like his father, because the red represents blood or bloodline. By saying the “red walls were deeper than he could have imagined,” Abel alludes to the fact that his bloodline runs deeper within him than he thought and, given his ignorance, this is causing him to have a fragmented identity.

The narrator tells us, “And even then the boy could sense his grandfather’s age, just as he knew somehow that his mother was soon going to die of her illness. It was nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding, as he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons” (11). Here Momaday again uses land elements to illustrate Abel’s thoughts and emotions. However, the difference here is that the land clarifies emotions. This idea goes back to Kidwell and Velie’s claim that Native Americans, “establish human relationships with existing environments” (qtd. in Porter 31). Abel associates his relationships with his grandfather and mother (human relationships) with the sun and seasons (existing environments). Later in the novel, when Abel is trying to reconcile his identity, the narrator goes into a long description of Abel watching eagles soar. He notes how beautiful and powerful the eagles are flying about over his head. They were both golden eagles, male and female, the female with broad wings, incredibly fast while her weight keeps her in control. The male is younger, but he is quicker and tighter in his moves. The eagles eventually fly off together out of Abel’s sight (16-17).

On the surface, this prolonged description of birds may seem insignificant. However, the eagles illustrate the outcome of reverting to Native American ideals and rejecting hybridity. Abel states that they are both golden eagles, which represents two people of the same culture. This is important because mixed cultures are what fragmented him. Not only was his father considered an outsider since he was of a different tribe than those living where he settled, but Abel’s soldiering in World War II also caused fragmentation because he was forced into a culture with completely different values and identities. Abel’s description of how powerful, agile and beautiful these eagles are when flying in their natural environment juxtaposes the scene immediately following where
Abel travels with a group of eagle watchers. During the trip, one of the men catches an eagle and puts it in a sack. They continue on their journey until nightfall when Abel steals away from the group to observe the eagle. The narrator describes Abel’s experience, “He drew the sack open; the bird shivered, he thought, and drew itself up. Bound and helpless, his eagle seemed drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight. The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust” (20). In this passage, there is only one eagle and he is not in his natural environment. Instead of powerful and agile, he is described as “bound and helpless.” This eagle represents Abel’s current state because he is alone and feels bound and helpless since he is not attuned to either his homeland or foreign land. In addition, the sight of the bird filled Abel with “shame and disgust” which reflects his emotions toward himself. The passage ends with Abel killing the eagle, which parallels his killing or ridding himself of that brokenness. This recurs elsewhere within the novel as Abel struggles to reconcile his fragmented identity.

Self as Land in Silko: Embracing Hybridity

In Silko’s novel, however, the hybridity Momaday rejects is embraced. While Momaday stresses the necessity of a complete turn to Native American ideals, Silko clearly contrasts that theory by including two medicine men in her story. Old Ku’oosh is a traditional medicine man who is unable to help Tayo, while Betonie is an eccentric medicine man that invents new ceremonies and is vital in Tayo’s healing process. Silko implies that Native Americans must adapt to the new landscape, which consists of white culture, in order to reach reconciliation. While a distinction is made between the two cultures, reconciliation is achieved by learning to live with both cultures spiritually and physically.

Disconnected language fills the interaction between Tayo and Ku’oosh. Silko reflects on her theme of change by utilizing language that expresses the distance between the traditional world of Ku’oosh and the modern world of Tayo. The narrator describes Ku’oosh as soft-spoken and using “the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins” (Silko 31). The term “involuted” indicates that from Tayo’s perspective, a sense of obscurity parallels traditional practices. In addition, the old dialect’s origins are strange to Tayo, as the narrator elaborates: “nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it” (35). If Ku’oosh is only repeating what has been said before, then it is obvious no change has taken place. The narrator continues: “Tayo had to strain to catch the meaning, dense with place names he had never heard,” which further illustrates the disconnection between Tayo and traditional Native American culture. Furthermore, the narrator describes Ku’oosh’s language as “childish” but also “interspersed
with English words,” which indicates a struggle to merge two cultures, and even Ku’oosh admits to Tayo that “There are some things that we can’t cure like we used to[,] . . . not since the white people came” (Silko 35). Ku’oosh’s statement shows that he sees a permanent disconnection with the land brought on by white culture. In addition, Ku’oosh says “The others who had the Scalp Ceremony, some of them are not better either. . . . I’m afraid of what will happen to us all if you and the others don’t get well,” which implies that Ku’oosh is aware of the insufficiency of the traditional ceremonies, but does not have the ability to adapt to a new landscape. After Ku’oosh performs the Scalp Ceremony, Tayo thinks he may be getting better. Tayo observes an apple tree in the yard “trying to see the tiny green fruits that would grow all summer until they became apples” (Silko 36). Silko uses the apple tree to imitate Tayo’s inner self. For instance, the “tiny green fruits” represent the small steps Tayo has taken to get better, such as eating regular food, seldom vomiting, and sleeping all night without dreams (36). However, after this small hopeful moment, Tayo rides to the bar and drinks. History tells us that Europeans introduced alcohol to Native Americans when they first invaded their land. In addition, alcohol was used as a form of social control. Eduardo and Bonnie Duran state, “The labeling of Native American drinking behavior as deviant was a method of social control and was one justification for paternalistic policies with the aim of obtaining Native American land” (103-04). Therefore, Tayo’s decision to drink shows a progression away from pure Native American ideals while also distancing him from the land.

Silko uses the imagery of grapes to illustrate Tayo’s disconnection from the land and pure Native American ideals. Harley picks wild grapes and shares some with Tayo. Silko’s use of “wild” to describe the grapes conveys two meanings. First, it alludes to a pure, natural, untouched land, representing Native American culture. However, the word “wild” also reflects white society’s historical view of Native Americans. This detail is significant because it demonstrates that one word can contain within it two contrasting ideals; thus, Tayo can contain within him two contrasting cultures. Harley eats the grapes in handfuls, chewing on the seeds, but “Tayo could not bite down on the seeds. Once he had loved to feel them break between his teeth, but not anymore” (Silko 41). Tayo’s refusal to “bite down” and “break” the seeds shows his resistance to fully consuming the “wild” grape, which parallels his inability to reconcile the two cultural identities within him. Throughout the novel, Tayo continually battles between the two cultures, in which Holly E. Martin says that he “must understand the part of him, symbolically represented by his white blood, that seeks to follow the pattern set by the destroyers” (137). Tayo’s “white blood” is an internal symbolization of Tayo’s immersion into white culture through the war. Just as the white blood

Krisha Bryan
is a part of him, so is the white culture. Therefore, Tayo will always feel fragmented until he encounters his landscape “not just as Indian land, but as land containing both Indian heritage and white destruction” (137).

Betonie, the modern medicine man, is the embodiment of Martin’s claim. When Tayo first meets him, he thinks that Betonie does not “act like a medicine man at all” (108). During Tayo’s experience with Betonie, Silko blends the idea of merging Native American culture with white culture through language and environment. For instance, Betonie’s home is a “hogan” which sits upon the “yellow sandrock foothills,” above a “town” consisting of “ceremonial grounds and city streets” (107-08). Silko bombards the reader with images of hybridity in the first few paragraphs. Initially, Silko uses the word “hogan,” the Navajo word for a home, and couples it with the natural landscape, but she then adds “town” which symbolizes white culture. Furthermore, Silko then hybridizes the town itself by using Native American and white land elements to describe it. “Ceremonial grounds” refers to traditional Native American culture, while “city streets” blatantly refers to white culture. This juxtaposition is key to showing these two cultures side by side in a kind of harmony. In addition, the city uses the ancient ceremonial grounds to bring in revenue from white tourists and Native Americans participate in the commerce, which exposes an even deeper level of hybridity. Silko also notes that Betonie speaks “in good English,” juxtaposing him against Old Ku’oosh who spoke the language sparingly. This detail about Betonie implies that he recognizes the change and has adapted accordingly. Betonie explains to Tayo why he lives on the outskirts of Gallup, always pairing the natural land with the developed areas in his descriptions. He states that the white people live “in alleys between bars” and the Native Americans “next to the river and their dump” (108). Silko employs the same scenario with the description of Gallup as she did with the “wild” grapes. Gallup is the “wild” grape, which consists of both cultures that contrast with one another metaphorically and physically, as described by Betonie. However, Betonie then says, “They don’t understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here” (108). Betonie’s statement illustrates that he “has found a way to live both between and among whites and Indians, and he knows that Tayo must learn the same” (Martin 137). Betonie states that they are comfortable in the hills because they were born and raised there and were present before the white man pushed himself in. Betonie alludes to the fact that one must learn how to see the land as part of himself and if so, it will not matter if the physical terrain itself has changed. The narrator even says, “There was something about the way the old man said the word ‘comfortable.’ It had a different meaning. . . . the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills” (108). This passage is important because it conveys that land

Fragmented No More
has a deeper meaning within Native American culture, that notion of “being one with the land” that Betonie has achieved. However, after this comment, the narrator continues, “But the special meaning . . . was burned away by the glare of the sun on tin cans and broken glass, blinding reflections off the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below” (108). This part implies that, to Tayo, land littered with white cultural paraphernalia destroys the pathway to enlightenment.

Stan Steiner says in his novel in *The New Indian*, “Land is the measure of life. In his view of the land the tribal Native American denies the values placed on it by the white society. His own values are to him more eternal and essential to the human spirit, having existed before the advent of the barbed wire and commercial fence” (qtd. in Irwin 279). Silko implies throughout the novel that Native Americans must adapt to change in order to reach unity. Steiner describes the thought process behind Silko’s implications while at the same time illustrating Betonie’s perspective. Steiner’s word “tribal” refers to traditional Native Americans who choose to overlook the intrusion of white culture. Instead, they focus on their own values and thus are able to live within a hybrid environment. Silko continues to illustrate a fusing of both cultures in order to instill the idea of hybridity within the reader. Robert, the friend who led Tayo to Betonie, decides it is time for him to leave. At this point, Tayo is still hesitant about the effectiveness of Betonie’s plan. Betonie senses this and tells Tayo to leave if he wants. The narrator then says, “Tayo turned to look for Robert, but he was gone. He stared at the dry yellow grass by the old man’s feet” (109). Silko uses the words “dry” and “yellow” to describe the grass because it is dying and also because of the heat of the sun. This is important because it represents how Tayo feels inside, especially when the next phrase says, “the sun’s heat was draining his strength away; there was no place to go now except back to the hospital in Los Angeles. They didn’t want him at Laguna the way he was” (109). The dry yellow grass mimics Tayo’s inner identity. As soon as Tayo has made the decision to continue with the old man and enter his house he feels, “Currents of cool air” and smells “herb and root odors” (109). As Tayo smells these natural odors, he also smells “heavier objects” such as boxes, newspapers, and cardboard (110), which reiterate Silko’s notion of hybridity.

**Conclusion**

Bhabha claims hybridity is unproductive and causes fragmentation, and Momaday illustrates this assumption through Abel’s process of reconciliation. On the other hand, Silko embraces hybridity and believes adapting to a new landscape that includes both cultures will lead to reconciliation. Silko demonstrates this theory by reconciling Tayo’s fragmented identity through Betonie’s character, a medicine man who
has learned how to adapt. In Momaday’s novel, Abel’s true reconciliation begins when he partakes of an ancient running ceremony. The struggles throughout the novel illustrated that the only way to unify his identity was by returning to the pure Native American ideals and ridding himself of any white cultural baggage. While at the end, his reconciliation is not complete, Abel has finally found where he belongs and the landscape expresses this sentiment. The novel ends with Abel running through the land in intense physical pain. However, he ignores the pain in order to continue the ceremony. “Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at last without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky” (185). These last lines demonstrate that the landscape has become an integral part of Abel’s being; finally, the land and his inner self are one. In Silko’s novel, Tayo eventually completes Betonie’s ceremony and achieves reconciliation with the land. The last step of the ceremony involves incorporating an element of white society and surviving the night. Tayo finishes the ceremony, which indicates he has learned how to adapt to the new landscape. A drought has plagued the land the entire time Tayo’s identity was fragmented, reiterating how the land imitates the inner self. Therefore, at the end of the novel, the rain coming forth parallels Tayo’s reconciliation. In addition, the rain proves to Old Ku’oosh that there is a ceremony to reconcile fragmented identities, but change is necessary in order for the ceremony to work. In the end, Old Grandma says, “It seems like I already heard these stories before. . . . only thing is, the names sound different” (242). Her statement illustrates the theme of hybridity and change because ceremonies and stories are traditional, but the aspects of those same ceremonies and stories are changed in order to fit the new landscape. While Momaday and Silko achieve reconciliation in opposing ways, both works illustrate the intimacy of land and identity woven throughout all of Native American culture.

Works Cited
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*Krisha Bryan*
Critical Preface

My Time as an English Major at UWG

In college, I learned to do what I want, and be who I wanted to be. I knew, pretty quickly, that I did not want to be a technical writer, that I loved literature, and I loved to write. I have just recently learned how to budget (the hard way). I learned how to cook for myself, and I learned that sleep was really important. I learned that I was not indestructible or immune from generally failing at life. I learned how to recover from...
said failures; I learned resiliency. Or, perhaps I learned more ways in which I was resilient. Ultimately, what I learned as an undergraduate directly shaped who I am personally and professionally today.

I ultimately selected my undergraduate degree because it offered me the greatest amount of prospective happiness. I started at UWG as a science major, determined to go to Med School, become a doctor, and take care of my mother . . . essentially pay back to her all the time and money she spent on me. However, since I went to a really dinky high school where I rarely felt challenged with the curriculum, I expected college to be an equal breeze. This is where I was wrong.

In college, I learned that math truly sucks (that also includes all other curricula that involves excessive math). Partly because I was taking an amazing English class that contrasted so starkly with my math class, and partly because of the persuasive powers of that professor, I became an English major.

In the past, I was always a reader. I was overjoyed when my mother built me a bookshelf in middle school. I realized in my 2000-level classes that I could read and read, then write about what I read . . . and I was good at it. This was such a relief from the formulas and pointless letters in calculus. The real irony of my selection of a major in the humanities is the fact that—during the entire time I have worked on campus, three out of four years—I have truly experienced the bias against funding in the departments firsthand. While I am an English major, and a philosophy minor, I have worked in the chemistry department only. Because, for whatever reason, the humanities do not receive adequate funding, I have worked various jobs in the Chemistry department . . . because that is where the money is. It is ironic that I have switched my major to English because if I am having a hard time finding a job in my field as an undergrad, how am I going to do once I graduate? In my time at UWG, I have learned that life is not always fair.

I have also learned some things that are not directly relevant to school assignments . . . or maybe they are:

1. Weather matters. Not saying you should choose where you go to school based on the weather (actually, I totally am), but especially if you go to school where you will probably walk around outside much more than you are used to . . . maybe take this into consideration. Basically, spring in Georgia is outrageous. And living next to the beach would have been far superior.

2. Getting sick is much worse when you are responsible for making up class- and homework, and you have to rely on the on campus voodoo hut to take care of you. Dress appropriately, eat well, and exercise.

RaeAnna Hogle
3. Getting enough sleep is vital for productivity. Having so much homework that you cannot get enough sleep to do a good job, or procrastinating so much that you have to continually lose sleep to do assignments, will degrade the quality of your work and thus the quality of your education. Also, it will make you a crazy, grumpy monster-person with bags under your eyes. Not sexy.

4. Going to the library is essential to how productive you are. However, you should not feel productive only at the library. That said, it is a good idea to figure out where you study best. Recently, every time I go to the library, it is like Club Ingram in the place. Therefore, I have learned the joys of doing homework in the computer lab on campus. There is nothing shiny there to distract me, but beware of bubble-gum-chewing hussies.

5. Do not assume people know what they are talking about just be because they sound like they do. Sometimes the people that talk the most in class are actually super lost.

6. Credit cards . . . sexy, sexy little things that let you buy real food, and shoes, and keep you from studying because you have to work an extra shift to pay it off.

What I have not quite learned yet is what I am going to do with my life. When I tell people that I am graduating with an English degree, the most common response is, “So, what are you going to do with that?” It is one of my least favorite questions, but I have come to realize that it is an important one. What am I going to do with English? Unrealistically, I would love to read books, and write what I want about them, when I want, and drink martinis, and maybe live on the beach . . . but I wouldn’t get paid much for that, and it sounds a little too much like what Hemingway did . . . so I am currently in a bind.

To most people, all that English majors do is read books, talk about books, and write papers about books (which is pretty accurate, actually). As a result, we do not seem to be doing very much. Maybe that’s why we don’t receive funding. But I, for one, value English precisely for its focus on the process of literary analysis. We rarely ask questions that have concrete answers, and yet no other major can go to a source—a text—and pull out such definitive evidence for an argument. In this way, if you think about it, science is pretty bogus. Scientists come up with postulations that require to be proved with crazy equipment like an electron-whatever-microscope, whereas an English major needs only to go to the nearest bookstore. No matter what you are going to “do” with English, I believe that there is value in having learned how to read, how to speak, and how to write like an English major—that is, critically.
In my opinion, English majors are like archaeologists, dusting away to dig up little pieces of bone in order to build a bigger skeleton. In this way we read, and re-read, searching for a phrase repeated, a pattern, a symbol, a sign. In these moments, the skeleton rises out of the text, simply because we have taken the time to look for it. The pleasure and the danger of this sort of reading is that there is no limit to the number of times that a text can be read. I have learned that, for an English major, reading is never actually finished, only temporarily abandoned, to be resumed whenever the book is cracked open again. There is something encouraging in this method of searching and researching through a text. In re-reading a text, there must always be a willingness to question and even accept information that may force you to change your previously formed opinions. In this, I have learned to develop a certain kind of mental flexibility in my first (second, third) impressions of a novel (or any text!).

So, what am I going to do with that? I guess whatever I want. I have learned this semester alone about the multiplicity of career choices an English major has: editing, teaching, marketing, writing . . . If you ask me, I can do a lot! Also, I still have time to decide. I am going to grad school, where I will further refine the skills that I have learned in my time as an undergrad. Then I’ll worry about what I want to be when I grow up.

I have said it many times this semester—I have not been the best undergraduate student, especially this semester. While usually I am one of the chattiest in class (productively chatty, that is), making As, and finishing homework early, this semester I felt distracted in class, and was more concerned with my off-campus job, working extra hours to pay bills instead of staying on top of my assignments. Sometimes college was hard, like this semester, but in the long run I have thoroughly enjoyed my choice to go to the University of West Georgia. I have met some of the most inspiring professors during my time at UWG (even though maybe I was not particularly inspiring to them), and I have made really great friends. I can only hope to learn more from my stay as an undergrad as I continue on in life, and reflect back on my times spent here.
All those dumb generations back of me, are crying out in every breath of every word that itself is struggling out of me.
—Anzia Yezierska, *Children of Loneliness*

Genealogical documents often raise more questions than they answer, since inconsistencies, surprises, and scandals are at the core of family history research.
—Claire Lynch, “Who Do You Think You Are?: Intimate Pasts Made Public”

In an age of consumerism and capitalism, the recently popular genealogy company Ancestry.com tells us that, through the process of digging through our family records, genealogy enables us to learn about the history of our ancestors. But how reliable is pure genealogy in mapping out our familial past? Ancestry.com presents the search in genealogy as “a profession as well as a hobby, a passion as well as a chore, and an investigation into the lives of others as a way to learn more about the self. Running through it all is a core assumption that humans are ‘defined by who and where we are from’ (Watson 297)—that the question ‘who do you think you are’ can be answered if only the right documents are uncovered” (Lynch 108).

In the television program *Who Do You Think You Are?,* celebrities search through a multiplicity of documents, desperately desiring to ascertain life-altering information about their ancestors. Simultaneously, they try to answer the question about who they think they really are. However, in excavating through sketchy historical documents, the actors

Fictionalizing Genealogy
in the show inadvertently reveal that genealogy is a fiction, despite how it presents itself as pure fact. In reality, in searching through unreliable records of their ancestors’ pasts, the celebrities must make leaps of faith in believing the “facts” they dig up. Essentially, as they don’t truly find any hard history about their ancestors, the celebrities must fictionalize their lives as well as the lives of their past relatives.

The same phenomena occurs in *Paradise*, as in Toni Morrison’s novels there is always a tension between the history that is written down and family history that gets passed along orally. In *Paradise*, despite the townspeople’s use of family bibles to keep written records, two men—twins—mentally document the town’s history in order to keep oral tradition in a position of authority. By highlighting the benefits and pitfalls of either mode of historiography, and by showing the destructiveness of an imbalance in the two, Morrison illuminates the middle ground where orality and the written word exist in a harmonious balance. Where *Who Do You Think You Are?* debunks the myth that genealogy is the sole creator of fact, Morrison complicates the notion that one mode of historiography is more favorable than the other.

**Genealogy as Fiction in *Who Do You Think You Are?***

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* (*WDYTYA*), celebrities search through the annals of history to discover potentially life-altering facts about their ancestors. The fact that someone would be so invested in unearthing lost facts about another person’s life, related or not, shows that there is currently a genealogy craze in America. Despite their search for amazing facts, nothing particularly controversial comes up in the show, perhaps because “genealogy, like life writing, spreads itself across a wide range of definitions and contradictions” (Lynch 108). If people perceive that strict factual knowledge arises solely from genealogy, they fail to realize the very contraction in that statement, that documents must be fabricated and selectively documented for people to dig up later.

Genealogy in general attempts to presents itself as fact. This is especially noticeable in *WDYTYA* as the show goes to great lengths to use all sorts of vaguely historical representations of fact to legitimize the searches of the celebrities. For example, in the Brooke Shields episode, a historian points out that Shields is related to a pope, a handful of saints, and some other quasi-royal gentlemen. In order to prove his point, he takes her to the location where her ancestors are artistically represented—a museum. The historian then shows Shields a collection of paintings and statues dedicated to the saints and the pope, as if this would truly secure the genealogical evidence he has surfaced for her. In this moment, Shields claims that she now knows something about herself that she has somehow discovered in his search for her family history. This is because “*WDYTYA* nudges the family history researcher away
from solely archival explorations towards life writing, gently suggesting with photographic montages and personal reminiscences that one might care to formulate a storyline as well as a timeline” (Lynch 111).

The reason Shields went so out of her way to dig into the depths of her family history is because “genealogy research is related to the thrill of learning history with a personal connection. You don’t dig merely to accumulate a lot of dry bones[,] . . . you simply cannot back-trail your progenitors without becoming interested in the times in which they lived. . . . Researching your genealogy promises that history will become part of your blood” (Watson 306). Because of this, in attempting to recreate her family’s life, Brooke is actually constructing her own life narrative based off of facts obtrusive to the family member’s possible life narrative. Therefore, autobiography exists to debunk genealogy as genealogy is damaging to the possibility of structuring a life narrative.

For example, when people like Emmitt Smith—an African American—digs up information about his ancestors—particularly one like the slave, Mariah—they oftentimes fail to come up with legitimate documents. When Smith cannot find a set of hard facts, he and the historians he comes into contact with in his genealogical search formulate and basically make up a life for Mariah that could be accurate, but there’s no way of telling for sure. This is how genealogy fails in attempting to create a narrative. “Genealogy makes truth claims about the knowability of family history and its power to authorize the individual while actively resisting the incursions of autobiographical storytelling” (Watson 299); this means that, essentially, if Smith wishes to delve deeper into his barely documented historical past, he must acknowledge that archives, be they paper or electronic, are haphazard, “made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve” (Steedman qtd. in Lynch 68).

Smith admirably attempts to fight against the inaccuracies in the documentation of his ancestors, despite the huge amount of vagueness in his search of documents. This is because “through genealogical tracing, a family can not only know, but save the lives of its ancestors”, which is exactly what Smith desires to do (Watson 305). However, since he comes up nearly empty handed, he has to resort to a totally questionable DNA test that tells him he’s (obviously) of black and white ancestry. In this way, genealogy attempting to prove itself factual leads to its actually being damaging to the searcher, especially to those who lack a written genealogy. While Smith attempts to reclaim his ancestor’s voice through genealogy, he is ultimately duped by WDYTYA as the show utilizes a suspect historian who uses a number of sketchy resources like birth records from a “colored” archive. At this same point in the episode, the “astute” historian reveals to Smith that people at the time of the Civil War—the exact time period they are researching—took better
records of *horses* than they did black people. Why Smith then wishes to rely solely on the information presented to him in an archive that was half-heartedly documented is unfathomable.

In this moment on the show, Smith inadvertently reveals more obviously than any of the other celebrities the true problems with genealogy presenting itself as fact to be claimed by any who searches for it. If a celebrity like Smith, with an enormous amount of money, cannot find decisively accurate documents about his ancestors, then the show underscores how it is even more unlikely that the average customers of Ancestry.com will uncover glorious hordes of perfectly documented information about their family members. On the show, “archivists appear with papers in their hands, already transcribed; old acquaintances of the subject’s great-grandmother happen to be standing on the corner at exactly the moment they pass by with a camera crew, and so on. For the family historian who travels to the National Archive without such a crew, the process can be long, frustrating, expensive, and fruitless. By presenting experts, such as archivists and historians, while at the same time depriving them of their ‘expert discourse, technical paraphernalia and peer group context’ (Livingstone and Lunt 97), the program raises expectations that cannot be met” (Lynch 113).

This ultimately reveals that genealogists are fictionalizers—that is, writers of fiction. In this way, African American life writers, perhaps one like Emmitt Smith, may liberatingly reclaim a voice in history not through pretense to fact but through an autobiographical narrative. Family history is arguably not the pursuit of truth at all, but rather an “expression of the ultimate human fantasy, the pursuit of immortality. Throughout their research, family historians explore further and further back into the past; simultaneously, the records and family trees they produce are designed for future generations” (Lynch 116). Genealogy cannot exist without autobiography. As Watson puts it, that which “autobiography celebrates as the fruitful variety of remembered human constructions of events is suspect to the genealogist” (303). But this is a false dichotomy. It is at the “juncture of simultaneous mistrust and empathy that [autobiography], genealogy, family history, and reality TV converge” (Lynch 109) in *WDYTYA*.

Perhaps most redeemingly, Smith confronts the monster of slavery in his adventure through his family databases. Smith ends up in a situation much like Toni Morrison’s character Milkman who also goes on a genealogical search for meaning in his life: “The end point of Milkman’s journey is the starting point of his race’s history in this country: slavery. The confrontation with the reality of slavery, coming at the end of Milkman’s penetration into historical process, is liberational because slavery is no portrayed as the origin of history and culture. Instead, the novel opens out to Africa, the source” (Willis 36-37). In thinking
about the advancement of the genealogical documentation of African American lives, critic Eric D. Lamore optimistically speaks about “how the future of African American life writing will [eventually] be found in the archives . . . without the help of professional historians, genealogists, and archivists” (10). Maybe this idea will be encouraging to Smith and other black historians like him in their search for meaning in their genealogical past. However, African American life writers will need to acknowledge the possibility that their lives may never be published as a popular novel or be aired on a show like *WDYTYA*. Rather, these narratives “about successfully (or unsuccessfully) locating one’s past . . . will likely be more consistently circulated and disseminated via blogs and social networking sites, as well as through private conversations during holiday celebrations, family reunions, and other types of familial gatherings” (11).

**Orality Wins in *Paradise***

The fictionalization of genealogy is also seen in contrast to openly creative autobiography in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, despite the use of family bibles to keep genealogically accurate records, two men mentally document the town’s history, keeping autobiography in a position of authority. By highlighting the actual creative process behind genealogy, and by showing the destructiveness of an imbalance in the two, Morrison illuminates the middle ground where autobiography and the written word exist in a harmonious balance. Critic James Mellard states that, in Morrison’s novel, “violence undergirds paradise; paradise depends on violence” (350). This same idea can be applied to autobiography and genealogy. However, “this coexistence of the text and the oral can be difficult to establish, particularly if we only have a text to examine” (Collins). Through Morrison’s text, this becomes evident: both modes of life narrative rely on the other. Genealogy alone prevents the narrator from creating a full, autobiographical life story, while autobiography cannot exist alone without some genealogical foundation on which to ground itself.

In *Paradise*, genealogy—as represented by Pat’s project—is limiting and forced, therefore linked to the written word as ominous, since as writing it obscures the creations of African American oral (auto)biographies. On the other hand, written autobiography is authoritative, the creative version of genealogy—something that does not necessarily need to be documented or exact. Morrison’s novel draws a line between oral history in the form of storytelling and autobiography. This means that ultimately in *Paradise* a battle rages between the communally autobiographical griot brothers—Steward and Deacon—and Pat, the fact-driven genealogist. The brothers “represent a rhetorical strategy that allows [them] to fulfill the duties of the griot” (Collins). Further, when

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**Fictionalizing Genealogy**
we get to the chapter “Patricia,” to signal that we are to find a historical (rather than a pop-cultural narrative) account of the founding of Haven and Ruby, “Morrison provides [Pat] with a historian’s credentials. If not a trained historian, she at least is a teacher of history and understands what an archive is and where to find the untold stories” (Mellard 355).

Perhaps the most monumental tribute to the power of document-based history is Pat’s genealogy project. Beginning as what she imagined would be a gift to the citizens of Ruby—a collection of family trees, the genealogies of each of the fifteen families—turns into a violation of oral creativity in the eyes of the townspeople, and a monstrous record of the written word that Pat will eventually burn. Though she harbors doubts about the legitimacy of her project (355), Pat begins her search for history in a seemingly benign manner as she creates family trees, “the trunks sticking in the air, the branches sloping down” (Morrison 187). Pat is doomed to begin with as she attempts to interpret and analyze the “fiction-generating machine” that is genealogy (Homans 5). Critic Ladelle McWhorter uses Foucault’s theory on genealogy to explain Pat’s failures: “On Foucault’s analysis, so the imaginary critic says, there appears to be no biological [grounding for genealogy that] serves as the anchor point and target of the regimes of power. . . . Thus there is nothing—or at least nothing real—that holds the [idea of genealogy] together” (McWhorter 40). Therefore, in order to create a palpable aura of factual genealogy, Pat sets out on a “quest for lost biological origins” (Homans 11).

However, Pat is hardly a radical historian. She feels that this history and its “lists of old-time achievements were enough for her” (Morrison 209). Once she completed the trees, Pat began to “supplement the branches of who begat whom with notes . . . gleaned from her students’ autobiographical compositions . . . from talking to people, asking to see Bibles and examining church records[,] . . . letters and marriage certificates” (187). However, “belonging by themselves to mere annals or chronicle (her biblical ‘begats’), these, though part of the archive, are not history as such. For her evening labors on the project, however, she goes beyond these protohistorical forms” (Mellard 355). While at first, the townspeople comply and even help Pat with her searches, they soon become angry and complain about Pat’s intrusive digging.

This blatant denial of the written word’s importance is a result of Pat’s violation: writing down what townspeople speak—that is, the biography they pass down orally. The family bibles, church records, letters, and marriage certificates that Pat gleans are the only written traditional sources for historians of black history. Marni Gauthier says this about the rejection that Pat experiences: “the caustic . . . interpretative notes . . . are a desperate attempt to defy the rigidity . . . represented in the genealogical trees . . . Yet the novel’s insistence on the intertwined relationship between oral and written histories brings scrutiny to both

RaeAnna Hogle
forms of accessing historical truth. Like the oral histories in the novel, Pat’s genealogy is subjective, and shares some of the same gaps where information to fill it is simply unavailable to its author” (401). Acting as her town’s historian, the personal and experiential theories with which Pat inflects all of her “notes” echoes Morrison’s reliance on memory and others’ recollections. Therefore, despite Pat’s urge to write, she relies heavily on what her companions are willing to transmit to her orally. The autobiographical compositions of the children are particularly troublesome for Pat as they are based on a traditionally oral creativity, yet she forces her students to write them down. In Paradise, the difficulty with Pat’s project is that she believes that genealogy will provide and preserve “fact,” when it’s actually not even as factual as the sketchy records and oral history on which it’s based. As a result, like in *WDYTYA*, genealogy pretends to fact when it’s as fictional as any other story.

However, the town does not realize its own need for Pat’s manuscript, as it is through Pat’s literary archaeology that the townspeople would actually better understand their own histories. Because orality has overwhelming authority in Ruby, and despite Pat’s promises to herself about how “she alone would figure out why a line was drawn through Ethan Blackhorse’s name in the Blackhorse Bible and what the heavy ink blot hid next to Zechariah’s name in the Morgan Bible” (Morrison 188), Pat ultimately fails to uncover a history to write. Poor Pat, in a constant battle for the appropriation of manuscript, eventually burns her papers, beaten by the entirety of the townspeople who have all their faith in oral storytelling, autobiography rather than genealogy. Pat also fails because she had already “formed a concept of the self and the past [is] something knowable if only sufficient effort is applied (Lynch 114). Therefore, in *Paradise*, Morrison is essentially trying to convey the idea that there is no real difference between autobiography and genealogy.

As the griots of the town, Steward and Deacon Morgan, Ruby’s recognized leaders, employ, enforce, and defend Ruby’s autobiographical communal narrative against Pat’s genealogical counter-narrative (Davidson 356). An African historian, the griot is a repository of oral tradition. Due to the expansiveness of their combined knowledge of the local history of Ruby, Steward and Deacon are formidable figures who stand against “genealogy” in Ruby. Despite the townspeople documenting their family trees in family Bibles, if the people of Ruby were to attempt to look up actual family records on a genealogy database like Ancestry.com, they would be faced with a lack of accurate—if any—information. In the wake of this phenomenon, Morrison allows her twin characters to reclaim the limited perspectives of African American history through the act of orally transmitted (auto)biography. Morrison ultimately permits Deacon and Steward this ability as she wishes to acknowledge the fact that the “life stories of . . . people often have

*Fictionalizing Genealogy*
complex narrative lines, since to the already insurmountable difficulty of any human effort to know and fix one’s origin is often added the extra difficulty of lack of information” (Homans 4).

Genealogy Defended in *Paradise*

In other instances, especially when seeing the conflict from the point of view of women from Ruby, genealogy sometimes trumps other more creative modes of historiography. Although she allows the men of Ruby to murder the Convent women, Morrison stresses the significance of how the women in Ruby view oral and written history, as it is vastly different from how the men see it. While Pat, a woman, defends genealogy despite the objections of the townspeople, the other women in the town place their confidence in autobiography; the men switch positions, and suddenly defend genealogy, simply to be of the opposite opinion than the women. The men’s indecision suggests that they are “dependent upon many of the same assumptions about human life and governmental responsibility, and are constructed by some of the same disciplinary means” as women (McWhorter 39). In other words, the women are more reliable in their opinion that (auto)biography is more reliable than genealogy.

A few days after the town meeting, the Convent women crash K.D.’s wedding party, and Anna Flood laughs about how the Convent women saved the day for the townspeople. Anna thinks that there is “nothing like other folks’ sins for distraction” (Morrison 159). Previously in the day, an argument broke out between the men about changing the inscription on the Oven. Flood then spins the tumultuous opinions of what the Oven inscription should say and mean, adding a feminist touch to her thoughts: “The young people were wrong. [The Oven should read] Be the Furrow of Her Brow” (159). It is significant that she empowers the voice of a female God; whereas the town typically thrives on what critic Rob Davidson calls “a rigidly controlled communal historiography predicated on the subordination of the individual to the group. Steward and Deacon Morgan—Ruby’s recognized leaders—employ, enforce, and defend this communal narrative” (356). By acknowledging that the town’s “origins seem knowable, memorable, documentable, [and] yet again and again . . . fictionally constructed in the face of admissions that they cannot otherwise be known” (Homans 4) Anna shows her willingness to subvert a male-dominated Oven inscription. This in turn shows her potential to rise above the violent patriarch in Ruby, to take on that which so often oppresses women.

The inscription on the Oven, a symbol of Ruby’s recorded history, speaks directly to the tradition of orality and what is written in Ruby. Anyone might recognize that [the] identity and the origins that supposedly ground [autobiography] are artifacts” (Homans 5); however, this
would be a falsity. Dovey, Steward's wife, reflects upon the day in which she attended a town meeting where another woman, Pat's daughter Billie Delia, objects to the inscription on the Oven. Dovey is not surprised that Billie Delia goes against the grain as she already sticks out amongst the “coal black” 8-rocks in her town with her “odd rosy-tan skin and wayward brown hair” (93). Dovey’s comments represent the slipperiness of oral history, and how ‘nailing it down’ by writing it down can be a more difficult task than it sounds: “‘Beware the Furrow of His Brow?’ ‘Be the Furrow of His Brow?’ Her own opinion was that ‘Furrow of His Brow’ alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross” (93). Dovey’s comments about the Oven are particularly interesting as her thoughts lead to a debate on the dichotomy of oral versus written—genealogy versus (auto)biography—where the men in the town are focused more on the generational repercussions of modifying the inscription on the Oven. This means that the men are upset at the idea of the women fabricating genealogical—generational—fact. Though, in Dovey’s eyes, it is futile to rely in the written word solely, since Ruby’s history is based on an oral tradition, a tradition that she finds to be too transient and moving to be held in place by only poorly documented genealogy. Dovey may also choose to reject autobiography as it requires her to reveal the scandals of the town: incest and homicide. Perhaps the scandal of the story, “which requires [her] to spin such racy yarns about [her] origins and their presumed but not proven consequences” is too much for Dovey to handle (Homans 6).

In a moment of odd irony, however, Deacon Morgan actually enforces the written tradition, since he will not allow anyone to come up with a new saying (an oral phenomenon) to replace the written words on the Oven. In a moment that seems to be a battle between generations, Deacon actually supports the wellbeing of writing in Ruby as he demands to keep the letters on the Oven the same. Deacon Morgan fiercely condemns the younger men: “Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built” (Morrison 85). Deacon wishes to preserve the item symbolic of his ancestry as “there is a significant value in being parented by and having ongoing contact with one’s biological relatives” (Haslanger 91). Since Deacon cannot do this directly, he is adamant about preserving that which has been passed via written language—genealogical fact—despite it being “positively fictive” (Homans 12).

The town reverend, Richard Misner’s response sheds further light on the dichotomy; whereas in Pat’s genealogical narrative oral history is abrasive and has the power to distort written history, the dichotomy is inverted, as Misner claims, given that the youth of Ruby “are respecting
It’s because they do know the Oven’s value that they want to give it new life” (Morrison 85; emphasis added). The idea is that an addition to the oral history of the Oven would lift up and enrich its written story, meaning that “knowledge of the real events and acquaintance with actual ancestors is not required for the narrative project” (Haslanger 105). However, further adding to the irony of the situation, the other twin who holds the town’s history in his head, Steward Morgan, ends the debate with a blunt threat: “If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or adds words to the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you is a hood-eye snake” (Morrison 87). Steward acts out violently for fear of the loss of his self-crafted identity. He fears the change of the inscription on the Oven as removing that which grounds his identity and would leave him “disadvantaged by the lack of a basic good on which most people rely in their pursuit of self-knowledge and identity formation. In coming to know and define themselves, most people rely on their acquaintance with people who are like them by virtue of being their biological relatives” (Velleman qtd. in Haslanger 95).

Conclusion: Is Ancestry.com Really Worth it?

Given that it holds immeasurable amounts of accessible census information and is convenient, and given the appeal of “original” documents, depressingly, in the end, it seems that the mega-company Ancestry.com will win the battle of who gets to rule publicized genealogical information. However, despite the prospect of locating other family members, and other various attractive benefits of the (paid) Ancestry.com membership, “when searching through archival records, the researcher must change his or her self perception based both on what is found and what is not” (Lynch 117). This means that, while perhaps not openly, Ancestry.com customers reveal the fictitious elements of genealogy in the way they must autobiographically orient themselves around the information uncovered.

*WDYTYA* also challenges genealogy and family history in their traditional formats by producing an edited narrative in which the shaping and editing of memory are acknowledged. At the same time, *WDYTYA* “distorts the complexity of the task, constructing an audience expectation that a satisfactory narrative is [always] available to all those willing to search” (116). Morrison also complicates genealogy and autobiography by showing that they are both produced creatively, though oftentimes appearing to be in conflict with one another. Simply put, if the traditional self-reflection of autobiography is to be rejected, “it is only by dramatizing the archival findings, photographs, and memories” found on Ancestry.com that the individual at the center of the search can hope to truly answer the question “who do you think you are?” (116).
Works Cited


Fictionalizing Genealogy
The (Anti) American Dream: Fatal Obsessions of Material Wealth or Self Reliance in John Krakauer’s Into the Wild

by Erin Mayo

Critical Preface

As I rehearse my first English courses, I remember having a natural desire that was not satisfied with examining merely plot. Analyzing texts for deeper meaning is a skill that I have applied beyond English and language arts classes. I recall loving every part of English; more specifically, I engaged fully in class discussions when texts are dissected for meaning beyond the surface level. As I develop, or consider, these “deeper meanings,” I learn a valuable lesson applicable to my personal
life. My final essay is the accumulation of analyzing life according to American standards. This aspect is one of my favorite topics because it is the environment in which I have grown up, and continue to grow in.

I should have known that a natural desire for uncovering hidden meanings in texts would only be enhanced as I began my coursework as an English major. My English courses, especially Senior Seminar, have changed the way I watch movies, television, along with how I read books, blogs, and magazines. I no longer see a movie at face value—my mind has a constant reel analyzing every detail of a character, scene, conversation, etc. Not only does this occur, but connections to other texts begin to form a never-ending map that connects various works of literature. Quite often, my friends and I will watch a film. Afterwards, they inquire about my overall approval or rejection of the film. More times than not, I was greeted with the same look of disbelief as I allow my thoughts to splurge into words. The majority of the time, they shake their heads and I am left frustrated. However, I have learned that I think differently than my friends. I have learned to embrace the inner “English nerd” and find contentment through the mere ability to pick apart a movie and gain a new perspective. It has come to the point that I do not feel like I am meaninglessly allowing media to flow in one ear and out of the next. An inner level of comfort exceeds any judgments my friends may have.

Through my obsession about life as it relates to the American Dream, I have written countless papers that inquire why society is in a fragmented and broken state of being. I also frequently wonder why some famous stories are celebrated—the life performed often ends miserably. Senior Seminar allowed me to build upon this obsession in a new manner by exploring the foundation of life itself. Before looking to another’s life, I found myself asking questions about my own life because I am susceptible to buying into the American Dream as a result of being born and raised in the culture. Before relating the themes brought up in class discussions to other people’s lives, I turned inward, asking why my life is portrayed in the manner I have chosen. Frustratingly enough, I was able to see areas of my life that needed improvement and as a result, I have changed aspects of my own life. This outcome of the life of an English major is what makes me most satisfied because I am able to grow through obtaining a new perspective.

Grammar and MLA formatting have not been my strong points within the English classes I have taken. However, the courses I enrolled in as an English major helped push me to explore and comprehend both of these aspects so that I can write effectively, speak properly, and hold myself to a high standard as an educated person. Through my understanding of grammar, I have gained a confidence in writing that hit a growth spurt in Senior Seminar. The majority of essays I write, I

Erin Mayo
approach with a self-conscious attitude that undermines the authority of my writing. As I worked to break down the mental wall, my ideas and writing began to flow more easily with more self-assurance. The self-assurance came through many failed attempts; however, the psychological pit of timid feelings grew deeper. This semester forced me to climb out of the pit in confidence, believing that I have obtained the knowledge necessary to succeed as an English major.

The critical lenses are taught so that we can dissect a text through a specific light. These help develop critical thinking. My instinct is to approach a text attempting to figure out the life lessons it has to offer. However, suppressing that initial reaction in order to observe feminist ideals is hard. By focusing primarily on women establishing their voices makes it hard to stick to the familiar approach I typically take. Research and Methodology helped me learn and apply various lenses, and the research behind my paper included the steps learned while attending the class.

My final paper for Senior Seminar is the result of new approaches I developed when writing a lengthy paper. In order to brainstorm ideas after reading the text, I filled the side of my refrigerator as well as a couple of dry erase boards hanging on my wall. This allowed me to visualize all the analysis of the character’s life in order to find a common denominator for developing the thesis. Considering I am a visual learner, this helped tremendously because I was able literally to see my ideas and write down common factors. This eliminated the stress of forgetting ideas, thus allowing for a natural development of a thesis. I also cut apart my final essay in order to group the ideas in an organized fashion. With paragraphs cluttering my living room floor, I organized the pieces by taping them to the wall under the corresponding portion of the thesis. I was able to remove and edit paragraphs ensuring they referenced the thesis and did not ramble on about random ideas. It was not until I began meeting with Dr. Hipchen that these ideas came about. I never had a professor who helped formulate approaches to writing that clicked with my style of learning. In return, this directly affected every mental aspect I used when I approached composing an essay. The ideas allow writing to become tactile and enjoyable, seeing that I do not enjoy sitting in front of a computer for countless hours. My final essay came about as a direct result of implementing these newly learned strategies.

I have always been an avid reader. As a child, I had my nose stuck in a book on a consistent basis. Reading stories about people and places always allowed for my imagination to expand. I never dreamed I would be able to cross two aspects of life I thoroughly enjoy: reading and outdoors. I grew up in a small neighborhood that backed up to land on which my siblings and I could explore. Countless afternoons were spent lost in the woods playing various games and walking amongst

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The (Anti) American Dream
the trails we made. As I got older, the love for outdoors and reading grew—I found myself combining both worlds. My final paper brought me great joy because I was able to study the life of a fellow outdoor fanatic and write about it. The paper became a distraction to completing other papers because it excites me to write about the life of an extreme woodsman and the effects society has on his life.

Through studying English, I have developed affection for words and their meanings. When performing a close reading of a specific portion of a text, a word’s definition can open a new door to a room full of new analysis. This in turn pushes me to engage in dialogue with the author’s chosen words. As a direct effect, I began to see close reading as enlightening and fun rather than another assignment or monotonous step in the reading of a specific text.

My life as an English major has prepared me for my future career as a high school English teacher in more ways than I thought possible. As I learned how to define my own pedagogy, I also learned how to think and write on an advanced level so that I am qualified to teach students the various aspects of English. It is my hope and aim that they will find some common ground with the subject matter. Although not every student will fall in love with English as I have, I would be satisfied knowing he or she gained a respect for the material or an increase of knowledge of who he or she is as a student.

As graduation rapidly approaches, the time spent studying English was well spent because I can go forward into my career with a firm foundation. Certain assignments felt meaningless; however, in hindsight the assignments were stepping stones that helped me cross over into the “real world.” I have matured through the preservation and strength mustered up to complete the courses. As I take what I have learned into the field of teaching, it excites me to share what I have learned with the younger generation in hopes that at least one student will walk away having his or her life changed in some miniscule way as a result of a real life connection.
Stereotypically, society defines the American Dream as the acquisition and amassing of wealth and possessions so that one’s life can be deemed “successful.” Roger Pearson defines the American Dream in his essay, “Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream”: “Briefly defined, it is the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals. It is the literary expression of the concept of America: the land of opportunity” (638). In John Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, the main character, Christopher McCandless, embraces the opportunity to reinvent himself contrary to the stereotypical notions of the American Dream. According to McCandless, success becomes more of a commodity than a means of obtaining ultimate satisfaction with one’s life. In Krakauer’s novel, the life of a young man by the name of Christopher McCandless illustrates the main problem with the American Dream: that material wealth does not make a person happy. Krakauer’s book critiques this emphasis on material wealth, using McCandless’s story to examine ideas about self-reliance and self-mastery.

Krakauer uses McCandless’s life to explore what it takes to survive. According to the American Dream, in order to survive you have to accumulate wealth (have all these possessions) and you have to be self-reliant. McCandless radically abandons wealth and embraces self-reliance and this kills him. When McCandless abandons possessions, he leaves the “happy medium” that would allow him to survive; likewise, when he rejects society’s help absolutely, he dies. Therefore, Krakauer uses McCandless’s life to say that in order to survive, you cannot be obsessed with possessions any more than you can be obsessed with

*The (Anti) American Dream*
doing everything by yourself. In *Into the Wild*, then, any extreme rejection or embodiment of the American Dream is fatal.

After graduation, McCandless begins to create a new self when he severs ties to the life his parents, and society, live as he journeys Westward to Alaska. In his pilgrimage to the West, McCandless abandons his original name and replaces it with Alexander Supertramp. This action allows McCandless to completely reject the material American Dream and fully embody self-reliance. Krakauer confirms this idea when he writes: “To symbolize the complete severance from his previous life, he even adopted a new name. No longer would he answer to Chris McCandless; he was now Alexander Supertramp, master of his own destiny” (23). McCandless’s claim to be master of his narrative as a result of changing his name allows life to become an unfiltered experience for him, a narrative that is not bound by other beings and material possessions. Not only does McCandless master his new found identity, but also his destiny. By willingly giving up his previous life molded by his family, McCandless believes he can rewrite his life narrative under the terms he desires: absolute abandonment of a commodified life. Without breaking society’s mold of identity, McCandless’s rebirth would be impossible ideologically. David Platt reveals the fragmented state of society as it embodies the preconceived notions of a commodified success in his book, *Radical*: “It [the war against materialism] is a constant battle to resist the temptation to have more luxuries . . . to live more comfortably. It requires strong and steady resolve to live in the middle of an American dream that identifies success as moving up the ladder” (171) McCandless eliminates the majority of the battle when he chooses absolute abandonment of his parents’ definition of commodified success. McCandless continuously sacrifices the preconceived desire to obtain a “comfortable” lifestyle through his journey to Alaska.

Shortly after graduation, McCandless donates the entire amount of money left in his bank account to OXFAM as his first step of subscribing to absolute self-reliance. In doing this, McCandless rejects the love for money. Krakauer tells us that, “Shortly thereafter, he donated the balance of his bank account to OXFAM, loaded up his car, and vanished from their lives” (125). OXFAM helps feed those who suffer from starvation. Ironically, McCandless gives a large sum of money to help feed those in need, when at the end of his life, he dies of starvation. McCandless achieves the first step in self-government by giving to OMFAM. He willingly surrenders every penny to his name—a radical move that facilitates the process of being self-reliant. If McCandless had reserved a portion of the money, he could have bought non-perishable food to provide nutrients when the wildlife in the Alaskan bush was scarce in the winter season. However, McCandless’s obsession with becoming fully self-reliant did not allow this idea to be considered. His
life ends in starvation because of his obsession, thus supporting the proposed idea that relying on one’s self absolutely is undeniably fatal.

McCandless surrenders his car as a means to fully subscribe to absolute self-reliance. He willingly abandons the possession of his car on his journey to become Alexander Supertramp. Krakauer explains McCandless’ predicament when he writes: “He could simply abandon the Datsun and resume his odyssey on foot. That’s what he decided to do. He saw the flash flood as an opportunity to shed unnecessary baggage” (29). The simple abandonment of McCandless’s car allows him to take another step towards successfully accomplishing the complete rejection of material wealth. By leaving the car behind, McCandless outwardly displays the lack of attachment to any material object in his possession. McCandless leaves the car, dead, as a metaphorical symbol of his character leaving behind the notions of American-style success. The Datsun becomes unnecessary baggage to McCandless, thus becoming a symbol of an item that hinders one’s freedom, progress, or development. If McCandless kept the Datsun, his character would not be able to embody fully the absolute consumption of self-reliance because he would rely on the car to transport him from place to place, instead of relying on himself. Also, the car hindered McCandless’s character from becoming self-reliant because it was a material object that society labels an “outward confirmation of one’s success.” The abandonment of his car gave McCandless the ability to obtain freedom from a material object and advance towards becoming Alexander Supertramp. Without his car, McCandless was mobile through the reliance on his own feet, thus molding McCandless into the self-reliant man that he set out to be.

James Craig Holte quotes Ralph Bakshi in his essay, “Ethnicity and the Poplar Imagination: Ralph Bakshi and the American Dream,” speaking to the idea of freedom when he states: “The American Dream is realized in the freedom we have, not in the struggle we achieve” (105). McCandless began obtaining his dream at this point in Krakauer’s novel because he was experiencing personal freedom from the material possessions he once had. In hindsight, McCandless denies his possession’s power over himself and gains freedom, thus becoming absolutely self-reliant.

McCandless disposes of his deer hunting rifle at the same time he abandons his car in order to continue to reject the accumulation of material success. The rifle is buried in the ground in order to allow McCandless’s character to metaphorically bury his reliance on society, and embody a new perspective: reliance on the self. Krakauer tells us, “He buried his Winchester deer-hunting rifle and a few other possessions that he might one day want to recover” (29). McCandless buries the rifle to signify the death of any possession’s power in his life. By burying the gun, McCandless allows self-government to encompass more of his character. Krakauer also mentions McCandless was “exhilarated”
at the ability to release his grip on this possession. As a result, ultimate freedom was obtained for McCandless’s character because he could completely sever his life from the constraints of a material object.

McCandless then burns the remainder of his money as another sign of embodying the second definition of the American Dream: self-reliance. McCandless claims the pile of money is pathetic because of the worthlessness it has in his life. By burning the money, McCandless finds a new reality: life does not end when possessions die. Krakauer explains the money burning scene: “He arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand—a pathetic little stack—and put a match to it. One hundred twenty-three dollars in legal tender was promptly reduced to ash and smoke” (29). One experiences McCandless’s disconnection from the pile of money as he labels it “pathetic.” The word pathetic implies something or someone that is miserably inadequate. By labeling currency pathetic, McCandless implies the embodiment of American-style material wealth is miserably inadequate because it evokes complete reliance on society rather than the self. Roderick Nash comments on the obsession of man’s works in his essay “The American Wilderness in Historical Perspective” when he states: “Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was a stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness create[s] a perfect setting for exultation.” (5) McCandless sought wilderness because he realized the impairment society places upon one’s life. McCandless clearly was disgusted by society’s works because he set out for Alaska. By burning his money, McCandless escapes society’s grasp on his life and obtains the ability to experience complete joy and satisfaction. Later in the novel, this presents a problem because he experiences hunger and dehydration as a result of abandoning the money. If McCandless would have kept the money, he would not have faced death at such an early point in his journey. Ironically, this abandonment disillusions McCandless into thinking the best life is gained as a result of segregating oneself completely from reliance on society.

McCandless gives his watch to Jim Gallien to signify his refusal to pursue absolute commodified success. His watch gives him the ability to determine the time, but McCandless considers that an unnecessary dependency on society’s definition of time. McCandless explains his reasoning to Gallien: “I do not want to know what time it is. I do not want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters” (Krakauer 7). Gallien reluctantly accepts the offer; however, McCandless abandons yet another possession in his attempt to become fully self-reliant. A watch gives the time according to what society has deemed. McCandless believed this was subscribing to an ideal that limited personal freedom.

Erin Mayo
He gives the watch away so that he can allow the time to be defined by himself. Interestingly, the watch represents a metaphorical chain to society. Seeing that it is worn on the wrist implies that it is a handcuff binding McCandless to follow society’s time. McCandless realizes this, and decides to leave it behind. By not knowing the time or day, it is impossible for McCandless to know the season or month in which he is. As the reader continues to explore his life, s/he sees how this contributes to his death because the Teklanika River cannot be crossed due to warm spring temperatures melting the ice. If McCandless kept track of what season was occurring, he would have survived; however, he refused to be anything other than self-reliant. This absolute embodiment of self-reliance brings about death for McCandless.

McCandless acquires a canoe as a new mode of transportation after abandoning his other possessions; however, he leaves the canoe, too, as he experiences a metaphorical rebirth further into absolute self-reliance. McCandless faces death when he gets caught in a storm while canoeing: “This incident led Alexander [McCandless] to decide to abandon canoe and return north” (Krakauer 36). Ironically, nature forces McCandless to face death, and abandon another possession. McCandless had slowly become reliant on the canoe to transport him down the river. McCandless abandons the canoe after realizing that being in the canoe brought death to a closer reality. After this point, McCandless refuses to own any other mode of transportation other than his own feet, which means that McCandless moves farther away from the “happy medium” of survival. Nature causes McCandless to experience a rebirth when he “beaches the canoe on jetty and collapses exhausted on sand at sundown” (Krakauer 36). The rebirth moves McCandless to abandon the possession because under the belief that the canoe is what pushed him closer to death. When he leaves the canoe behind, he fully relies on his self—his feet—in order to get from one place to the next. As a result, McCandless’s rebirth embodies the absolute self-reliance he desires.

The journey to Alaska metaphorically represents a “self pilgrimage” for McCandless because he begins to find a new portion of his identity through nature and experience. McCandless believes the American-style material success means poisonous wealth which he rejects. He finds new perspective—self-reliance. McCandless writes: “And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure the climactic battle. To kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring [me] to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization [I] flee, and walk alone upon the land to become lost in the wild” (Krakauer 69). McCandless kills his former identity and admits to killing his false being that embodies the natural desire for wealth. This “false being” relates to the mold society forms around him as a
new college graduate. Part of the societal mold around graduates is to graduate, obtain a successful job, marry, have children, and live in the “perfect” house. By breaking this mold, McCandless finds absolute self satisfaction through the complete rejection of all material possessions. Once McCandless loses his possessions, he embodies his purest form of self: absolute reliance on oneself.

McCandless abandons his apartment off campus as a means to rid his life of any hint of obsession over the accumulation of material wealth. By abandoning his apartment, McCandless releases himself to the freedom of self-dependency as he begins his journey to Alaska shortly after graduating from Emory. Krakauer retells McCandless’s parents’ account of finding the abandoned apartment: “They decided to drive down to Atlanta for a visit. When they arrived at his apartment, it was empty and a ‘FOR RENT’ sign was taped to the window” (Krakauer 22). When his parents find the apartment empty, McCandless’s journey to break free from the typical America-style success story becomes reality. When McCandless abandons his apartment, he surrenders the control of the stereotypical material wealth the American Dream offered, and begins his pursuit of his own idea of the American Dream: absolute rejection of all material wealth in order to obtain self-reliance.

However, McCandless self-destructs as a result of excessive self-reliance. He subscribes to the definition that embodies relying on the self, thus disregarding another being’s help. Krakauer uses McCandless to critique absolute self-reliance because he overly trusts his own individual power. Trusting of his own self, he rejects people’s desires to help. By rejecting society’s attempt to help McCandless, he dies. This supports the ideology that absolute reliance on oneself proves fatal, thus Krakauer’s book develops through McCandless’s actions a critique of the absolute rejection of any form of help from society.

McCandless first rejects society’s help when he refuses Jim Gallien’s offer to supply adequate gear. This refusal allows McCandless to remain self-reliant, but later, costs him his life. Krakauer writes the dialogue exchanged between McCandless and Gallien: “Gallien offered to drive Alex all the way to Anchorage, buy him some decent gear, and then drive him back to wherever he wanted to go. ‘No, thanks any way,’ Alex replied, ‘I will be fine with what I’ve got’” (6). McCandless’s problem is that he relies heavily on his own power, dismissing the fact he is human—this requires the help of other humans in order to survive. On a surface level, one might admire McCandless’s response because it shows the cliché contentment with the possessions he currently has. However, as one learns about his narrative as a whole, rejecting the help from Gallien was a mistake that cost McCandless his entire life. Gallien was a hunter who had previous experience around the terrain McCandless would live for the next couple of years. Fatality entered
McCandless’s life as he rejected Gallien’s help out of fear of losing his identity based within self-reliance.

McCandless acquires a job at McDonalds in order to obtain the minimal amount of money needed to survive; however, he rejects society’s help again when he denies a co-workers’ offer to give him a ride home. McCandless does not allow the connection to other people because that would contradict his self-government. McCandless’s boss, Lori Zarza, recalls her observation of his actions: “Whenever they offered him a ride home after work, he made excuses and politely declined” (Krakauer 41). In order to avoid being obsessed with other’s help, McCandless did not accept the rides that were offered because he was on his own individual odyssey. Instead of embodying the happy medium, McCandless takes the absolute extreme side of the American Dream.

McCandless gives up the help Franz offers to avoid connection to other people and remain a solo, self-reliant hitchhiker. McCandless declines the offer twice: “I will give you money if you need some.” ‘No. You do not get it. I am going to San Diego’” (52). McCandless’s emphasis on his solo journey means he has to reject Franz’s offer to help McCandless. The whole aim of his journey is to live in the wild, alone, because society taints a man’s life. If McCandless developed connections through the avenue of help, this would debunk his entire philosophy of obtaining the best possible life: experiences completely devoid of any preconceived notions society has set in place. Through his rejections, McCandless isolates himself and dies. If McCandless would have accepted his money, necessary items could have been purchased to guarantee a successful and safe experience while in the Alaskan bush. However, McCandless’s stubborn nature subscribed to the notions that one must be self-reliant in order to succeed.

When McCandless rejects Ronald Franz’s help and offer to adopt him, McCandless gives up the nonmaterial help and adoption in order to maintain his status of Alexander Supertramp—the self-reliant individual. Krakauer writes the dialogue: “So I asked Alex if I could adopt him, if he would be my grandson.” McCandless, uncomfortable with the request, dodged the question: ‘We will talk about it when I get back from Alaska, Ron”’ (55). Franz’s request to adopt McCandless would have helped replace the former family that McCandless left behind. But in rejecting Franz, he was able to avoid emotional baggage that he deemed unnecessary. Like his material possessions, emotional connections were commodities to McCandless. To travel knowing he had a connection with someone would cause that person to subconsciously travel with him—something McCandless would have despised. What he did not realize is that traveling alone, being completely devoid of emotional attachments, would be another factor that would help kill him. At the end of his life, one of his last journal entries has the state-
ment: “Happiness only real when shared” (189). Franz had spent many years alone because he was widowed. Interestingly, his offer of adoption foreshadowed McCandless’s future loneliness because he had lived life alone up until this point. The experiences shared between the two helped Franz realize the importance of human relations. McCandless, however, ignorantly rejected the chance of survival when he rejected Franz. This allowed McCandless to maintain self-reliance and avoid help that society offered.

McCandless also rejected Tracy—“society’s” help in supplying a means to have a love relationship. As a result, McCandless unwaveringly continues to attempt absolute self-reliance when he denies a possible intimate relationship with Tracy. Jan Burres commented on McCandless’s outlook on her: “He could not take her seriously” (Krakauer 44). By removing any type of importance to her character, McCandless rejects what she offers to help him achieve the “happy medium” that the American Dream offers him. She has potential to be a wife, but McCandless refuses to consider her because he is attempting to create his own imagined destiny: one of success through self-reliance. By rejecting Tracy, McCandless rejects society’s help in creating the “perfect American-style life.”

As McCandless turns down the offer of gear and money, he also rejects investing in the proper map of the area in which he will live, thus becoming ignorantly reliant on his own memory of the land in order to survive. Ironically, he does not survive because the minimalist map he possesses did not show a local Park Service cabin nearby and stocked with food. Krakauer examines this as he writes: “If McCandless has possessed a United States Geological Survey topographic map, it would have alerted him to the existence of a Park Service cabin on the upper Sushana River, six miles due south of the bus [where he died]” (196). McCandless’s absolute embodiment of self-reliance prevented him from acquiring adequate means for survival. The cabin that the map depicted contained all of the necessary food and supplies that would cure McCandless and prevent his death. His obsession about self-reliance completely removed the possibility of obtaining the help from society. The problem with self-reliance continuously proves fatal and supports the idea one must embody the “happy medium” in order to survive. Any other subscription to the two definitions of the American Dream is fatal.

McCandless rejects society’s help in order to expose two absolute aspects about society: physical and emotional baggage. David Gooblar argues that, “When an author purports to tell the truth, and that true story involves people other than himself, he takes it upon himself to expose others in ways of his choosing” (36). McCandless keeps an account of people he crosses paths with; however, he rejects each one.
because of the emotional and physical baggage each person offers. If McCandless accepted the help from society, he would undermine his life’s purpose: true life is only experienced through self-reliance. Being obsessed with experiencing life by himself, McCandless detaches from the “happy medium” the American-style dream offers, thus causing his own death. Although McCandless did not intentionally portray each individual negatively, he shows how relationships and material wealth are destructive to one’s life. Without both, McCandless dies. This supports the paradox most people grapple with: obsession over material wealth or self-reliance.

Nick Jans show us the danger of an obsession about self-reliance, one that we see throughout McCandless’s story, suggesting such an obsession is guaranteed to be fatal. Jans recalls, “His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scouts manual, is what killed him” (Krakauer 72). With a few tools gotten from other people, he would have had a better chance of surviving than relying on his own self to live. But it is simple and easy to say for an outsider source, such as Jans. However, few people realize the reason that McCandless refused the allow society to help him was because of the unnecessary baggage that came with the help. Once help was received, the other person began to embody expectations from McCandless—this was something that he truly despised. He always left people’s lives at the brink of the breakthrough moment—the moment that began a friendship between McCandless and the other person. McCandless admits to fleeing from his family and friends he met along the way: “McCandless was relieved that he has again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family” (55). Throughout Krakauer’s retelling of McCandless’s life, each time he buries his possessions, he metaphorically purges himself from the emotional baggage as well. His emotional baggage comes from receiving help from society because other humans provide necessary aspects in order to survive. Just as a baby can die due to lack of attention, McCandless dies of the same lack of attention.

As people, we are wired to rely on one another, something McCandless had trouble with, which meant that McCandless’ life ended because he subscribed to absolute self-reliance. Robert Solomon dissects Nietzsche’s idea that human relationships are a subconscious, collective nature in his essay “Nietzsche on Fatalism and ‘Free Will.’” According to Solomon: “Each of us individually has a particular nature that (whether actualized or not) cannot be altered” (63). McCandless’s particular nature seemed to crave another being to share life with, as we discover when McCandless writes his realization that happiness is real when it is shared. McCandless’s rejection of humans kept him moving
over time. As a result, in its absence, he began to realize the fulfillment
a relationship with another human gives. Solomon argues one cannot
change the natural nature born within one’s soul, which leads us to see
the validity behind McCandless’s conclusion about shared happiness.
Tragically, McCandless sought self-reliance to avoid being hurt in the
same way his original familial relations hurt him. He dies as a result of
his absolute rejection of society’s help.

Neither the amassing of wealth nor the purging of assets leads to
success, but rather it is the bonds we create with one another that make
for happiness. The desire of personal relations is an innate asset to have
within one’s life. McCandless removes all possessions that could lead
his to a commodified success; however, through denying society’s help,
he dies. Clearly, the only manner in which one can survive is to find the
“happy medium” between obsession with material wealth and obsession
of self-reliance. As we develop relationships, we recognize ourselves
and our baggage in others. When Wayne Westerberg comments on
McCandless’s demeanor, he mentions “gaps” in McCandless’s behavior,
“Alex was not a total space cadet or anything, do not get me wrong. But
there were gaps in his thinking” (Krakauer 63). The gaps that McCand-
less had proved to be the missing pieces he possessed as a result of the
missing personal bonds with other humans. Whether McCandless kept
his wealth or not, he would not have been able to survive as a result of
missing amassing connections with people. In order to survive, one
must achieve the “happy medium.” Contrary to what critics believe,
as Julie Levinson in her book The American Success Myth on Film claims,
“The function of the myth in American life is to encourage hope and
belief in the individual” (21). Despite McCandless’s failures, he believed
in success within and from his own individual self. This allowed him
to be self-reliant. However, through his unrelenting trust in himself, he
dies. In order to survive, he needed not the amassing of wealth, but the
accumulation of relations with others. This would have given him the
opportunity to obtain the “happy medium” in order to survive.

At the end of McCandless’s life, death results from his failure to
reach the “happy medium.” He rejects obsession with material wealth by
leaving his possessions behind; similarly, he refuses society’s attempt to
supply necessary means to survive while in the Alaskan bush. McCand-
less writes a final message on cardboard saying: “I have had a happy
life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!” (Krakauer
199). By accepting that his death is unavoidable, McCandless was able
to achieve his own definition of the “happy medium.” Solomon adopts
Nietzsche’s notions of fatalism when he writes: “Fatalism, strictly under-
stood, means that nothing could be other than it is” (63). McCandless
fully embodies this at the time of his death, because he understands
Solomon’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s definition to be true—noth-

Erin Mayo
The (Anti) American Dream

McCandless’s life explores what it takes to flourish in society. In order to survive, one must dismiss the absolute accumulation of wealth as well as the absolute rejection of society’s help. America claims to be the land of opportunity which entails the notion that one can obtain life according to his or her dreams. McCandless journeys west to Alaska in his attempt to recreate his life according to his new found standards. As he rejects society’s help, he misses the opportunities to acquire the necessities of survival in the Alaskan bush. Just as these commodities are unattainable at the time of McCandless’s death, so the American Dream is unattainable. When McCandless dies, it proves that the American Dream as a commodity can kills one’s life if embodied absolutely and obsessively.

Works Cited


Outlaw Identity and *Breaking Bad*
by Kaela McCarter

**Critical Preface**

**The Discovery of Self**

Life as depicted on television is completely consumed with clichéd topics of love, sexuality, and gender. I have often pondered what the adage “get a life” really means. There are constant advertisements on television and the internet that would suggest that to get a life means to be incredibly rich, extremely hot, and famous. The façade of getting a life is displayed everywhere, but there is almost no mention of real, every-
day lives, popular enough for everyday screening. College for the last four-plus years has meant consistent time spent in an institutionalized environment and working in order to survive. My own personal experience of living has been something that I have been able to cultivate. So this semester was very helpful in helping me sort through what “getting a life” truly means in terms of exiting out of college life into the adult world. Two texts help to provide a clear definition: Getting a Life and Intervention. These three texts relate that individual lives as a whole are not defined by the same rules because each individual life is lived through different circumstances. Some people indeed live commercial lives, are born rich and famous, but normally people survive through life with the bare minimum. Each character described in 4384 Senior Seminar navigated his or her personal definitions of life through the telling of their narrative. Each biography shared a different clip of their narrative and revealed the fundamental truth that there is no unified definition of life. Life is discovered and governed by each single-minded person, and to truly ask what is “getting a life” one must turn inward for answers.

The first few weeks of class were spent reading through Getting A Life: Everyday Uses Of Autobiography, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson. This text was filled with several diverse controversial subjects. The topics explored in this text gave voice to subjects that would normally be ignored by the dominant society. The biographies presented were from broad ranges of voices that possibly could not speak or hear, or had been victimized. I began to ask myself questions like, what defines a life with voices that do not fit the mode of dominant society, and, how does a life gain importance? The article titled: “What Kind Of Life Have I Got? Gender in The Life of an ‘Ordinary’ Woman,” by Susan Ostrow Weisser, describes a “sixty-year-old Italian American ‘housewife,’ mother of four grown children, and part-time worker in her husband’s small business” (252). Mrs. F was interviewed along with her family with the intended purpose to study the question, “What narrative rules and structures govern a self-made text about one’s own life. [And] how the act of constructing an identity takes place through narration” (250). The research group conducted a series of short interviews with Mrs. F and also asked her to submit a writing prompt addressing the narrative of her entire life. Before submitting her information for observation to the research group, Mrs. F revealed that she afraid that she would say the wrong thing. Mrs. F submitted her life to be scrutinized under a microscope to strangers and the conclusion provided by the research team is that Mrs. F is hiding a deep dark secret and that much of her life is overshadowed by her constant attention to her family/husband. The text does provide enough evidence to assert that Mrs. F clearly loves her family/husband very much, and that as a sixty-something-year-old woman, she is also very wholesome. What became clear
is that the research group fails to read Mrs. F’s narrative properly. The act of writing someone else’s story happens mentally all the time, like the stripping away of details to piece together plausible stories through individual lenses. The problem with constructing someone else’s life with individual frames is that this device limits the detail of the subject’s voice. Mrs. F’s life is full of active living, drama, and excitement, but in order to receive her narrative, the research group would have to surrender, to following her narrative through her rules. The research group made quick conclusions because they failed simply to listen to the brief pauses, (contradictions), and originality of her speech. Mrs. F tells her story to strangers and that would generally give them access to her private life, but instead, she forces the group to face their own prejudices. This section was insightful because it teaches one to destroy the need to profile people, and then decide that one knows a person because of a past situation with a similar person. In order to truly know anyone calls for a true desire to listen openly, without preconceived notions of already knowing a person. The nameless Mrs. F is a stand-in for the many people who are defined as having no life. These lives are not able to be Gogled, Twittered, or Facebooked. They have no opening that allows one to peer in their existence. The definition for “getting a life” is subjective. Collective frames mean we have stopped attempting to know people. We rely on the distant Facebook and Twitter to answer questions that would never be obtained to one-on-one contact.

After reading through Getting a Life, the next step is going through Intervention. Intervention is a show that reveals the disparity of humanity. The characters presented in this show are addicts. Through the viewing of this show the audience is able to get a peek into the lives of people who struggle with several addictions. The cast of Intervention did not resemble hard-core drug addicts, but instead appeared to have normal, healthy bodies. Intervention argued that one must not rely on past experiences with different narratives to assume superiority with other texts. Each member of the cast dealt with not only difficult drug addictions, but some of them also had serious emotional problems as well. Most of the cast had bright futures and describe their addiction as something that ate their lives, bit by bit. Intervention was very instrumental in expressing the anger, hurt, and fears shared by the addicted person and the family. Although it would appear that blame should be solely placed on the individual with the addiction the show was great in advising the consequences of an enabling family. I learned personally that most family members attempt to help their loved one by themselves thinking that they have the tools to coerce compliance to quitting to drugs, but I observed that many families actually participate in helping their loved one continue down the road of addiction. It is not up to the family to play savior and very important to seek outside help immediately.
Most characters presented in Intervention needed a therapist from the start of their addiction, but does talking actually help to solve addiction? Intervention and “What Kind Of Life Have I Got” were connected in multiple ways. Intervention like Getting a Life discussed topics that are typically ignored because it is generally an uncomfortable subject. Both texts helped me to draw upon the fact that as a collective we are quick to ignore certain groups because they make us uncomfortable. Generally, people say that religion, sexuality, and money are topics not proper to be discussed over dinner. In Getting a Life, the section titled “The Talking Mediated Talking Cure: Therapeutic Framing of Auto Biography in TV Talk Shows,” by Janice Peck, described the technique of discussing private problems in public spaces. This section narrowed this subject to television talk shows and the way in which different talk show hosts discuss difficult topics. The connection between Intervention and “The Talking Cure” can be combined because as “The Talking Cure” discusses the problem and Intervention delivered the actual event/result. I learned through the usage of both texts that talking about anything uncomfortable publicly is a phenomenon that has been sensationalized for ratings, not allowing the actual subject the space to truly find the much needed cure for their issue. Talking can only help a person if that individual is in an environment that is conducive for help. I personally observed through Intervention that talking can be therapeutic and is helpful for those who are not fortunate enough to have people around them who can talk to them about their issues.

In conclusion what I obtained from taking Senior 4384 will stay with me for the rest of my life. I learned overall that how you decide to find meaning for your life is completely governed by self. You can find inspiration in multiple places, but the only way to discover how to live a life is by simply participating in the process. Intervention revealed that some people may choose the dark road of addiction as their life, and others like Mrs. F that decides to raise a wholesome family. Despite the controversy of option on the narratives of their characters’ lives, both shows suggest that how you live is entirely subjective. At times your life can hurt other people, as in the narratives of Intervention, and for the sake of community you may decide to change. The key component is that the individual has to want to change because it is his or her narrative. How people find meaning in their lives is diverse for each person. It is imperative in your own personal journey for life that you do not stop another soul from enjoying his or her life. In Mrs. F’s case her story had to be taken like a puzzle that needed time and attention in order to find all the pieces. She was not a loud stereotype who could easily be drawn with generalizations, but a woman that had her own personality that was only uncovered through the act of listening. Throughout all the texts read in class one thing will stick, and that is

Kaela McCarter
that above all the glitz and glam signified in television, one has to know oneself. Each biography was instrumental in navigating through their narrative to represent the discovery of true selfhood. Selfhood is not meant to be found in television or the internet, but real joy begins when an individual is comfortable with who he or she is, whether gay, old, blind, deaf, crippled, black, white, or pregnant. It is your life.
A person must graduate from high school, go to college, find a decent career, and a long list of other outdated traditional expectations. There is no room for alternate attitudes, personalities, or individual choices. Each person is groomed to adhere to the same standards with the promise of securing a decent life. So with this fairytale mindset recommended, who would want to be outside of the norm? What causes a good guy to go against the grain? Walter White, a character from the hit television show *Breaking Bad*, is at the point in his life, like most stereotypical middle-aged men, when he is disappointed with what his narrative has produced. White is an extremely intelligent chemist who resolves an underpaid high school teacher. He has a pregnant wife, an outspoken disabled son, and two jobs that barely pay his bills. *Breaking Bad* presents White, a character who has consistently attempted to follow the rules of civilization and reaps no reward for his good behavior. After following this scripted narrative, White lacks confidence in himself and falls completely on his face in anger over feelings of inadequacy. *Breaking Bad* shows how White decides to build his self-esteem by revolting against doing what is typical, and transforms into a man who demands power and respect. White finds this spunk only after he metamorphoses into an unconventional, glorified drug dealer. I argue that *Breaking Bad* presents the untold stories of everyday men who have lived their lives according to the conditions standardized by civilization and feel as though they have never gotten a chance to live on their own terms. *Breaking Bad* communicates a message that good people like White turn bad because they are not able to live in a domesticated space. White only feels a sense of achievement from his life after he becomes immersed in the wilderness.
White desires to be the stereotypical “man” of his home. On the surface, he is a plain individual who has a wife named Skylar, and a son named Walter, Junior. But White’s life is anything but typical. Though he’s fifty, his young wife is pregnant with their second child, and his son is a disabled teenager. On top of all the other exterior pressures on White’s complicated life, he discovers he has lung cancer. For the first time he is forced to step back and take inventory of his life. *Breaking Bad* forces the audience not to focus just on White, but on his entire family as a way to expose the real issues that cause him to feel inadequate. His pregnant wife is clearly a lot younger than him and a very pushy woman. Skylar consistently talks to her husband as if he is their son, using her words to maneuver White to obey her commands. He does not align his identity with the typical patriarchal male. For years, he has tried his best to survive in a domesticated environment, taking menial jobs to make ends meet. He is employed at a school and a car wash in order to support his growing family. But White is miserable in his home life, and this is represented by the unbalanced power structure in his home. In order to keep the peace at his home, he steps to the side to allow his overbearing wife the space to run the house. This position of peace-maker destroys his chance to align with the stereotypically masculine male. His lack of control in his household is a consistent reminder of his failure to be a part of his supposed masculinity. White’s masculinity is also challenged when he receives the life altering news that he has lung cancer. This new set-back again makes his attempts to be domesticated challenging because his sickness cripples his identity further. From his perspective his inability to have a sense of control in his home and his sickness gives him a feminine identity. This emotional identity-crisis obliterates everything White formerly did to heighten his sense of masculinity. White’s overall relationship with health and Skylar is very tense. Skylar is like the stereotypical man, and she does not go out of her way to soothe his ego. White is not the man of the house but a boy fighting to gain back his rightful place as the head of the household/his life.

White fights to have a relationship with his son, but fails. White’s son has a debilitating disease: cerebral palsy. *Breaking Bad’s* opening scenes depict White Jr. as a young man fighting for independence. He struggles not to allow his health and physical appearance to remove him from a normal teenage life. White struggles to connect with his son; he tries to shape a relationship with his son, but White is uncertain how to go about building that relationship. Each time White fails at connecting with his son he is plagued with additional feelings of inadequacy. *Breaking Bad* shows that White’s failure at being a domesticated man is again visible in that he does not know how to help his son formulate his own masculinity. White is aware that his son wants to align himself with stereotypical modes of masculinity, too: he wants to be muscular, to have

*Kaela McCarter*
friends. But White’s son is not given a rite of passage from his father, since he has no idea how to teach his son tools that, being domesticated, he has never mastered. White Jr.’s attitude is very aggressive because he resents his father and despises himself. The two men are both without respect from the world. White Sr. is finally at his wit’s end because his home, a place of rest, has turned into a den of destruction: he is trapped inside his family and desperately desires to escape the reminders of his failures as a masculine man.

White’s job as a high school chemistry teacher does not fulfill his capitalistic desire: to be rich and therefore successful and powerful. White’s middle-class job is does not provide enough income to pay his medical expenses. His treatment alone costs twice what he makes in one year. Cancer compels White to make plans quickly about how he will gain freedom from his domestic prison. White trusts in the American dream: he attended a post-secondary school with a plan for doing much more with his life. Episode 5 of the first season reveals that White did not set out to become a chemistry teacher. In this episode, White and his wife go to an all-white party. The Whites unintentionally wear the wrong color to this party filled with professional adults. This party is obsessed with everything that White does not have possession of. Most of the people at this event are rich. Shelley E. Taylor and Marci Lobel discuss the theory behind why people compare themselves to others: the “theory of social comparison maintains that people need to have stable, accurate appraisals of themselves. The theory posits that people prefer to evaluate themselves using objective and nonsocial standards, but if such objective information is unavailable, then individuals will compare themselves using other people” (569). Lobel and Taylor detail that people generally look to others for a scale of how to judge themselves: there are other avenues that people can explore to rate themselves, but when all these things are not at hand, they look at other people to validate their lives. This theory is enacted on Breaking Bad in season 1. White is depicted looking to be validated by other people in the context of his inability to conform to the color schemes of the party; this indicates his failure to fit in. White is dressed in royal blue at an all white party, which represents masculinity, wealth, and strength. But he is embarrassed and hurt to find out that this venture to find his masculinity is not welcomed because it is very much a part of the wilderness. Breaking Bad presents Greg and Grecian, a married couple who have invited White and Skylar to the party. White is taken to be introduced by Greg to meet his friends. Once it is time to give gifts at this party, White is already filled with dejection. The gift is a reminder of how little White matters in a world where money speaks. He feels that his voice is muted by the manly men at the birthday gathering because they represent everything, all his failed ambitions. White’s broken pride
isolates him from conversation with other men at the party: he is slow
to speak, revealing that he has no idea how to converse with civilized
men. He does not make eye contact, either, suggesting his isolation
and his hurt pride. White walks with a double consciousness, assuming
that everyone is laughing at his failure to assimilate to the pattern of
masculinity. Greg attempts to welcome White into the club by inflating
White’s intelligence to his guests. But White is fixed where he is
entirely isolated from everything masculine, which includes a successful
business, wealth, and confidence. Richard Faulk writes that “Implicit
in Breaking Bad is an indictment of the cultural ethos of capitalism,
and its tendencies to commodify every aspect of life except family
relations and intimate love, and even then there is tautness between
doing well and doing good.” Faulk insists that American culture is run
by individuals who value money, riches, and fame over everything. He
does insist that the only exclusion is intimate love and family, which of
course is challenged in the television series, with White and his family.
Faulk’s interpretation of capitalistic ideology can be directed towards
the themes that bring White to shame.

White is incapable of governing his entire life by conventional stan-
dards because his identity is controlled by others. White is miserable
and looks over his life with regret. He cannot find his rightful place
anywhere, not with his wife, his son, his employment, or other men.
Nothing in White’s life secures his fulfillment. Breaking Bad suggests
that White finds no rest among or around other manly men because
he is by definition a barbarian. This word, at first look, is very harsh,
but after closer observation it becomes clear that White is a part of the
wilderness. When thoughts of the wilderness surface, one is reminded
of nature, desolation, and most importantly, freedom. Breaking Bad
presents White’s identity as one who does not know how to assimilate
to American domestic manhood. In Breaking Bad White is kept from
entering the world of middle-American culture because White is too
independent. Roderick Nash, author of “The American Wilderness,”
relates to being isolated because one is a part of the wilderness, and
that is a state common for people who refuse to soften their strong per-
sonalities. Nash states: “Those who came in contact with the American
wilderness reacted to it as individuals, never in fixed categories” (4).
In other words people like White who have a defiant, free identity are
unable to assume an air of patriarchal masculinity; if White were suc-
cessful at assimilation he would be able to fit inside of conventional
standards of manliness. Nash also suggests that people who have sub-
missive personalities are not isolated like White. His wilderness identity
keeps him from adapting to domesticated masculine sensibilities.

In season one, White decides to kill himself to gain freedom from
cancer, a crippling life sentence. White’s cancer is not the only prognosis

Kaela McCarter
Outlaw Identity and Breaking Bad

that is numbering his days. His wife does not respect him, his son does not make sense, and he has to have two jobs. White’s illness becomes secondary to the real problems surrounding his identity. Everything he has in his life has been urged on him, and daily he muddles through the narrative of a life he did not choose. White decides to take back control of his life by killing his identity. In season one, episode five (entitled “Gray Matter”), Skylar arranges a family meeting to coerce White into getting chemotherapy. The scene takes place in the small, cramped living room of White’s home. His wife, son, brother-in-law (Hank), and sister-in-law (Marie) are all waiting for him when he arrives home. Skylar sets up this intervention because White has just turned down ninety thousand dollars from Greg and Grecian because his health insurance will not cover any of his medical expenses for chemotherapy. White denies Grecian and Greg’s help because his pride will not allow him to receive any attachment to his failures. White loves his family, but refuses to leave them with debt, and also because “he would rather die soon as himself than be remembered as an invalid” (“Breaking”). White tells Skylar that his dignity is more important than treatment. White no longer wants to align himself with domesticity and makes the choice to die macho death. This decision is one that White hides before it is revealed, because he does not want to be swayed to make a different decision. It is suggested that in this scene he is clearly depressed and would rather die than face further cultural rejection. Death becomes a sign of glory, and this is asserted by Breaking Bad because this is the first time that White shows confidence in himself. Death is amplified to a romantic heroic gesture because he is disillusioned into believing that his death will bring him the glory he desires. He decides that he wants to become a martyr by sticking with his decision to be free from the pressures of domestic opinions. Skylar is not willing to listen to her husband because she believes he is not listening to reason. She decides that the best thing for him is for him to have treatment because she is afraid of having to raise two children alone. White and Skylar discuss his decision. White states: “What I want, need, is to have a choice. Skylar replies, “what does that mean?” White states: “Sometimes, I feel like I never make any of my own choices. . . . I mean [sighs] my entire life it seems I never . . . you know, had any real say about any of it. . . . with this last one, cancer, all I have left is how I choose to approach this” (“Gray” 36:04). White asserts himself, revealing that he would rather die that be forced to live in this miserable condition.

His first decision in the text of this show is monumental because this is the first time that he makes a choice boldly. His choice is very controversial and forces the audience to question the reasoning behind his decision. Is this pride? Or is this White finally speaking his mind in a life in which no one has ever asked him how he feels? It is not clear
automatically what motivates his initial decision not to receive chemotherapy, but it is suggested that White is ready to transform out a feminine sensibility where he feels inadequate into a man who demands change. He does not voice all his emotions to his family because it is painful to reveal everything that has kept him isolated. It would also force them to understand that they all have been culprits in the ultimate demise of his failing masculine identity. Philip Auger explicates the problems that hamper positive masculine identity: “The roles of social institutions such as education, law, and especially religion . . . all have a part in producing human dignity and self-worth. It is in the mythologies and ideologies these social institutions produce the foundations for definition and identity are created” (75). Auger argues that in conventional society all have a part in creating self-worth. Although Auger only lists a few examples of social institutions, White’s character suggests that there are quite a few power structures that define and shape a man’s perception of manhood. White’s decision is his denial of conventional means, and his official acceptance of the wilderness. His decision ultimately to die speaks volumes to making the conscious decision to end “It”: the control of his wife, his pointless career, and the necessity to make everyone else happy but himself. His decision to commit suicide is powerful because his approaching death forces the audience to look at everything that eats at his life. This episode becomes the power that propels White out of being a feminine man into one that takes control over his narrative.

White’s transformation is a metaphorical rebirth. He first emerges on Breaking Bad as a man who “took up cooking meth to build a nest egg and, later on, to pay his medical bills” (Nussbaum, “My”). White’s ambition to cook meth appear pure, but he makes this decision as a means to transform into a masculine subject. He is struggling to provide a reasonable means for his family to survive and to be fulfilled. Initially White decides to not receive chemotherapy, but changes his mind because he finds a way to live freely. White’s decision to do chemotherapy appears as if he is surrendering to domesticity, but White decides to create Heisenberg, an avatar that will allow him to travel in and out of domesticated sensibilities, to escape away from the strict rules of popular culture, and also as an unconventional avenue to build his confidence. Heisenberg is everything that White desires to become. By transforming into Heisenberg, White is able to bury the former man who is without fulfillment. The birth of Heisenberg is essentially White’s first step into breaking his lack of confidence, impoverishment, and living with a crippled sense of self.

White asserts his dominance in the criminal underworld. After Heisenberg is birthed White takes a minute to understand his new self. He does not wake up in any given episode thinking that he wants to be a drug dealer, but his desire to change his life by his own means propels

Kaela McCarter
him into his new identity. He has to set up the functions of his new identity first. Entering into the unknown world of drug and crime is very foreign to White's sensibility, but his avatar Heisenberg soon finds his place. In order to submerge into his new character fully, he first creates his borders. He has to find allies, which results in his meeting with Jessie Pickman. White does everything in his power to keep his family out of his separate life. For instance, he has two cell phones to keep his personal and business call separate. His lives almost come to an end in season 1 when his Skylar asks her husband why he has two separate phones. Like a man who has taken with another lover, White concocts an elaborate lie to keep his wife clueless to his alternate life. Nichole Barnter discusses the life that White builds to protect himself: “White’s entire existence has become a battle against impurities and imperfections, using his book smarts and, by now, impressive street smarts to take the chaos that is his life and massage it into something approaching a solution. Something where all the elements fall into place.” Barnter describes White as a self-made man, given how he uses the ideas of middle-American culture to build his life. Barnter also discusses how White’s impurities and imperfections now hold him in bondage given how he uses negative personality traits to build his life. His life slowly destroys whatever bond he had with his family, already damaged by his motivation to keep his family outside of his life. White chooses to lie to his family and also fears the scrutiny of the outside world. Although he has always been outside of popular culture, he stills dreads rejection. His deception of his family is an outward expression of his new persona as a self-centered man. Deep down, he is aware that he has no real justification for his actions. Melanie McFarland notes that he quickly “transforms from the squelched worker bee into a man capable of numerous crimes, who tenderly holds his pregnant wife’s hand one moment before quietly hissing at her to stop bothering him.” White has no problem learning the dark trade of drugs and crime and grows from an individual who just desires to be masculine by his own definition into a man who kills in order to gain respect. White’s avatar, Heisenberg, positions himself as leader and quickly learns the rules of his new world and thus White fully submerges his identity into a wilderness mentality. Heisenberg’s persona is fearless and able to muster any skills necessary to get a job completed: his first act of power is demonstrated as he walks into the house of his oppressor to destroy him. It is clear in this scene that White completely changes into Heisenberg because nothing about his former personality is traceable.

White’s motivation for entering into his new life are at first simple, to be his own man. Entering into the unknown world of drug and crime is very foreign to White’s avatar, Heisenberg. In order to fully submerge into his new character he first creates his borders. He has
to find allies, which results in his relationship with Jessie, who ironically teaches Heisenberg how to make his new identity authentic. Jessie slowly walks White into the formerly unknown world of crime, drugs, and death, which means that Heisenberg and Jessie’s relationship is very toxic. White as Heisenberg adopts his new self with the power structure granting him leadership. Heisenberg sets up the rules in his new world and demands that others follow his lead; for instance, he instructs Jessie about what he needs in order for him to actually create the product. Hinesburg’s interaction with Jessie helps White to fulfill the paternal role that he is unable to with White, Jr. White as Heisenberg develops strategies about how to be a father figure. To become a father to Jessie, White must first win his respect, respect also being an overall goal that he doesn’t get with his wife and son. White is able to win Jessie’s respect as he submerges into Heisenberg by teaching Jessie how to cook meth correctly. Jessie assumes he knows how to cook meth, but White is an extremely intelligent chemist, and as Heisenberg takes shape, he is able to turn his intelligence into a device that helps to authenticate his new identity. Jessie is anxious to be just like Heisenberg. White takes his new love of respect further by sharing his talent for proper cooking skills with everyone. In season 1 of Breaking Bad, he is at the local store searching for items to fix a broken water pipe in his home. White happens to notice a young man who apparently is looking for items to use to cook methamphetamine. White instantly springs to life, wanting to teach the young guy how to cook. He attempts to explain how to cook meth and, frightened, the young boy runs away. White takes his time to allow his alternative identity to be discovered while trying to connect with the young man. The fact that he tries to connect suggests that he now is confident enough in his skin to share his knowledge. White destroys the man who feels like he lacks masculinity and then wants to parade his new identity. 

White stops at nothing to gain power as Heisenberg. White’s enjoys his new-found respect from Heisenberg, but seeks ways to earn power. Breaking Bad suggests that as he emerges into his new self, he enjoys his ability to make money, but desires more. As Heisenberg, he wants power and stops and nothing to get it. Power for many is more powerful than a drug. By the second season, White has forced his way into power by going to the biggest dealer on the block and declaring war. He accomplishes power as Heisenberg by blowing up the office of Teeko and demanding two hundred thousand dollars. Teeko, a well-known drug dealer, steals Heisenberg’s drugs, but he, desperate to prove himself and regain his stolen masculinity, fights Teeko with his mind. Heisenberg creates a bomb that clearly comes from his years’ experience as a chemistry teacher. It is suggested that White is able to find respect through the avatar of Heisenberg because he does not opt to

*Kaela McCarter*
Outlaw Identity and Breaking Bad

get a gun or a common tool to fight Teeko. He uses his own intellect to gain power from his enemny.

White is further fulfilled by allowing his avatar Heisenberg the freedom to control his entire life. As a secondary role in White’s identity, Heisenberg begins to fade as White steadily immerses his identity in Heisenberg's. White begins to feel that he is a patriarchal male in his home because he can finally afford to pay all his bills fully. Without his new occupation as a meth chemist, his chemotherapy is impossible, but as a drug cultivator White is able to pay the doctor bill. He swells with pride because he can at last pay his medical bills without having to ask anyone for a handout. He is overjoyed that he is free from the control of the capitalist system, no longer worrying about anything, and this freedom is felt in his home. White’s freedom affects how he treats Skylar. Although Skylar is a stay-at-home mom, she has previously assumed dominance in her home. White took himself out of his wife’s hands, consistently leaving in order to produce methamphetamine. Although White loves Skylar, he does not show romantic love, preferring sex: his new-found masculinity whets his sexual appetite. White’s pride over finally gaining dominance in his home and his identity is seen as White aggressively demands sexual intercourse. His confidence is obvious as his wife tries to decipher what has changed about her husband. Money is a sign for confidence, power, and a chance to finally be fulfilled as a manly man.

White shelters his identity. By season two, he creates a new identity by renaming his former self. White’s transformation into Heisenberg aids him in becoming a father, wealthy, and powerful. Each item White lacks is gained through the deviant character of Heisenberg. Through season two, the audience is able to grasp how a person is able to cover his deviant identity. White ultimately reveals that one cannot become deviant through honesty and integrity; he is only able to hide through deception. His avatar not only aids him with new personality traits and power, but also helps him keep his new life a secret. James Meeks discusses the challenges of White’s character stating: “the challenge of a part within a part, an actor playing a man who is constantly forced to be an actor in order to preserve what he has, up to and including his life.” In other words in order to be free from his family, friends, or anything surrounding his life, he must perform his dominant personality. He has to pretend that he is still the loving, devoted, hard-working man that he is known as by everyone else. It is imperative in White’s mind to keep his new identity a secret from his family. So the name Heisenberg also assures that his family will never come into contact with his new identity.

White allows the persona of Heisenberg to take over his life completely. The suicide of White’s feminine secondary personality is completely murdered. He is fulfilled, but has to play two roles in his life in order to pacify everyone. His family is aware that there is a change in
his personality but is unable to pinpoint what has changed. He makes no real effort to give his family any evidence of his new occupation as drug dealer; because he is able to deceive his family, he is further seen as a changed man by his wilderness experience. As his avatar, Heisenberg can control the very essence of White’s life. He does not do anything to resist the negative consequences of his actions. White’s avatar becomes confident and justified in all his actions. White is so lost in his performance as Heisenberg he becomes disillusioned, his murders, drug connections, and lies becoming more fallacious as he exercises his new avatar’s strength. White states that because he does not want to leave his family with a great deal of debt, he must cook meth. White is disillusioned by stereotypical masculinity and decides that being the ultimate caretaker and provider of his home is the most important thing. Although White is fulfilled by his alternate identity, he has convinced himself into believing his lie. Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu state that: “‘Breaking Bad,’ . . . critique[s] the myth of the self-made man. The anti-heroes imagine they are heroes, but the moral universe exposes this illusion. . . . White is none of these things. White grows ugly. White is not funny. . . . White lies to others, and to himself. He justifies his tyranny endlessly, refusing to repent.” Kuo and Wu, in other words, state that Breaking Bad exposes the truth about White’s identity. Being inside civilization leads him to an empty meaningless life, but his exploration into Heisenburg’s lifestyle reveals that he is not a hero. White’s dark journey into the drug cartel disillusions him and deceives everyone that he loves, including himself. White believes that he is a hero because he can put food on his family’s plate and pay for his medical bills. His disillusionment does not allow him to perceive that power and position are the only tools needed to make him happy. His inability to see himself forces the audience to wonder if White is a better man because of his choice to rewrite his story. White’s morality does not judge his hostile actions. He believes that it is acceptable to kill people who infringe on his power and success.

Heisenberg corrupts White and changes his personality into a gruesome, nasty, and self-absorbed tyrant. White’s evolution does not help his relationships with his family members, nor does it aid him in enjoying his life openly. White must hide his alternative identity and perform for his family members. He does receive more money, but this does not heal the other issues that he lacks in his life, which becomes a disaster because there is nothing honorable about his assumed masculinity. He must fully step down into the darkness of the wilderness and so he lies, murders, and becomes detached from his family members. He slowly evolves from perceiving Heisenberg as just his secondary personality, and allows the avatar to take over his mind completely. Nussbaum describes the disparity in White’s personality, stating: “White has made

Kaela McCarter
far less justifiable choices, each one changing him, with a throb of arrogance here, a swell of egotism there” (“Child’s). The author says that White chooses to be bad, believing that his actions are justifiable because he has terminal cancer. He makes excuses for his poor behavior, never thinking that he takes action just because he desires to live in the wilderness. To face that truth would mean looking in the mirror and truly seeing his ugly reflection.

*Breaking Bad* suggests through White’s character that performing two roles in life is impossible. White lacks self-confidence in the civilized world, and seeks acceptance by cultivating his avatar, Heisenberg. White attempts to keep both of his lives separate and, for period of time, he is successful. Eventually White’s life begins to unravel and he slowly becomes a distorted, stereotypical image of masculinity. His is an example of a self-made man, but White breaks laws, hearts, and relationships in order to discover false confidence. He decides to destroy his good morally sound personality completely in order to adopt Heisenberg completely. White’s narrative is disturbing because it reveals that conventional society does not embrace every man. The American Dream in this text becomes only an image that is not available until White turns to crime. His new life requires that he lies, murders, and embraces the wilderness entirely. *Breaking Bad* is a show that critiques the capitalist, conventional standard that defines civilized men. The desire to be respected lures White into a life that gives him his acknowledgment as a man, and robs him of a narrative free from performativity.

**Works Cited**


“A prayer for the unknown soldier”: Mass Media’s Influence on African American Mourning and the Canonization of Black Martyrs in the African American Community

by Stephen Foster Smith

Critical Preface

Holding Back the Years

Although Simply Red’s “Holding Back the Years” should not play while anyone reads this, its nostalgic vibes definitely fit the language of this piece. Looking back over my journey as an undergraduate, I honestly would have never guessed that I would be writing numerous drafts of ten-to-twenty page papers, diagramming sentences, and discussing postmodernism at various hours of the day, all with a smile. Truthfully,
I thought I was going to end my collegiate career embarking on some world tour while playing the clarinet and proving to everyone that there was no need to compare me to SpongeBob SquarePants’s archenemy, Squidward Tentacles, or the shadow on the Zataran’s box. It all changed when I stepped into my 1102 class at Fort Valley State University—I attended several universities. There, I met a professor whose name I cannot recall, but I remember why I remember her, exactly. Her makeup, for one, was always pale, and her style, too, included all black everything, but I remember why I remember her: She introduced me to a magnificent woman, Flannery O’Connor. “A Good Man is Hard to Find” was my first taste of what I consider “good” literature, and after my encounter with the Misfit I was starving for more good literature.

Although there are many words in the English language that deserve to accompany this critical preface, I doubt that I can figure out the correct order and choice of language to convey my true thoughts, but my best is worth the greatest try. While I attended what is now Point University, I encountered my second landmark literature professor. He looked older than age would allow me to count, but he was as electric as a teenager, and I remember why I remember him. It was in his British literature class that I learned what “gothic” truly was. No, no girls in ghastly black eyeliner and lipstick, no grunge metal played in the background of any lecture, but reading my work for the first time surely fit the genre that includes frights by ghouls. It was in this class that my love for literature truly began to grow. I learned that it was fine to question if Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were, in fact, two different people. Also, I learned that reading quizzes were more than just vocabulary and chapter headings, but I vividly remember understanding that language exists for a reason and that I had the power to make it work for me. This professor—who, again, I have no idea as to what his name is—made me invest time figuring out the right word to set off an entire argument. In this class, I also figured out that there is power in punctuation, and, in a way, it allows for others never to see you sweat. From this class, though, I would embark on a journey that would change my life forever.

I planned to attend the University of West Georgia during the final months of my senior year, but I never actually got there until the fall of 2011. During this time, I, again, tried to be a mass communications major until I realized I hated it, so I chose English because I was craving something I had no clue about. My first class, World Literature-Honors with Dr. Pearson, proved to be the wake-up call I needed in order to succeed as a real literature student. In fact, Dr. Pearson fed me the roughest criticism yet, but made me improve the consistency of my writing and exposed me to the Greek argument—and to “so what?” Nevertheless, it was in this class that I began to understand what truly made a story work, and what pushes a story past the point of understanding to where

Stephen Foster Smith
one actually rereads it plenty to understand it all. I began to gobble up and destroy every single novel I read and they became a sort of sustenance that I did not want to go without. Specifically, Women’s Literature with Professor Amanda Campbell agitated the right chords within me, because it was in that class that I learned that I was not some horrible mess of a student like I had once been told, but that I had potential and a lot of it. The novels in her class exposed me to various genres and opened my eyes to the joys of women’s literature. I learned that Native Americans have a wonderful and magical history surrounding their culture, along with a look into the life of Appalachian women who work just as hard as their men do; what was to come proved better than I thought it could ever be.

I owe much to Professor McFarland who told me, when I began to feel as if I would never improve as a writer, that there would always, at least, four people who despise your work for every one person who says he or she enjoys it. Whether or not this figure was arbitrary, it surely inspired me to continue and try harder. This lesson, later, provided me with the encouragement I needed to participate in the undergraduate conference at the university. Coming from times where I had no clue if I would make it to the next semester in my collegiate career, participating in the undergraduate conference became a mile marker for me as I started to become serious about literature. Dr. Insenga improved my eye for detail in a conversation that included the word “tease” numerous times and her relentlessly making certain that I understood how to improve weak areas—for that I am truly grateful. Dr. Erben introduced me to early American literature and how to have a less painful experience with it once you figure out what interests you in it. Grammar with Professor McFarland truly inspired me to get serious with literature and figure out how to make writing bend at command with the control of punctuation, word choice, and order. With the help of Dr. Miller, also, I would not have become extremely interested in gender and sexuality studies or the genre of satire. I never knew what it was or what it meant in literary terms until her curriculum showed me clear examples of it, and Dr. Miller allowed me to take her three times in a row, which I am still absolutely grateful for today.

Largely, however, I owe the final portion of my collegiate career to four professors in particular: Dr. Boyd, Dr. Masters, Dr. Crafton, and Dr. Hipchen. I remember signing up for the Toni Morrison course not quite knowing what to expect other than to read Beloved, and to make my best friend jealous because I was taking a class on our favorite author. The class, however, must be one of the most important classes I took the University of West Georgia because after and during that class I became completely sold on the thought of being a writer of and on African American literature. Truthfully, I never wanted to write about

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
the literature and history of my race because I felt like living it was knowing it, but with the help of Morrison, Dr. Masters, Dr. Boyd, and Dr. Hipchen I found the key to dispelling the thought. Dr. Boyd truly opened my eyes to African American literature, and that it was more than August Wilson and Langston Hughes. After spending the semesters with those four, I was absolutely ready for all that was in store for me, and taking Dr. Lisa Crafton twice a day was fine as well. Dr. Crafton encouraged me to dig so deep within my mind that I remember, during a nap at my laptop, I dreamt I had coffee with her and what I would like to think was William Blake, but we all said nothing—we just kept digging and digging until we had, well, no more mind. Dr. Crafton also made me expand my horizons by encouraging me to become an editor of LURe. It was here that I realized literature could be a real business, and that language, in itself, was a very powerful tool worthy of battle against any type of foe.

In my last semester, however, I remember entering in to Senior Seminar unaware and completely off-guard. Coming to such a point in my major was a shock to me, and throughout the months prior, I had no clue about how the end would look because my mind would not allow me to hypothesize about it. No matter how much encouragement my professors gave me, I could not break down the barrier between my personal issues and my education, except when I stepped in to Dr. Hipchen’s classroom. The subject matter, “Getting a Life,” became appropriate in my situation because I truly wanted to know if life experience had a science behind it, and, indeed, it does. Dr. Hipchen taught me how to push past the grime and guck of whatever personal struggle is plaguing me and write, just write. I remember becoming so interested in her class that I wanted to go every day. It was the first time I had the opportunity to exist an environment that was comfortable, intellectually challenging, and, seemingly, just for me. Dr. Hipchen’s class helped me understand how to break down theory and apply it to every morsel of any text you read, and what attached me to the class was her ability to make everything I did truly work just for me. With all of my professors, there is so much I could rant and rave about, but that would be book full of mushy, lovey-dovey sentences that Nicholas Sparks would not even read. Truthfully and seriously, what I mean is that I came from a place where finishing the first semester was a gamble, so making it into my final semester is a surreal event in my life. No, my grades have not always been good, and I do not always have the drive to go above and beyond, but I love what I do now and I appreciate all I learned on the way here. Now I understand that pain truly equals gain.

If there had to be one overarching lesson learned in my five years of undergraduate studies, I could say, by default, it was the cure for the common comma splice, sentence fragment, word control, content
selection, page control, citations, titles, formatting, how to really read literature and poetry, Shakespeare (you must write his name alone), genres, authors, eras and ages of literature, but it will always be this: Persistence and resiliency is the key in all areas of life. Without a doubt, the most critical portion of my undergraduate experience in English rests in the personal achievements in my life. I will, without a doubt, use every bit of every lesson learned as an English major at the University of West Georgia every step of the way in my graduate studies.

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
In a recent article published by the Huffington Post, columnist Ron Dicker claimed that Mother Teresa’s “Humanitarian image” was a “myth” and that the belief of her saintly nature was, and still is, baseless. The article, chock full of speculation regarding Mother Teresa’s character and holy dedication, quotes the research of Serge Larivée, in which he states that although “the nun had 517 missions in 100 countries at the time of her death… the majority of patients were not cared for properly and many were left to die.” Questioning the personality and works of Mother Teresa began shortly after her death, prefacing the Vatican’s talks of canonization. Although speculation regarding Mother Teresa and her posthumous road to sainthood began more than a decade ago, it seems, presently, as though the mixing of mass media and death are creating a strange attraction to the tragedy of Mother Teresa’s death itself. While no one may have a specific interest in the actual moment of Mother Teresa’s death, the world—the Catholic Church, in particular—seems constantly to exhume and torture her body through discounting and re-examining her work; Catholic culture continues to resurrect Mother Teresa and repeatedly murder her in order to quicken her path to sainthood, or so it appears. To many, it is no mystery as to what attributes contribute to a saintly state of being: undoubted and rigid devotion to Catholicism, selflessness, and an uninterrupted willingness to sacrifice oneself for God and his will. So, as it seems, Catholicism cuts its followers a deal, in that if its devotees live their lives on the fringes and in the folds of the world, walking the earth detached from secular influence, divine monarchical status is available but only after death and wide-spread publicity. Well, what if canonization was immediate? What

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
if sainthood was so close that within days or even minutes after death one could become immortalized and a prized brooch on the lapel of their native culture? All choices make for a nice and attractive package, but what if this immediate canonization required murder?

In current culture, whenever a death—specifically, a murder—rocks national headlines, a widespread and overt mourning commences. In most cases, the murder is local and those who bear witness to the event either live within the victim’s community or are relatives of the victim and usually openly grieve. Recognizing that local murders can spark mass grieving, when a national mourning begins, the question becomes: who actually possesses the right to mourn over the victim? Moreover, the importance lies in where the permission to mourn unknown victims publicly comes from—mass media. The publicizing of death through social networks and mass media circuits allows for random members of the affected culture to participate in grieving over a loss, more often than not, unrelated in any way to the griever. Mass mourning grows stronger when the victim is an individual such as a child, a woman, or a minority, and when that type of person becomes the underserving victim, the large-scale mourning becomes a cross-cultural sensation that can transform into mass activism. The media takes no responsibility for this effect, and, in fact, it has no need to; its subscribers are chiefly responsible for the conversion of mass mourning into mass activism. In America, specifically, a quiet need for activism always lurks beneath the surface and the need derives from a big yet simple fear far down within each of us.

For Americans, believing wholeheartedly in America as an indestructible powerhouse, the apprehension of its status becoming subverted creates anxiety and fear deep inside of Americans and an even greater one deep inside of its minorities as well. The argument, then, shifts towards a critical investigation determining, presently, which culture in America seems to live silently with the most social anxiety—African Americans. Largely, anxiety within the African American culture stems from the collective trauma the race lives with due to the collective memory of slavery and the struggle for civil rights. This collective struggle is a product of what Jerome H. Schiele calls “the persistent albatross of oppression” (803). Such a monster lurking beneath the American historical surface causes the African American community to hold tight to the collective memory embedded in the minds of many, and with the albatross of oppression persisting to dismantle any type of comfort within the community, an acute anxiety always nips at the heels of African Americans. The anxiety involves, at least, two fears: the return of blatant racial injustice (such as Jim Crow laws and segregation) and the return of slavery in its overt and authentic form (or a form less severe but identical in its function). As a result of these fears, the race always

Stephen Foster Smith
needs some form of a reminder that these events happened, and that whether or not racial injustice is public or secret, it still flows within the veins of America. These reminders usually involve the murders of African Americans that, in turn, cause the African American community to elevate the victims to a communal heaven through a process resembling canonization. In this communal heaven, there are two types of holy figures: Black Christs and Black martyrs or saints. Black Christ figures are those in the public sphere openly fighting for, representing, and uplifting the African American community. Black martyrs and saints, different from Christ figures, are local individuals who die and go through a process of communal canonization. On the surface, the process seems simple: these figures, unknown to the public, die and through attention from mass media, the African American community sensationalizes their deaths, canonizes these individuals, and uses the figure(s) to remind the race of racial injustice and assuage the collective trauma simultaneously.

Meshing sainthood with the culture of the African American community produces an investigation of the actual process of immortalization and canonization within the community, and becomes perfect fodder for how the community makes two distinctions in the choosing of Black saints and Black Christs. Why the community chooses constantly to grab hold of unknown African Americans and elevate them as messiahs and saints becomes the question to answer, but before discovering the reason for this type of cultural process, we must being the investigation of the steps and procedures in canonizing African Americans that begs for explanation. Social media today plays an extremely important part in Black canonization, alongside the trauma and the history of the African American community. Black saints never rest within the community, and their lives become, ironically, true folklore as their stories become part of the large mural of African American history continuously painted by the canonization of more Black saints and the crowning of Black Christ figures. Ultimately, after combining collective history, narrative, and trauma into an overarching cultural history, African Americans canonize and crucify worthy individuals and immortalize their stories in order to glue their histories to the present African American experience, constantly writing and rewriting selves that live, die, and resurrect forever in a never-ending history.

While discussing this cultural phenomenon, it is important to look to cultural works hinting at or underlining the exercise of Black canonization. In “The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance, and Change” Stephen Reicher posits that “the social identity tradition is based on an instance that human social action needs to be understood,” (921) and while studying the role of social identity in mass mourning within the African American community, contextualizing mourning "A prayer for the unknown soldier"
puts the investigation into a clear light. Literature, especially, works at this process of African American social identity tradition and canonization. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* boasts a wonderful and well-crafted example of Black cultural canonization with much truth in its fictional representation. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* contextualizes the power vested in African Americans to immortalize individuals who unknowingly die for the cause of uplifting and representing the race. Take Tod Clifton for instance: he is the novel’s young and fiery bad-boy moving within Harlem alongside the Brotherhood and fighting for the state of his community. When introduced in the novel, Clifton’s description prematurely hails him as a God-like figure, telling of his “easy Negro stride” and of an occasional “pleasurable sigh” women make at his appearance (363). More importantly, what becomes critical lives within the portion of Clifton’s physicality and aesthetics: “he possessed the chiseled, black-marble features sometimes found on statues in northern museums” (363). The nameless narrator talks of Tod Clifton as a type of statue immortalized in museums; moreover, this language foreshadows Clifton’s position in the fictional Harlem community as immortal and saintly.

Aside from the valiant nature of Clifton, his life truly has no purpose until he dies, and, here, his life becomes important because others gain the opportunity to shape and mold it and even live it themselves. When Clifton dies at the hands of New York City policemen, the nameless narrator comes to a realization that Clifton honed the skill of jumping in and out time—“plunging,” rather, after he sees Clifton peddling Sambo dolls on a street corner: “It was as though he had chosen . . . to fall outside of *history*” (434). Clifton unlocks a secret the narrator searches for the entire novel: the chance to take a plunge outside of history. This “plunge” the narrator speaks of happens when one decides to live outside the boundaries history outlines for its inhabitants. Clifton’s choice to leave the Brotherhood, sell Sambo dolls, and rebel against the police all lead to his untimely demise; however, for those still living, Clifton’s choices meant that he decided to live life not just on the outskirts of society, but in an incalculable void. Clifton plunges outside of history and no longer has a place in society or makes a place for himself in it; Clifton simply exists in a void just beyond the edge of history. Abiding life in the space where history ceases to record, Clifton gains the chance to construct a Self. Although this Self never lives within the architecture of the novel, this “Self” becomes the reward for plunging outside of history. Clifton’s choice may seem like a brave and thoughtful one—as much of an enigma as the choice truly is—but once he dies, his culture works to resurrect him, reconstruct him, memorialize him, and immortalize the Clifton *they* know and the works he did for *them*, not the self he constructed outside of society.
Following Clifton’s death, the narrator organizes a wonderful and lavish funeral full of pomp and circumstance. The scenes during Clifton’s dramatic funeral reflect the mass mourning common within the African American community following a death of one of its members. It seems as though spectators and participants in the funeral work to usher Clifton right into heaven themselves: “They bore him high and they bore him proudly and there was an angry sadness in their eyes” (451). The processional, more like a parade, assists the carrying of Clifton’s body all the way to the park where the actual funeral happens: “It was a slow procession and the band played sad, romantic, military marches. And when the band was silent the drum corps beat the time on drums with muffled heads” (450). The sad, celebratory funeral service for Clifton becomes a holiday as members of his community, filled to the brim with angst and exhaustion, ransack their Harlem neighborhood in his honor. While witnessing members of Ellison’s Harlem raid local businesses in honor of Clifton, avenging his death, thinking of him as a saint or a messiah within Ellison’s Harlem becomes problematic because of the resulting racial violence, even more disastrous than before. That these individuals in Harlem believe in Clifton as a savior figure makes the reader realize that the community now controls Clifton’s life and makes it work for their sake. Clifton’s treatment is cruel and unusual; misinterpreting his death as a fight against an oppressive superpower instead of an actual run from one—the community nearly relishes his demise. This cruel act of misinterpretation allows for his immortalization and the use of his life in a redemptory format: “in [this] case, cruelty is seen as a device to defy a trend toward naturalization and defeat, a direct challenge to the force of history and time itself” (Martel 202). In trying to defy defeat, then, the community violently reacts as a way of subverting power and forcing collective memory on itself. This fictional Harlem echoes a recent happening within America and its effects within the African American community: the death of Trayvon Martin. The community’s reaction to Clifton’s death resembles the reaction of many following the murder of Trayvon Martin.

In the days after Martin’s murder, large social campaigns began and much chaos erupted on social networks. Most famously, the social campaign “Justice for Trayvon Martin Foundation,” formed by Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, Trayvon’s parents, was launched in order to “pursue justice on behalf of Trayvon Benjamin Martin” (JusticeTM). The cause for the whirlwind of press mainly came from the high activity on social networks following the incident, which created more space for the discussion of Martin’s murder to take place and fuel social efforts like the Justice for Trayvon Martin Foundation. Importantly, the number of ways in which Americans mourned Martin’s death became quite interesting. Certain posts on social networks such as Twitter and

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
Facebook involved statements resembling: “I miss Trayvon and I didn’t even know him.” Even trending topics, on Twitter, involved nothing but language surrounding the event: “Zimmerman,” “Trayvon Martin,” and “#Justice4Trayvon” appeared numerous times as members of social media sites wondered if there was justice for Martin. Yet, the mourning and outrage does not stop with regular social networkers; specifically, African Americans involved in the murder of Martin became agitated as his murder seemed to go nowhere in Florida’s judicial system. One African American user appeared, tweeted about the swelling situation: “Why is it the federal government has to become involved for blacks to get justice in the South?? . . . you think we would have evolved more.” The user, _Victorious_One, voices her opinion—she blatantly feels as though justice for Blacks is unattainable in the South, and thereby reminds us that certain members of the African American community use the murders of its members to remind others of the painful Southern history surrounding African Americans.

Largely, mass mourning through displays of public media outlines the “nature of social networks as well as their impact on participation” (Passy and Giugni 124). Mainly, what seems to spark the communal grieving of a person by strangers comes from the esoteric understanding of race and the lure of participating in the large-scale agitation surrounding a death—in this case, Martin’s death. This agitation elevates Martin to a Black saint, basically, overnight. In the case of Martin, individuals in social networks and media chains transformed his death into a national tragedy, using social networks as the vehicle driving the story into a sensitive place within the African American community. Florence Passy and Marco Giugni state that “not only do networks form the social environment on the basis of which individuals make their choices in the short run, they also affect in the long run the cognitive parameters to . . . participating in a social movement or abstaining from doing so” (124) and, quite correctly, the influence of social networks on the aftermath of Martin’s death sparked minor investigations of self-defense laws in various states. The largest social network effort surrounding this issue began on Twitter, with the trending topic “#STOPZIMMERMAN”; this effort brought attention to Florida’s judicial system, started discussions on cross-cultural racial profiling, and, ultimately, revived conversations on racial injustice against African Americans. One might think Martin became a Black Christ figure, but since Martin never openly fought for equal treatment and civil rights within the African American community, his status as a Black saint is truer and more evident. People began to wear hoodies in “honor” of Martin, such as Democratic Representative Bobby Rush, of Illinois, who “was escorted off the House Floor . . . after donning a hoodie and sunglasses in honor of slain teenager Trayvon Martin” (Madison).
hoodie hysteria became one of the most prominent symbols during the period of mourning for Martin and, much like the common all-Black attire of a funeral, individuals everywhere dressed in hoodies as a way of attending a funeral for Martin.

Yet, even given these fashionable ways to mourn, the dead Martin really acts with the same cruelty exhibited by Clifton in *Invisible Man*. Although physically Martin cannot be abusive to the public, his dead existence acts abusively in reaction to the way his culture treats him. Underneath the mourning and reverence surrounding Martin’s death, there is a slight cruelty in the only way he can react to the cultural activity: being silent, immobile, and shut-off. Martin cannot speak, but African American culture speaks and is still speaking for him; moreover, because Martin is not speaking back or out or for the African American community, it seems as though he has “apparent indifference to human suffering” (Martel 206). More than likely, that fact is false in reference to Martin, but through the way media and culture mourns him, his inability to speak for himself *about* himself creates the illusion of a Self that cares nothing about the people it comes into contact with. Martin was immediately brought to a saintly status within the African American community even before the crime became a fleshed out, concrete narrative within the media. The point here is that Martin’s death created an effect proving that his body may be physically buried, but for the African American community, Martin’s ghost must haunt the memory of the race until the collective grief disappears.

What sparks the exhumation of these individuals? What causes the race to band together and acutely grieve over someone unknown until the moments following his death? Ultimately, it could be the way in which a society frames the death, or, possibly, it is the way African American culture constructs of the dead Self and releases it back into its community. Of course, local individuals surrounding Martin actually knew him while alive, but once his story, propelled by the media, reached millions everywhere, his existence became infinite; Martin plunged outside of history and achieved immortality. Following Martin’s murder, media surrounding the murder caused the story first to sway and stir millions, gathering every bit of sympathy and emotion from those choosing to witness. The media then twisted the story to highlight George Zimmerman, framing his involvement in the crime. This effect, although convoluted and persuasive, did not make Zimmerman into a defenseless neighborhood watchman, but instead scripted Martin as the ultimate victim in the situation. Once outside of history, Martin was then brought back into the folds of society and resurrected by those who insisted on his death as a reminder of the injustice still present within America.

Somehow, members of the African American community became Martin himself following the many demonstrations and petitions on

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
his behalf. Specifically, the image of Martin became what the public remembered. Often, facts about what Martin bought and what he was wearing before his murder became perfect points for discussion as media coverage of Martin’s death infantilized him: “He had been carrying a can of iced tea and a package of candy,” (Alcindor). Recreating Martin as a candy-eating teenager causes individuals to mourn more because it personalizes him and permanently characterizes him as a child. With this image of Martin, media then made it accessible to mourn the death of Martin without truly knowing him. And his being African American automatically created a connection to Martin, allowing African Americans to build a relationship with the posthumous Martin quite easily.

Media surrounding the death of Martin worked as a vehicle that increased national mourning because of its handling of material surrounding the murder. Three major factors made the case of Martin’s murder frustrating: the location of the murder, Florida’s history as a Southern state, and the uncertain nationality of George Zimmerman. Florida’s position in the United States as Southern state automatically, for some, categorizes it as a place with a heavy racial history with dormant racism waiting to surface during a moment such as Martin’s murder. Also, acute media coverage surrounding the nationality of George Zimmerman began to become one of the fuel lines for the controversial case. The trial showed clear indications of racial injustice as several legal professionals stepped down from their positions during proceedings and as clips of Zimmerman’s comments surfaced from the 9-1-1 call. The trial, currently without a verdict, relates to the murder and trial of Emmett Till, another instance of resurrection and cultural martyrdom in the African American community.

Mystery surrounding exactly what contributed to the murder of Emmett Till still plagues scholars of the case, but, nevertheless, the situation is similar to the case of Martin, especially in cultural responses to the young men. During the funeral of Till, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, wanted an open casket in order to let individuals see the injustice afforded African Americans, and, specifically, African American adolescents. In her memoir, Death of Innocence, Till Mobley describes the moments she spent at the funeral home identifying her son’s body. She said that she “told Mr. Rayner [she] wanted an open-casket funeral” and “he asked [her] if [she] wanted [him] to retouch Emmett” (139). Till-Mobley said that her final reply to Rayner’s questions were “‘No’ . . . that was the way [she] wanted him presented. ‘Let the world see what I’ve seen’” (139). At a time when children were not thought of as affected by American segregation, Till’s murder became the perfect example of extreme injustice within America. What makes Till’s death similar to Martin’s is not the fashion of wearing costumes resembling his, but the media coverage and the history of his murder. The point is no
one, ever, truly tells the life of Till; Till’s murder becomes his life. Similar to the days following the death of Trayvon Martin, the days after Till’s murder trial created major attention from the press. Dailies and National Circuits ran reaction pieces once Till’s murderers, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, received their acquittal. Very similar to the media coverage of Martin, “many Mississippi newspapers offered some editorial comment on the verdict and its aftermath, news accounts kept the story on the front pages and back pages; the Till story and its many characters had become something of a phenomenon in four short weeks” (Houck and Grindy 115). This effect caused Till’s murder to stay at the forefront of history, and the effect repeats with Martin.

Interestingly, many accounts of Till’s murder only cover the days before his murder and years of the aftermath that followed. In Death In The Delta: The Story of Emmett Till, readers learn that Till’s nickname was “Bobo” and that his father died in combat when Till was four years old (Whitfield 15). Yet, readers are not privy to much more information, and most descriptions of Till are brief and biological, often describing his disposition, mannerisms, height, and frame. These descriptions are often, however, so warm that Till becomes a familiar figure to the reader or witness; Till’s resurrection becomes possible through familiarity to those wishing to know his story. His murder, however, overshadows his disposition and body—except his race—and the story provides excellent fuel for his resurrection: “He was a known prankster, a risk taker, and a smart dresser who nevertheless did well in school” (Whitfield 15). Till’s description presents itself in the exact same way that Trayvon’s does. The infantilized quality of these individuals adds to their history and absolutely victimizes them by listing their unfinished accomplishments and categorizing them as young and bright individuals. History constantly retells the murder of Emmett Till beside the infamous image of his open casket, sensationalizing his death and imprinting the image of the deformed, casket-bound Till on the minds of many. With this process, the individual viewing the body as an historical image then becomes subject to the trauma of Till’s body as if attending his funeral. This traumatic viewing admits the individual into the collective history and trauma of the African American community in which the image and the life of Till’s murder will never rest. The African American community raises Till’s murdered body and makes the Till who died at the bottom of the Mississippi river a saint within its community.

Gazing at the image of Till in the casket becomes the reading of an historical script, one written by its under-represented subjects. The image, stuck on replay in American history, “rises before us again and again, marking the utility of the injured Black body to American self-making . . . leaving it at best, distorted, ambivalent, and partial” (Priest 1). What Myisha Priest means is that instances like Till’s and Martin’s

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
m Murders become a repetitious imposition upon African American memory, causing these events to become important reminders of historical injustice burned into the minds of African Americans. Yet, in a way, if one knows the picture, one knows the life of Till, the life that the picture holds—Till’s murder. Much like Martin, those who know Martin through mass media and social networks have no clue about who Martin really was; they know the hoodie, or, in better words, they know the memorialized Martin. The dead Martin is the one that lives, and the dead Martin is the one the African American community resurrects and allows to live in the minds of African Americans everywhere.

Till and Martin share many similarities in their murdered lives and their actual lives, as far as we know them: both were young Black males, both died as teenagers, and the press covering their murders continues to resurrect them as history. Specifically, murders of young Black males serve in the media as a special events deserving headlines. Historically, while individuals such as Dr. Martin Luther King or Malcolm X become immortalized as Christ figures because their efforts involved helping the race, Martin and Till were just two young boys who were born African American and died unexpectedly. African American culture inscribes the status of martyrdom to figures such as Martin and Till partly because of their murders, of course, but also both because certain African Americans need to resurrect them and impose sainthood on their lives, choosing to keep their murders and murdered lives in motion. Allan S. Berger investigates how culture inscribes martyrdom onto certain individuals, much like with Till and Martin. Berger states that “martyrdom may be either political/social or personal,” and for Till and Martin in the African American community, all three apply (252). In the death of both young boys, political awareness flooded American culture and sparked discussions concerning social injustice on a levels from national to personal. Berger also explains that “political/social martyrdom involves choosing to suffer or even die in the pursuit of social purpose or goal deemed to be more important than life itself,” (252) which ties directly into the canonization process within the African American community. Berger’s political ideology does not apply to the actual subject in this discussion, but these ideas apply to the culture, which becomes the actual subject following specific individual’s deaths. In order to label Till and Martin as martyrs, the African American community must decide that the death of the individual will become the opportunity for the community to suffer in regards to causing social change.

Children become the main focus and attention of Black canonization not only because they are minors, but because they continue the heritage of African Americans. Murdering children lies too close to extinguishing the race. Further, history distinguishes the lives of minorities as “others” or an experience so abstract and difficult to name that little explanation

Stephen Foster Smith
is possible without too-easily categorizing it. Therefore, the loss of a life within the African American community becomes the push toward categorizing the life so far that it becomes nothing. In retaliation, the canonization of African Americans as saints and the crowning of certain individuals as Christ figures is a cultural imposition on individuals required in order to save the race from further attempts at extinguishing it. Truthfully, the race is far from becoming extinct or even being extinct, but the anxiety still remains. Seen in literature, history, art, and any other form of documentation regarding the African American experience, martyring through owning the life of the dead makes up for the taking and erasing of a life. In this case, ownership is the process of African Americans taking back lives of murdered individuals. Given historical impoverishment of African Americans, ownership here provides the opportunity to own property and assets, belongings that become synonymous with the life/owner itself. Therefore, when looking at a race that, historically, invested much time in becoming enfranchised and owners of their own lives, it is highly important to understand that African Americans closely knit themselves through collective identity and history, becoming a sort of ownership where one Black life owns, or even shares another so that the understanding of the importance of owning one’s own life never fades.

The effort may seem difficult and rich in meta-narrative and history, but it becomes quite simple once understood on a basic level: African Americans exercise canonization efforts to make sure the community, and no one else, possesses the life. The evidence is clear in the process of reverencing Martin; the hoodie hysteria and his complete immortalization created a space in the collective history of the race that members will absolutely never forget and will never have a chance to. African Americans repossessed and claimed Martin’s death as their own so that his life would not fall into the hands of the wrong type of history-maker, much as it happened in Ralph Ellison’s Harlem and with the murder of Till and the story of his life. While ransacking Harlem in honor of Clifton never achieved any goal for Ellison’s fictional community, mourning Till helped inform the nation of the racial injustice within the South and the horrible judicial practices in Mississippi. The mass mourning associated with Till’s death afforded many African Americans a thread to link themselves to Till and each other during a time where societal rules worked to further separate them. Clearly, mourning becomes the process that enables the elevation of certain individuals into a space of eternal existence and reverence, and without this mourning, the necessary history of African American life, such as Till and Martin’s, would not exist. Seemingly, the deaths of both Martin and Till were both necessary: they played major roles in social activism and the discussion of change, and these simple, yet grave, reminders of injustice in America

“A prayer for the unknown soldier”
work perfectly in provoking understanding of how murder affects a community and how collective history works within a race. For Rebecca Mark, mourning exists as an evolving entity within American culture: “mourning is a constantly nuanced, fractile, continuous unfolding that grows and expands with the lyrical calls and responses of each generation across time” (123). Further, as mourning continues across time, it includes more individuals in its process. For African Americans, each individual folds into the history of its community, and each member bears witness to the continuous murder of its saints and martyrs. Collective history and trauma work as the vehicle that allows dead African Americans to travel through time with their collective narratives, and without these opportunities it is hard to ponder what history the race would have. Ultimately, canonization within the African American community is a need that, sadly, creates, recreates, and informs African American history within the community. It further authenticates their existence as a community with a history and provides for Black life that will never face erasure as long as eternal figures remain.

Works Cited


Contributors

Krisha Bryan is married to a mighty good man with four animals: two dogs, two cats. A breeze drifts across my body, bumblebees tumbling about in its currents. The warm sun embraces my skin. The green grass gently caresses my feet and I can hear a waterfall rushing and a river flowing. If I do not love, I am nothing.

RaeAnna Hogle likes it when people pronounce her name correctly on their first try. She wishes to move to the beach, maybe in California, and remain unmarried, writing essays on feminism and drinking martinis with her cat. She’d also like to grow a garden at some point where the soil wasn’t composed primarily of clay, because that type of dirt isn’t conducive to growing sexy tomatoes.

Erin Mayo grew up in Newnan, GA along with her parents, older brother, and younger sister. Over time, she developed a love for an active lifestyle that involves outdoor adventures such as rock climbing and camping. Erin has a deep desire to work with high school adolescents as an English teacher.
Kaela McCarter is an English major.

Stephen Foster Smith is a native of Atlanta, Georgia, very fond of the arts, and largely interested in many areas of literature and film, including African American literature and various film genres. A former musician, Smith believes good music has a special influence on good writing. Lastly, Smith believes writing is a gift that provokes the writer to struggle with its rough edges in order to uncover its ability to produce smooth language.