SocialEyes

a publication featuring sociological work by Boston College undergraduates

Issue 1, Fall 2009
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The submission deadline for the spring issue is March 12, 2010. We look forward to any new submissions and new staff members!
Editors’ Introduction

The idea for this publication came about at a departmental meeting when we were looking for ways to bring sociology majors together and to create a community within the department that would be better able to serve students. After vetoing such ideas as a sociology bowling team, the idea of a journal came up. The next day, the idea for SocialEyes was born.

Since then, we as a staff have had an opportunity to learn all of the challenges and steps involved in trying to publish a collection of work. After receiving our first submissions, we went though the process of editing and re-editing with the authors that stuck with us. We even had to come up with a title, which came from a naming contest won by Eddy Hernandez-Perez. In the end we feel that we have chosen articles dealing with a variety of interesting and important topics drawing from both theoretical and research backgrounds.

The title, SocialEyes, shows what we want readers to develop with this publication. We want it to be an opportunity to share some of the amazing work that sociology majors and all Boston College students do in the field of sociology. Hopefully this can be a way to share sociology, a subject that has interested us so much during our time at Boston College, to a larger community and introduce its many aspects to new students. Ideally, this should be a forum for the many different kinds of expression and perspectives represented in sociology.

Now that the first issue is here, we plan to be continuing to publish and create a sustainable forum for students. In the future we will seek out creative and diverse submissions in many different medias and hope that SocialEyes can become a BC institution.

Throughout the whole process we were aided by a small but very committed group of staff members that did everything from setting up email accounts and web resources, to editing submissions, to organizing events, to advertising for new members and submissions. We were truly lucky to have all the help that we did. We also have to say thank you to the faculty in the department who have been so supportive, especially Deb Piatelli without whom none of this would have been possible. She has given so much of her time and energy to making this a reality and we were truly lucky to find someone as committed to students as she is.

Co-Editors-in-Chief
John Skinner and Stafford Oliver
To Hookup or Not? Students Discuss the Hookup Culture at BC
By Erin Simmons

Introduction

Boston College is commonly known as a “hookup school,” meaning that its students are notorious for hooking up with each other rather than engaging in traditional forms of dating. While traditional dating involves conversing and getting to know one another before intimacy, hooking up generally involves a sexual encounter, which may or may not include sexual intercourse, that occurs between two people who are not in a romantic relationship. “Hookup” is an ambiguous term; it can refer to anything from kissing to having sex. The ambiguity of the term adds to the intrigue of the subject matter. However, gaining the reputation of a “hookup school” is not particularly distinctive because the hookup culture is a dating behavior phenomenon that seems to be sweeping college campuses across the nation (Bogle 2005; England & Thomas 2007).

While most studies have examined the varied definitions of a hookup, the role of alcohol, and gender dynamics within the hookup culture (Bogle 2005; Epstein, et.al. 2009; Glenn & Marquardt 2001), this study also explores why some students choose to participate in the hookup culture while others abstain from it. In the spring of 2009, I conducted a survey and a series of focus groups and interviews with a number of Boston College students. Below, is an excerpt of the findings from this larger study.

Who is hooking up?

One hundred and eighty-four Boston College undergraduate students participated in the survey portion of data collection. Regarding participation in hookups, of those 113 students who answered the question, 57% reported participating in hookups. Of the 118 females who responded, 34% of them reported that they participate in hookups, while 31% reported that they do not participate in hookups, and 35% of the females did not respond to the question. Of
the 63 males who filled out the survey 37% reported participating in hookups, while 19% reported not participating, and 44% did not answer the question.

These results indicate that while people are participating in the hookup culture and that it is an influencing factor on college campuses; it is not the overwhelming majority of students who are participating. This data also indicates that men are slightly more engaged in the hookup culture than women which follows suit with research from other studies.

Of the 184 students who participated in the survey, 167 of them completed the Hendrik and Hendrik love styles test (Gute & Eshbaugh 2008; Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000). Love styles are a measure of a person’s attitudes and expectations in romantic relationships. They are mental models of relationships, and they are used to predict and/or explain behavior in a relationship. The survey was conducted to test whether or not hookup behavior was related to what Hendrik and Hendrik call “ludus” or “game playing love” (Gute & Eshbaugh 2008; Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000). This love style, they argue, is a non-committal view of intimacy. Of the 64 students who reported participating in hookups, most chose a ludus love style, while the 49 students who reported not participating in hookups reported most often an eros love style (more committal). This data supports Paul, McManus and Hayes’ (2000) research that a ludic dominant love style could be a predictor of hookup participation.

**Why do people make the choices they do?**

Armed with the survey data, I began conducting focus groups to dig deeper into the reasoning why some individuals hookup while others refrain. Four focus groups were organized according to gender and hookup participation (males participating in hookups, males not participating in hookups, females participating in hookups, and females not participating in hookups). I also followed up with some selected interviews.

During the focus group sessions, several themes emerged as contributing factors to the decision of whether or not to participate in hookups: the transition to college life from the previous social and home environment; alcohol and the party culture; socialization and family influences; and psychological factors like personality and love style. There are some significant differences between the social scenes that people experience in high school and the one that they experience on a college campus, and those changes in environment seem to correlate with
changes in people’s actions. The emotional climate and relationships that students experience, the social activities, and the attitudes of students are all different in college than in high school and they are all significant factors in influencing choices around hooking up. Similar to other studies, alcohol and the party culture also proved to be significant in the hookup culture. Students reported that parties and alcohol not only provided an environment conducive for hookups, but they also reduce the social stigma, protect people from the pain of rejection, take away responsibility in intimate situations, and give people more courage in social interactions. In addition, the environmental factors unique to the college campus as well as the influence of parents and other adults earlier in life was important in the students’ choices about intimate situations. As indicated in the survey, personality traits and love styles also correlated with their choice of whether or not to hookup. While all of these contributing factors are significant, I have chosen to discuss one theme that emerged from this study—the role of the transition to college life.

*Transition to college life and the college environment*

One theme that emerged from the focus groups, that is not significantly present in the reviewed literature, was the importance of the transition between high school and college, and the students’ expectations of what the social scene would be like upon arrival at, in this case, Boston College. People who expect college to have a hookup culture tend to be the people who participate in the hookup culture, whereas it was less common for the people in the non-participating focus groups to indicate that they expected a hookup culture to exist when they came to college. One male, hookup participant said that the hookup culture was something that he had looked forward to experiencing:

“Going into college freshman year I knew that social stuff could be a lot different from high school, with stuff like parties, sex, alcohol, and you know stuff like that. I mean weekends would be about partying and hooking up, and there wouldn’t be any parents to get in your way. Parties and stuff would be completely different because you didn’t have to like sneak around and stuff.”

*Kevin, sophomore, hookup participant*

He and all of the other focus group participants (across groups) did indeed find that college social life was a lot different from high school social life. The participants (both participating in
the hookup culture and not) largely came from a private, in many cases single-sex, school background, which could have affected their responses, but the public and coed school students generally agreed or made similar statements. They all discussed the fact that the hookup culture as they see it or experience it at Boston College was virtually non-existent in high school. Hookups as they saw them in high school were few and far between, and those who participated were a tiny minority of people who were generally stigmatized for their behavior.

“I mean I guess hookups happened in high school, but it was definitely not something that everyone was doing. The girls who hooked up were kinda seen as slutty, and I guess it wasn’t as big of a deal for the guys, but people knew and everyone talked about them. It was something that people weren’t supposed to do.” Laura, sophomore, hookup participant

“There was just a small group of people who hooked up, but most of us didn’t. That one group hooked up with each other, but it just wasn’t the thing to do at my school. Everyone knew everything about each other. If you hooked up people would know; people would talk about you and judge you, and it would even get back to the parents. It was such a community; students knew all of the gossip, but so did the parents and teachers. No one wanted to deal with that.” Jenna, sophomore, non-participant

All participants discussed the high school environment both at school and at home as not conducive to the hookup culture, while the college environment was much bigger, more anonymous, and independent and therefore appropriate for and encouraging of hooking up. Hooking up was seen as taboo in high school. It was something that only a certain crowd did, but in college it was immediately accepted and in many cases even expected. Hooking up was seen as something that college kids just did. As Megan pointed out,

“In high school I never would have even considered hooking up, I even sort of looked down on or judged the kids that did hookup, but once I got to college I didn’t even think about it. Hooking up was just something that people did, so it was okay. Maybe because like you couldn’t get in trouble for it; I mean there are no parents here to disapprove, and it’s like everyone else is doing it so there’s no one to judge you, well unless you take it too far and get the slut label.” Megan, junior, hookup participant

Students, both participants and non-participants, talked about starting to hookup in college as something that they were almost expected to do because other people were. Many of the
participants expected that they would hookup in college and then also felt like by doing so they were meeting other people’s expectations as well as their own.

Other hookup participants talked about hooking up as something that they would have liked to do in high school, but it just was not possible for them until they got to college. In high school they had parents monitoring them with curfews and other restrictions and they did not have accessibility to the appropriate places and conditions for a hookup. They were not always able to go out when they wanted to, when they did go out they had parents monitoring where they went and waiting up for them to return. Joe said,

“Hookups are something that usually happen at a party or at least start there, and for one thing those kind of parties are a lot harder to come by in high school because you have to wait for people’s parents to go out of town and stuff like that, and its way harder to get beer or alcohol. Even if someone does get to throw a party, you have to come up with a lie to tell your parents about where you’re going, and then you have to make sure that you can be sober enough to drive home in time for your curfew. Like hooking up just doesn’t fit into all that. It’s like there’s too much pressure with other things to worry about where to go or what people might say, and stuff. Besides say you do get a girl who’s willing to hookup with you, where do you go? You can’t go to one of your houses because there are parents there, and you can’t really hookup at the party, so you’re like left with the car, and while most guys wouldn’t turn it down, it’s not exactly appealing, especially compared to college when you can bring a girl back to your room and a bed.” Joe, freshman, hookup participant

With the combination of parents, small social networks, and inconvenient circumstances people across groups agreed that hooking up was just not the thing to do in high school, it is generally an experience unique to the college environment. The participants of all four focus groups raised the point that people still date both before and after college, but during the college years for many people dating has been dropped in favor of the hookup culture. People spoke about how they dated in high school, Mike, a freshman, hookup participant, said, “most people didn’t hookup, they got into a relationship. They went on dates; at least for me and my friends, we went on dates and got girlfriends.”

People in both groups also spoke about how their siblings or their parents date now, as evidence that the dating culture still exists once people leave college. Ally discussed a
conversation she had with her father about dating and the hookup culture after going to see the film, *He’s Just Not That into You*.

“I said that I don’t think a lot of those things necessarily apply to college students today because people at college don’t date. He said that it’s only because we don’t have to. We have such a relaxed atmosphere about people of the opposite sex being together that we don’t need a contrived social function to get together. We can just go to each other’s room and do homework or hang out and watch a movie. We live right on top of each other and we see each other all the time in a social setting. He said that once we enter the corporate real world we’ll need the social structure to have romantic interaction again. I think he made a lot of sense.” Ally, junior, hookup participant

Her comments are echoed in the comments of Jenna in talking about her sister,

“I was talking to my sister recently, complaining about how no one dates here because they all hookup. She said that once I get out of college it will be fine because people in the real world date because they aren’t constantly surrounded with people of their age. Once you leave the isolated college bubble dating happens again because that’s how you get to know people. I know I can’t wait to get out there because I’m so tired of not being able to find a guy who’ll actually date.” Jenna, sophomore, non-participant

The point that she raises about the “isolated college bubble” is one that was frequently echoed in people’s thoughts on the hookup culture. College campuses are a world onto themselves. They have their own norms and their own rules. As sophomore Kevin and a hookup participant pointed out, “things like texting a girl at 2am to come to your room and hookup or kicking your roommate out so you can have a girl over are okay, anywhere else that’s probably not acceptable.” Hookup participants also brought up the fact that when you’re at college everything you need is in your immediate surroundings.

“You don’t need a car because you don’t have to leave campus. People party in their apartments on campus; it’s not like at home where you have to drive to someone else’s house or a bar or something. Here you can walk to the dorm or the house. The party is here, the people are here, the room you want to go to after is here. It’s all laid out for you.” Joe, freshman, hookup participant

“There really isn’t much of a reason to leave campus. I mean, in the city you have to be like 21 to do just about everything and what we can do is expensive. So everyone stays around BC and parties and hooks up for entertainment. We have everything we need for those things right here.” Anna, hookup participant
Students are all together in one fairly small area, they have access to not only each other, but alcohol, and they have little else to do. Also, consistent with the literature, all participants in the focus groups mentioned that they have easy access to the opposite sex. The dorms and even sometimes the floors are co-ed, which takes away the need to go out somewhere to interact with members of the opposite sex. People can just hang out or they can party and hookup; they don’t need to date. Adam, a hookup participant, said, “Why should we pay to take a girl out somewhere, when there are other girls who will come over and hang out for free? Dating is pointless unless you’re already in a relationship and then you take your girlfriend out.” The majority of the focus group participants including both participant and non-participant groups felt that dating, as it was before, does not fit into the current college atmosphere.

The males who participate in the hookup culture were especially adamant that dating was unnecessary in the emotional climate of a college campus. They felt that the hookup culture was a good system because it allowed them to fulfill their physical needs without emotional attachment. They felt that the hookup culture was there to satisfy physical needs that cannot be satisfied by friendships, but that dating was unnecessary because people are able to get their emotional needs satisfied from friends. Kevin pointed out,

“When you’re in college you’re constantly around your friends, you live with your friends and all that. And so you get a lot of those emotional needs fulfilled where umm I mean I don’t obviously I didn’t experience the hookup culture in high school. I spent a lot less time with my friends umm when I was outside of school so I think you have more of a need for umm emotional support umm and umm well not necessarily support but you know someone to spend your time with.” Kevin, sophomore, hookup participant

The male hookup participants spoke about the amount of time that they were able to spend with their friends and peers and the types of relationships that they have with their friends and peers and how that affects their priorities in their romantic relationships.

“I know in high school I really had very few friends. I went to a small catholic high school, that I uhh started attending as a junior, I mean everyone had been friends since they were 4 or 5 years old, and I really wasn’t able to build umm ahh really valuable friendships. I know back then I always wanted to have a
girlfriend, someone I could share ahh emotional things with and likewise have a mutual emotional benefit there. But since I’ve come to college, I’ve had that emotional part of me I think satisfied by friends that I’ve made, and umm really that part in terms of going out with a girl and hooking up with a girl, I, the emotionality isn’t such a high priority anymore.” Alex, hookup participant

This group of males expressed that having a romantic relationship would possibly make their lives harder and stretch them past the limits of their emotional capacity. They seemed to feel that adding emotional attachments to girls in a romantic way would just be too much for them at this point in their lives; they would not be able to handle too many different types of commitment. James said,

“And sometimes in college you ahh, like if you do add more of that emotionality it’s just like really hard. You have your friends who want to go do something, you have your roommates who want to go do something, and now you have your girlfriend who wants to go do something, and you might spread yourself too thin and get yourself in trouble with all of them.” James, junior, hookup participant

These males felt that if they could get their physical needs fulfilled without the emotional commitment of a relationship, then there was no need to have one. They felt that the ultimate goal is sex at this point and not a long lasting relationship, so dating really has no draw for them. Mike, a freshman and hookup participant, called dating in this era tedious. “I think many people generally feel that it’s tedious because they view the end as sex, and they feel that it’s so easily available, so why would you want to date. If that’s your only focus then it makes more sense to hookup.”

The males who participate in hookups separated the emotional from the physical within the context of romantic interactions. They felt that it was logical and practical to separate the two. They even extrapolated those feelings into the future, stating that, “marriage is arbitrary and pointless.” Also due to differences in sex drive, having multiple partners to satisfy sexual needs should always be acceptable, and that it is biologically and an evolutionarily right for people, especially males to have more than one partner. They seemed to feel that the hookup culture was a natural step, not only within their lives, but within the progression of society.

Other focus groups participants (females that participated and not as well as males that did not participate in the hookup culture) did not feel that way. Members of all three of the
other focus groups regardless of whether or not they participate in the hookup culture, felt that hooking up was something mostly unique to college age people, and it should and would phase out of our lives and possibly society. They all expressed the desire to have dating come back as the main form of romantic interaction on college campuses.

“I feel like dating happens in high school and outside of college campuses, and it used to happen on college campuses. I don’t see why it can’t happen here again. I mean, like, I know it kind of happens sometimes here for some people, but I wish it were like mainstream now and I didn’t have to wait like four years for it to be the norm again.” Molly, junior, non-participant

“I think that there’s kind of a movement to have dating become a norm again, like The Heights is starting an Eagle Dates thing and stuff. I mean it would be nice to be able to ask a girl out and go on a date in college without people expecting it to be either a serious relationship or a hookup. Dating in college could be a lot of fun if everyone would just relax about the hookup stuff and just enjoy a date for what it is.” Jon, sophomore, non-participant

Areas for Further Exploration

There seem to be countless influences on the hookup culture that exist on college campuses. While the choice of whether or not to hookup seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy; if a student goes to college expecting there to be a hookup culture then that’s what they will seek out, but if they are unsure of what to expect or they assume that hookups will not play a major role in their social life then they will not participate in the hookup culture. However, it is difficult to draw the line between what causes it and what simply seems to reinforce it. Peer pressure, alcohol, gender stereotypes, socialization, and paternal influence, as well as the change of environment upon arrival to college, are all prominent themes that arose in the focus group conversations. I left this study with more questions than answers: What have been students’ experiences before coming to college? How have they been socialized and counseled about love, sex, and commitment? How might participation in a hookup culture influence future romantic encounters after college?

Works Cited


Encounters Without Interaction: Understanding Cross-Racial Interaction at Boston College
by Stafford Oliver and Kristin Reed

Introduction

This semester the interaction between students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, more precisely the lack of interaction, has become a controversial topic. In recent on-campus publications, students have expressed frustration due to the lack of engagement between racial and ethnic groups. Some have suggested that intercultural campus organizations may play a role in contributing to this low rate of cross-racial interaction, and others have claimed that these organizations operate as closed, racial cliques alienating individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. While these reflections on personal experiences on campus are important to consider when seeking to improve the opportunity for racial interaction on campus, it is unfortunate that the discourse has focused chiefly on the need for blame rather than encourage further dialogue and understanding. We decided to explore this subject in more depth as a research project for our Research Methods course.

While our research questions were multiple, this paper provides a snapshot of our findings related to the questions: How do students perceive cross-racial interaction on campus? Does participation in intercultural organizations or events influence the perception of cross-racial interaction? Our hypothesis stated that higher levels of participation in intercultural organizations or events would lead to higher perceptions of cross-racial interaction on campus. Our findings revealed something very different.

1 We extend a special gratitude to Catalina Tang, Aly Alzor, Matt Gavin, and Keeror Colquitt for their efforts in this group project, whose insights were essential in this research.
Methods

Since this course assignment required us to use the survey method, we needed to be creative in the survey design. Developing this questionnaire was not an easy task because we needed to define cross-racial interaction in order to measure the perception of it and test our hypotheses. We decided to define cross-racial interaction loosely as conscious and intended interaction with a person outside of one’s own racial, ethnic, or cultural background, but design the survey in a way to allow participants to define their understanding of cross-racial interaction.

In order to increase the validity of our research we used an open-ended question to allow participants to individually define and interpret perceptions of cross-racial interaction on campus. We believe that if we were to create our own measures of cross-racial interaction we would have made false inferences about the data. [As a note, we did have measures of cross-racial interaction that we utilized in the survey to measure behavior that addressed a different, but related hypothesis that produced similar results.] We defined participation in intercultural organizations as membership status or attendance at intercultural events.

Our open-ended survey question was: “What are your perceptions of cross-racial interaction on BC campus? Does BC have a high, medium or low level of cross-racial interaction? Can you explain what you mean by cross-racial interaction?” We performed both a deductive and inductive content analysis on the survey question data. We coded the responses on perception as high, medium, or low; and we inductively coded the text to determine the definitions of racial interaction. We then performed correlations on the survey data, seeking to examine the relationship between participation and perception.

Due to time constraints, we chose a haphazard, non-probability, sampling method, although we were conscious in attempting to recruit a diverse sample. The survey was conducted through the internet using Survey Monkey to provide anonymity and increase the rate of return. Participants were invited to participate via links on Facebook and e-mail. We recruited 85 participants of which 64 fully completed the survey that represented a diverse sample of racial and ethnic identities. While this data cannot be generalized to the entire BC student population, it does offer a starting point for discussion.
Findings

Our data revealed that participation in intercultural organizations was relatively high. Most students were involved in intercultural organizations (57.8%) or attended intercultural events on a frequent basis (4 or more events per semester). With this level of participation, we expected to find that perceptions of racial interaction would be medium or high.

According to the data 76.2% of our sample stated that BC has a low level of racial interaction, which confirms our expectation of a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the amount of racial interaction on campus. However, the survey data also revealed that even those who were members of intercultural organizations (table 1) or those who frequently attended those events also felt cross-racial interaction (table 2) was low. This was surprising and disproved our hypothesis.

| Table 1: Membership in Intercultural Organization and Perception of Cross-Racial Interaction |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Membership | Low Perception |
| E-Board | 20.3% | 62% |
| General Member | 21.9% | 86% |
| Listserv | 15.6% | 100% |
| Total | 57.8% | 76% |

It is interesting to note that some members did feel that cross-racial interaction was happening, as 38% of the E-Board members rated cross-racial interaction as moderate and one of the general members rated cross-racial interaction as high.
Table 2: Frequency of Attendance at Intercultural Events and Perception of Cross-Racial Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Events per Semester</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Low Perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7+</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in table 2 further suggests that many students of different backgrounds and cultures are seeking interactions with different racial and ethnic identities. If many students are attending intercultural events, aren’t they interacting? Why is there such a low perception of racial interaction? The data provides some answers.

Students defined cross-racial interaction in their survey responses in terms of the quality versus quantity of interaction. Participants defined interaction as: “real friendships,” “socializing at parties,” “inter-racial dating,” “sharing experiences and views on important matters,” and “studying together.” These responses expanded our definitions of cross-racial interaction, offering new insights into how students interpret cross-racial interaction on campus. These new insights can better inform efforts to increase cross-racial interaction on campus.

Students also expressed a concern that “there isn’t a level of comfort in talking about race on campus.” The statements also revealed a lack of understanding about the need for intercultural organizations on a predominately, white campus. Clearly, this data offers good justifications for furthering education and dialogue on race and the role of intercultural organizations.

Discussion

We began this paper with the question: How do Boston College students perceive cross-racial interaction on campus? Does engagement in intercultural organizations or events affect their perceptions and behaviors? Our survey provided us with rich insight into these questions. We were able to successfully gather information regarding how our peers perceive cross-racial
interaction on campus, while also discovering that, despite our hypotheses, engagement in intercultural organizations does not produce a perception of high cross-racial interaction. While some may interpret this data to suggest that involvement in intercultural organizations or events does not increase cross-racial interaction, but rather prohibits it, we argue that the issue of cross-racial interaction is more complex.

This study raises the sociological question of institutionalized segregation on college campuses, and low diversity rates. How much of the issue of low cross-racial interaction is due to the demographics of the campus? How much is due to mis-understandings as to the need and purpose of intercultural organizations? How much is due to a lack of understanding of what racial interaction means? And how much is due to a student’s uncomfortability in venturing into conversations across differences?

When analyzing our results and contemplating the role of intercultural organizations, the analogy of each cultural club as an individual house illuminated some insight into an alternative understanding to the function of intercultural organizations on campus. At Boston College, there are over twenty-five individual houses in which students must approach, knock, gain entrance, and situate themselves. Even if every member of every house exhibited great hospitality, students still must take the initiative to be a stranger in order to experience an array of the diversity BC has to offer. There is not one house, place, or space where students can enter as fellow students and encounter the diversity that BC has to offer. Do you wonder why so many individuals that scored high on intercultural participation assert that racial interaction on campus is low?
The Identity of a Marijuana User: A Stoner’s Life
By Daniel Kenny

“I smoke marijuana. In fact, I smoke marijuana on a weekly basis. Joints, blunts, bowls, bongs, and waterfalls are all ways in which I get high. My reasoning? It’s an activity, which allows me to relax and bond with my friends. To most people, however, smoking pot or weed makes me nothing more than a drug dependent pothead or stoner. Yet, I am an intelligent, aspiring student and an overall well-rounded person. I like to think that I have a good head on my shoulders; my family and friends would concur with such an assessment of my character. Still, however, a distinct stigma is attached to the act of smoking marijuana. The labeling of marijuana smokers as members of a deviant subculture continues to persist in our society.” Anonymous, Sociology Major, Age 20

Introduction

This study explores the identity of the marijuana user. Why does an individual smoke weed? Is smoking weed a way of escaping reality? Do two different personas exist within the individual—the non-smoking, sober identity and the high identity? Drawing on my own interactions with marijuana users, I found that reasons for not smoking marijuana at certain times deal specifically with questions of identity and authenticity. A “Sober John” focuses on real life ambitions. Sober John wants to live in reality and needs to in order to accomplish important tasks. “High John” chooses to smoke in order to ease the pressure associated with those goals. Sober John simply wants to relax with his/her buddies and chill out—fully embracing the communal aspect of smoking marijuana. Something about High John proves worrisome. Does this persona feel authentic?

This paper provides the reader with a rare glimpse into the subculture of marijuana users. At no point does it attempt to stray from the truth of the words of the participants. Overall, this paper gives the reader a chance to understand why people choose to smoke and why they continue to do so. Elements of pleasure, group cohesion, and ritual are discussed in
some detail. Changes in perception and attitudes towards smoking are reoccurring concepts.
Similarly, stories of interactions with people and future outlook as a smoker are examined.
Nevertheless, the central themes of identity, authenticity, and reality hold this paper together conceptually.

**Literary Review – “Outsiders”**

Reading Howard S. Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* provided me with a basic overview of the subculture of marijuana users, and offered a direction for this research study. Though Becker’s work focuses on the subject of becoming a user and the concept of social control, his research coincides with a number of areas I chose to explore. His findings, in turn, agreed with a multitude of my own. For instance, Becker believes that marijuana use begins with a genuine curiosity about the drug and its influence (42). All of my participants agreed with this initial feeling, causing one to extrapolate:

> “I just wanted to see what it was like to get high, pretty much. Now, [nods] I’m all about it.” *Joe, Marketing/Finance Major, Age 20*

Similarly, Becker’s work concludes that marijuana does not produce addiction (43). Unlike alcohol and opiate drugs, the desire to smoke marijuana can be put off when necessary. While some may lack the mental toughness to curb their desires on a regular basis, none of my participants felt that they were addicted to marijuana. In fact, some even scoffed at this idea:

> “Addicted? No! [firm] I don’t think I’m addicted to weed though, so … I feel, like, I can … if you told me I had to stop tomorrow I could.” *Fred, Accounting Major, Age 20*

Yet, a clear dependency exists among smokers. While they may not necessarily be addicted to marijuana, it seems that most are unable to make up their mind about the ability to stop smoking immediately.

Becker’s work, like my own, also notices the drug’s ability to produce a new, pleasurable experience (49-56). Each of my participants continued to use marijuana because of such instances. Pleased with how being high made them feel, they enjoyed both the mental and physical effects produced from the use of marijuana. One went on to say:
“For a lot of people, being high is just better. Like I said, I’m just generally happier. I’m at a better state in my mind. Everything just seems more advanced, more pleasant.” *Matt, Accounting/Information Systems Major, Age 20*

If it was not for such pleasure, why would anyone choose to engage in such an activity? They would simply be inhaling smoke into their lungs for no reason. Becker realized that the pleasant effects were the main reasons behind continued use of the drug. The author states, “[marijuana] becomes, after a taste for it is built up, pleasant, desired, and sought after” (56). These, after all, are qualities of the drugs I noticed in each of my participants. Smoking marijuana is an activity they extremely enjoy and desire to take part in.

Aside from the pleasurable aspects that fuel someone’s decision to continually smoke, Becker’s work discusses the stigma attached to marijuana and its use. As a deviant activity, it contends that smoking marijuana is a “behavior which flouts [society’s] basic values and norms” (59). While there are a number of reasons for this label, Becker’s work stresses the two most important points. First, marijuana use is illegal in the United States (home to all of my respondents). Second, the negative conceptions exhibited by its illegality are often fostered in the minds of the family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers who come into contact with smokers. Fears of imprisonment and dependence upon the drug contribute to the stigma attached to it. Yet, most of my participants strongly insisted that they are not part of a deviant subculture.

The above mentioned areas of overlap proved useful in my own research. Despite actively trying to find areas of Becker’s research that contrasted with my own beliefs regarding marijuana, I could not. Sadly, I did not find much information present in his book related to identity and marijuana use. Though issues of authenticity and reality were briefly mentioned, it was not the focus of his work. Through in-depth interviewing with eight smokers along with participant observation, this paper advances Becker’s work in these areas.

**Identity, Authenticity and Reality**

*The Setting*

The living room is something you could only find in a movie involving college frat houses. Think *Animal House*, but to a lesser degree. It’s dirty and dingy. Empty and half-full beer
cans litter the one table top at the center of the room. There are ripped magazines, random DVDs, and old take-out containers piled on the floor, table, and two of the three couches that appear to be purchased from the Salvation Army. This is college. A world where young men live to excess. For most, school is the main priority. But when work does not need to be done, the party rages on.

The focus? Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Work hard during the week and party during the weekend—or when you’re free. These eight students, like many of the friends and acquaintances that make up their social network, drink alcohol on any night when they have nothing important to do the next day—regular class does not constitute a responsibility that curbs such behavior. Only quizzes, projects, papers, and exams require their scholarly attention. Still, one thing trumps all priorities—marijuana. In a way, it often dilutes any other responsibilities this contingent of young men possess. Sure, they accomplish the most important tasks required of them. Yet, they put many things off in order to smoke. Smoking causes them to change their schedules and goals for the day. It seems scary, but somehow, they survive.

And survive they do. In fact they thrive. Somehow these eight young men perform well in school, are involved in some extracurricular activities, and socialize with other young men and women outside of their small group. In order to understand the role of marijuana in their lives, however, one needs a further glimpse into one of their smoking sessions.

Today, for instance, they are all sitting in the living room I just described to you. What are they doing? Some are eating dinner. Others are doing homework. Some are watching TV on the large Sony model centered against the wall. Three couches laid out in the shape of a U, all centered around the TV, house their bodies. They are all Caucasian, middle-to-upper class, Christian, juniors at Boston College. All have bright futures. All will presumably do well.

Suddenly, one stocky fellow with bushy black eyebrows says, “Yo, guys. Wanna get high?” Eyes light up. A chubby blond kid shakes his head in mocked disgust. One-by-one, they all agree to get high. The stocky fellow lunges toward a room and grabs a small Ziploc bag containing a dark, dry substance. It smells like the spray of a skunk and is dotted with small orange fibers. It’s weed, pot, reefer, the sticky-icky-icky, or simply, marijuana. Hard to the touch, he breaks it up and places it in a small, black grinder—a device shaped in the form of a
circle that splits into two halves. He puts the two halves together and grinds away, smiling the entire time. The other students discard their work or push aside their food. It’s time to smoke. Everything else can wait.

The chubby kid, who shook his head but a few moments ago, races to the freezer and removes a tray of ice cubes. A skinny young man with long brown hair gets up from a couch and approaches another room. He comes out with a large green device. It has a long shaft and a large bottom. It almost looks like a beaker, yet there is a small piece of glass protruding from it. This piece has a bowl at its base. This is their prized possession. This is their bong.

All the necessities are now in place. The chubby kid drops five or six ice cubes down the shaft of the bong. Caught by two pieces of glass at the base of the shaft, they pile up higher-and-higher. The purpose is to make the hit cleaner, smoother. It’s a pleasantry that only occurs when one disregards the laziness which accompanies the comfort of a couch. The young man with bushy black eyebrows drops the grinded weed onto a piece of paper that is folded in half. From there, he tilts the paper, releasing the marijuana into the bowl of the bong. With relative ease, he picks up the three foot piece and prepares to blaze. He is going to get high and has earned the right to smoke first. After all, it was his idea. This young man retrieved the weed and grinded it up. He grabs a lighter off the table and smokes up. The entire time, he cherishes his reward.

The chubby kid follows. Simply grabbing the ice does not warrant him the right to smoke second. Luckily, because he was sitting next to the initiator, in a clockwise fashion, it is his turn. The bong is passed around and smoked out of; however, watchful eyes wander throughout the process. One hit is all you get per turn. Anyone who encroaches upon this understood rule may face the wrath of another smoker. This will probably come in a verbal scold, like, “Come on, man. Let’s go.” It acts as a warning that such behavior will not be tolerated.

Such rituals exist in the process. No one should pass the bong to someone if they have blown out the last of the weed. If the consensus is that more smoking is to occur, then another bowl will be filled by the last person who did not get to smoke. If smoking is to desist, the last person who smoked is to put all of the materials back in their assigned homes. Confrontation rarely is present. After all, the eight smokers are all friends. They know their habit like clockwork. And, thus, they relax. Their eyes turn red and they begin to laugh. They watch
comedic movies or sports shows, finding subtle jokes extremely humorous. They often succumb to the *munchies* and eat unnecessary amounts of food. They rarely move and if they do, it most likely is to get more weed. All is good in the world of the pothead.

**Becoming a Pothead**

To begin, each of my participants began smoking in their sophomore or junior year in high school. Though I find it hard to believe that peer pressure did not play any role in their first attempt at smoking, each of them contested this point. Curiosity was the sole component for their decision to smoke for the first time. This introduction into the subculture of marijuana users took place amongst friends in each case—a fact which has strengthened my understanding of marijuana as a communal activity. Their initial reactions, too, ran parallel. At first, most of them did not perceive the effects of being high. Yet, their curiosity continued to push them to try the drug. As one respondent described:

“Didn’t for a while, like, after the first time I tried it. Then, I actually got really high one time. Then, I realized it was awesome. [laughs] So then I started smoking pretty much whenever I could get stuff. Weekends for a couple of years. Then, it became more of a daily thing. And, now it just became that.” *Sebastian, Economics Major, Age 21*

All of my participants continued to use the drug at a greater rate. Their use steadily increased throughout high school and peaked in college. Currently, their level of marijuana use is quite high. When lack of school work permits, they tend to smoke at least twice a day. Such habits would be deemed excessive by the casual smoker. One such respondent discussed his patterns of smoking:

“Uh, right after class a lot. Or, like, right before dinner. Um ... sometimes before class. At least ... once more before I go to bed on an average day.” *Matt, Accounting/Information Systems, Age 20*

There seems to be no exception to a time that is not favorable for smoking. Only academic and personal responsibilities, such as a test or date, deter such behavior. Nonetheless, though they all continue to smoke, one does so very sparingly.
An Alternate State of Mind

The above mentioned respondent’s reasons for not smoking marijuana as frequently as the others resonates with the main themes I wished to explore at the beginning of this paper, particularly authenticity. As he said:

“I don’t enjoy it anymore. It’s just a result of ... I don’t enjoy it. At all. Um, it makes me ... I feel like it makes ... it makes me feel stupid and I’m not as, um, and it makes me feel more self-conscious.” Saul, Economics Major, Age 20

His observations about marijuana use and the non-sober like perceptions it provides coincided with my own hunches concerning the drug. It alters his mindset and makes him relax. Still, its negative effects (sense of momentary unintelligence and self-consciousness) outweigh the reasons why he previously chose to smoke everyday. My other participants appeared to lack a willingness to discuss such negative aspects of smoking.

They, on the other hand, elaborated much more on the questions I asked concerning marijuana’s perceived pleasant effects regarding their physical and mental nature. One respondent described the pleasantries smoking provides through its alteration of reality:

“It changes my views on life. It allows you to look at things in life in a different light, I suppose then, you know, you normally wouldn’t look at in that sense. It definitely changed my life. It made me a much happier person when I liked to smoke.” Carl, Accounting/Finance/Economics Major, Age 21

From the answers given to me by my participants, I easily concluded that they believe smoking makes certain activities more pleasant. Eating, relaxing, and sexual intercourse are just a few examples. Though I previously mentioned that most lacked a desire to discuss negative aspects of smoking in depth, some did provide brief answers which may help one to understand how smoking can be unpleasant at times. As one respondent said:

“My parents, like, uh, senior year ... there was ... I was so high around my parents all the time. They didn’t even know. They would just like get pissed off at me all the time and be, like, what the fuck are you talking about. I’d just be weird around my parents, and they’d be like, he’s a fuckin deuschbag. Yea, I was just high all the time. He is weird as shit.” Joe, Marketing/Finance Major, Age 20
This quote and others like it reveal that regrets towards smoking only arise in situations where smoking is not tolerated, e.g. interactions with parents, disapproving partners, or authority figures. The smoker does not seem to regret the actual act of smoking, but rather the unpleasant situation he finds himself unluckily present in.

Distinct Effects of Smoking Marijuana

Questions regarding authenticity and identity provided interesting and thought-provoking ideas. While I have already concluded that all, except for one, of my participants found being high a happier state of mind, the experienced alterations in mind-set must be explored further. In the smoker, there seems to be a distinct change in the ability to function as one does sober:

“Because I can’t really function when I’m high. I can function. Not! Mostly I just sit around and do nothing and watch TV, or just play video games, or … play pool. Jerk off. [laughs].” Bob, English Major, Age 21

Yet, this inability to function properly is not a problem. In fact, this is a welcomed change. It is the reason the smoker smokes. He wants to relax and ease the pressures of regular life:

“It’s good to, you know, forget about things in a week. Like the end of the day, it’s nice to take some of the pressure off. Eases it.” Joe, Marketing/Finance Major, Age 20

Does not such behavior constitute a desire to escape reality? Embracing a mindset that is enhanced by drugs personally seems inauthentic. To my participants, it does not. Smoking does not appear to change their identity. It’s a different state, but such deep considerations are not welcomed. They are just college guys looking to have a good time and get high. The change in perception is not severe enough to warrant worry. Thus, they do not fear that they may be becoming dependent on a drug in order to illicit pleasure that may be found in other leisure activities:

“No, I don’t see any difference. I’m just high that’s all. Same old Matt. Just high.” Matt, Accounting/Information Systems Major, Age 20
Hypocrisy as Related to Being High

Through the presentation and analysis of my data so far, I have mentioned that an attitude exists among smokers that seems to be contradictory. Most lack a sense to confirm my own suspicions that marijuana, at times, affects their lives greater than they realize. While this is completely understandable (after all, this is their opinion/view), most of my participants provide quotes that contrast with previous statements they made. When confronted about such contradictions, they became defensive and I was forced to move on to the next section of questions. For instance, most of my participants did not feel that marijuana altered their identity. To go off of this, they agreed that they were not dependent on the drug. Yet, one respondent admitted:

“If I had to I could. Like, I don’t need to. Probably not a very good chance. I said at the beginning of the semester I’d try to cut it out, but yea [laughter].”

Sebastian, Economics Major, Age 21

Admitting to be able to stop smoking was a trend present among my participants. Nevertheless, none of them seemed to be able to clearly state that they could stop. Their dependence, in fact, is funny to them:

“I’m a really big pot head. Uh, I’ve tried to slow down in the beginning of this year, but, uh, it didn’t work out. [laughs] Didn’t work out.” Joe,
Marketing/Finance Major, Age 20

While I find this contradiction alarming, I will admit that smoking seems to not have affected the overall performance of these eight students. They all do well in school and fulfill their responsibilities. Yet, marijuana takes a distinct precedence in their lives. It causes them to push the completion of the activities necessary to accomplishing those goals to the limit:

“Sometimes I blaze [smoke] before class. When I’m hung over, I blaze before class and, um, I’m like, goddamn it [sigh]. I shouldn’t have done that because I have to talk or something.” Tom, Accounting Major, Age 20

Once again, a respondent provided a realization of the hindrance marijuana may have on his ability to function. His engagement with the drug, however, like the other participants, continues on a regular basis.
Overall Outlook on Smoking

This last section of my presentation and analysis of the data focuses on the overall outlook on smoking my participants maintain. It particularly deals with two issues: the communal aspect associated with smoking marijuana and various views on future use of the drug. The reason why these two areas of interest have been placed together lies in my belief that the presence of friendship enforces smoking behavior. After all, each of my participants admitted that they do not like smoking alone. For instance:

“I don’t like being the only one high. I’ve done it, but I’d rather blaze with my friends.” Carl, Accounting/Finance/Economics Major, Age 21

This quote and other similar ones rest in a desire to take part in the activity amongst close friends. Being high around people who are not high is unpleasant. One’s mindset contrasts with that of sober individuals and it does not allow one to enjoy the mellow sense of relaxation the smoker desires. Instead, the smoker becomes self-conscious and feels awkward. Or, like one respondent described:

“Like an idiot.” Bob, English Major, Age 21

Thus, an embrace of the communal aspect of smoking occurs.

The communal ritual of smoking amongst friends strengthens the bond of friendship amongst people that choose to smoke. It is an activity that requires preparation, time, and a general understanding of the etiquette involved. Each of my participants recognized this aspect and the sense of sharing and companionship involved. As one pointed out:

“I think part of the allure of smoking is passing the joint and, the whole like ... it’s not acceptance. It’s like a bonding ritual.” Saul, Economics Major, Age 20

Yet, each of my participants was quick to point out that smoking was no different than any other activity in which friends spend time together. This seemed to be another example of their attempt to not associate marijuana with deviant behavior. One of them explained:

“I mean, my point is ... my point is ... if you fuckin smoke with the same person fuckin three times a day, you obviously get to no them better than, I mean ... if you didn’t smoke, you may not otherwise have gotten to know them. It’s
something that brings people together. Kind of like drinking.” *Sebastian, Economics Major, Age 21*

I found this explanation interesting and though I approach it with some skepticism, it does make some sense. The communal aspect of smoking clearly strengthens friendships. Is it different than any other activity where friends bond? Yes, in nature it is; however, at their insistence, it is similar to all bonding activities. Like all activities, the time spent together is the key.

My participants’ future outlooks regarding smoking portrayed the importance of the communal activity. While many assumed they would stop smoking once they left college and had careers, none were quick to rule out the occasional return to the ritual. One respondent reflected this view when he stated:

“Like I can see myself being thirty and blazing bowls with my buddies occasionally on a weekend.” *Sebastian, Economics Major, Age 21*

Thus, a return to smoking would only take place in the company of friends. Smoking alone, already looked down upon in college, is not anticipated. Any type of future engagement in the activity will only take place when the setting is right, and that setting requires friends.

**Conclusion**

The research I collected throughout this project has allowed me to conclude that a distinct identity exists among the marijuana users I interviewed. While they did not exhibit the feelings of false authenticity marijuana causes some to have, they do seem to utilize the drug in order to escape reality (even if they will not distinctly admit it). Smoking marijuana is a way for them to calm down and not focus on the responsibilities which lay before them. Their inability to function as they do so sober is a welcome occurrence.

Personally, I believe that marijuana users of this caliber do belong to the deviant subculture Howard Becker examined. They find friendship in smoking and, in many ways, form large aspects of their lives around the desire to get high. Though it does not seem to affect them negatively overall, interactions with others who are not high prove worrisome. Therefore, they cling to a desire of spending their time high with other smokers. Outsiders, though not
necessarily unwelcome, bring the possibility of an occurrence of an unintelligent or self-consciousness display.

The reluctance to be labeled deviant or abnormal is clearly apparent. This is evident in the constant desire to extrapolate much more on the pleasantries associated with smoking, rather than the above mentioned negative times. The smoker often becomes defensive at further probing in this area. After all, one smokes to relax. He does not like to discuss serious topics which may be controversial and thus, a *kill to his buzz*.

Attitudes toward future smoking are consistent with the communal aspect of smoking marijuana. Smokers do not like to smoke alone for they most likely will encounter someone who is not high. This person often will not understand them and perceive them differently than a fellow high person would. Thus, the approaching responsibility of a career brings a revelation that the current rapid rate of smoking must desist. While it may not entirely stop, smoking will only occur in settings where friends are present.

The above paragraphs summarize my central findings. They have enabled me to learn much more about myself and those who make up the subculture of marijuana smokers. Yet, there is more research that can be done regarding these smokers and the behaviors they and others like them exhibit.

I mentioned earlier that though my participants provided rich, insightful data, I met resistance from them at times. While I should have anticipated this, I half-heartedly believed that they may agree with my hunches of false authenticity and smoking as a way of escaping reality. Therefore, if I could push along future research on this topic, I would explore the defensive power of group cohesion experienced among a tight-knit contingent of smokers. Their fear of being labeled deviant by society’s standards is curbed by the similar views on smoking they share. Fearing the possibility of being considered abnormal, they look to each other for reassurance and support. Their thirst to get high outweighs the overwhelming majority’s view on the deviant activity.

Finally, one respondent earlier mentioned that the stigma associated with marijuana may be a reason why people smoke, i.e. teenage rebellion. Still, however, if less-and-less of the smoker’s companions chose to engage in the activity, the friendship necessary for the communal activity would seize to exist. This is a topic, nevertheless, that could further push
along both Howard Becker’s research and my own. Though I do not know where my interest in sociology will lead me, I hope that one day I may be able to revisit this fascinating topic.

Work Cited

Becoming Vegan: Not So Cold Turkey After All

By Laurel Manlow

“Why the Vegans are so whacky and delusional and unbalanced about other people’s food choices... why they have so completely adopted the teachings of the cult that they have no sense of self-identity outside their annoying self-righteous, evangelical, proselytizing lifestyle...that would be an interesting study.”

Introduction

A zealous and carnivorous crusader, who has remained anonymous, sent the above remarks to me by e-mail while I was conducting a study on veganism at UCLA. Popular culture has recently been giving veganism a more positive connotation. Americans have become more socially aware and “green,” however; the stereotype of vegans as hippies and overzealous anarchists still remains. In stark contrast to this attack, I have found that vegans live a socially conscious, healthy lifestyle, which they hold in high-esteem but generally try not to force on others. Those who have deviated from the “defined norm” have, at some point or another, been discriminated against, and, sometimes even worse, oversimplified into a convenient generalization. The process of becoming a vegan and living a vegan lifestyle is multi-faceted, and the goal of my work has been to uncover these variations. It is a way of life that cannot be classified as a cultish way of living any more than another diet should be.

I began this study by examining three vegan establishments: Jax Vegan Café, Native Foods, and California Vegan and decided to concentrate on Native Foods in Los Angeles. Native Foods is a relaxed environment—a place where one can quickly get something to eat or sit for hours in their upstairs café area. For this study, I conducted six, in-depth, in-person interviews as well as one by phone and two by e-mail. Although each experience has been different, there were a few stages that these participants went through on their vegan journey. The following
are excerpts from this study. All participants remain anonymous and names were replaced with pseudonyms.

**Becoming Vegan**

*First Step: Negative Experiences*

There are many ways people become vegan, and I found that most are not so “cold turkey” after all. All of my respondents describe some type of negative experience, repulsion, or disgust with meat or animal products. However, not every person who is mindful of what he or she is eating will take that next step to rule out meat and dairy altogether. There is frequently an exterior catalyst, such as a health, political view, or personal reason that propels them forward in their journey. Subsequently, one often becomes a vegetarian as a stepping-stone; vegetarianism can either come before or after this exterior catalyst. Once the individual has come across a positive experience as a result, which can be easily contrasted with their initial negative experience, he or she decides to become “fully vegan.” According to The Vegan Society, veganism can be defined as “the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.” The transition period brings with it many practical and social challenges.

Everyone interviewed entered the vegan trajectory by making a visceral connection between food and the animal. A negative experience ensues, and for Mindy, a hardcore animal-rights activist and squirrel rehabber (someone who rehabilitates squirrels which have fallen out of their nests) in her 60s, veganism began out of a sense of guilt for the ways animals are treated. Certain foods disgust her, and she would rather not contribute to the inhumane system:

“My whole life I had never been able to eat fish...the smell of fish is nauseating, I just found it horrible... I always kind of naturally kind of preferred my whole life more vegetarian type food. PETA sent me a complimentary magazine and in those days their magazine was really graphic. It was pictorially graphic, it was verbally graphic. I read through the magazine and I couldn’t stop crying for like four days, and it kind of snowballed from there.”

Mindy had already lived a semi-vegetarian lifestyle because eating certain animals disgusted her, but did not take that next step towards full vegetarianism until she discovered the animal
rights group PETA. After becoming increasingly acquainted with PETA’s message, Mindy became fully vegan. Mindy made the connection between veganism and animal rights in her forties and has now classified herself as a vegan for twenty years. She sees veganism as part of a larger lifestyle and in order for her to fully become the person she wanted to be in the animal rights world, she saw it necessary to adapt her eating habits as well. After visually absorbing new information concerning caged farm animals that never roam freely outdoors, she could no longer eat meat without a feeling of guilt.

Mindy is not alone in this stage of initial repulsion; Jessica, a teenager, watched videos on factory farming on goveg.org:

“In February 2007, I was up late one night watching videos online and I started to watch the factory farming videos on goveg.org. As soon as I saw the first video I started to cry watching what was happening to the animals. I continued to watch all of the videos knowing it would be painful but I needed to see what was happening. That night I decided that I would never eat meat again, and I haven’t. Then in late June 2007 I started to read the book “Slaughter House.” After, I read that it took 26 hours for the production of one egg from a chicken. This meant that every egg I ate put a chicken in an extremely torturous state for 26 hours. I decided to go vegan that night.”

Phil, a teacher in his 30s, participated in a marshmallow-eating contest his freshman year in college and almost got sick:

“I was at a party and there was a kind of marshmallow eating contest where people were stuffing marshmallows in their mouth and someone showed me what gelatin was, and I think I had about thirty marshmallows in my mouth, and it wasn’t anything radical like I got sick at that point. But, I started to connect up the dots, then connect up the dots with what’s in cheese and the enzymes that come from a cow’s stomach, and then it kind of started to build…”

And Jake, a young marketing analyst, was disgusted by the harmful effects of meat and dairy while doing his thesis on the “China Study:”

“It’s intense...it’s an intense book. I mean, after reading that... I hadn’t even read it up until the point of coming into contact with longtime friends that completely went kind of overnight vegan as a result of that book. So, I kind of
took it upon myself to really read it slowly. ‘Cause it’s not easy reading—doctor to doctor style reading, after reading that it kind of slowly kicked in.”

Mindy is different in that she sought meaning in what she was doing and wanted veganism to become part of her new animal-loving identity, whereas other interviewees may have pieced their vegan identities into their existing lives or saw it as completely separate.

Melvin, for example, described dairy as “very heavy in the body” and something that “bottles him up.” He has an aversion to many foods in general and went through a twelve-step program for eating disorders. He does not attempt to explain his initial aversion to meat in any political context as Mindy does; he said his body simply could not handle it and that he eventually became used to surviving without meat or dairy. Similarly, Blair, an employee of Native Foods who is in her 30s or 40s, had a traumatic experience in her childhood with milk:

Blair: “I stopped drinking milk, when I was like nine, so I needed to be healthy and eat other stuff. I had a sort of...traumatic experience...but anyway...” [I sensed a tiny bit of discomfort for the first time]
Laurel: “Yeah, I never really drank milk either, I don’t know why. Just with cereal...not just by itself. Why don’t you drink it anymore?” [She began to laugh, but not uncomfortably anymore]
Blair: “My dad, when I was like eight or nine or something threatened to bring my milk bottle to school and show all of my classmates that I STILL drank out of the bottle! I was horrified—couldn’t think of anything worse in the whole entire world. I don’t drink it, since then, I can’t even smell it. Not soy milk either.”

This experience shaped the way Blair thought about milk—but not all dairy for the rest of her life. She embraces eggs because of their connection to her homeland of Cuba, where one can take an egg freshly from the hen. Her memories have shaped her eating habits later on more than any other respondents. What outsiders may not know is that veganism does not always start out as and ethical or moral dilemma that must be solved; it can be a simple repulsion that the person may try to explain through other means and subsequently rationalize.

*Slowly Going Vegan or Vegetarian: Positive Experiences*
For most, an unexplained feeling of revulsion is not enough to change one’s diet and lifestyle all together. A positive experience after testing out veganism usually comes soon after. For Mindy, health issues compounded with animal rights helped push her further:

“The test results come back and he goes, ‘what are you doing? Your nutritional status has picked up tremendously in three weeks’ I told him I’ve been taking my enzymes but he said it’s picked up way more than you’d expect. He asked what I’ve changed and I told him I’ve gotten into the animal rights movement and I’ve eating vegan now and most of the food I eat is just the way it comes with Mother Nature. So, he said I don’t know what you’re doing but it’s working, keep it up. Then, I later found out that plant food, especially uncooked raw plant food, contains enzymes in it. I still take digestive enzymes and a vitamin and mineral pill everyday, because even eating the vegan food, I’m still not able to absorb everything—but tremendous difference. I’m also a diabetic, so it helps my blood sugar too.”

Her doctor was impressed by how her body’s mal-absorption syndrome improved itself so quickly. Some people need to feel the benefits in order to be converted. Positive reinforcement encourages the vegan-in-training that he or she has made the right choice. Others, like Jake, have not necessarily had health problems, but stay vegan because they know the health benefits:

“If you could watch those two people side by side—if you could monitor that and look at the health costs that are incurred in living a diet that is prone to disease, such as cancer, diabetes, all these heart complications. So yes, it’s like vegan is sustainable, or green. You’ll hear tons and tons of architects drawing people in to spend lots of money when they’re first building and by using certain materials or insulating certain things you avoid those energy costs down the road. It’s the same with being vegan. Medical expenses alone in this country would alleviate alone by living a whole foods, plant-based diet would be astronomically different. Why doctors aren’t promoting this and why research hasn’t come to the surface..? Most people would expect it to. Because for every study that shows that cancer is avoided by vegan or raw or plant-based diet, there’s ten more studies being provided by the people that are funding the industry of milk, dairy, and eggs.”

Jake is a strong proponent for veganism as a healthy way of life. He connects meat and dairy to most health problems for humans and, therefore, sees veganism as the obvious solution. For
him, veganism is an avoidance tactic. Mindy saw animal rights as her prerogative and veganism as a subset.

On the other hand, Phil, a military man came to veganism through another outlet; he told me that veganism/vegetarianism is “very big in the whole punk/hardcore scene” of which he used to be a part:

“I was really into the punk scene and the hardcore scene of the 90’s and the last couple years. The more I got into that, the more I found out about all these bands where their whole shtick, if you will, the whole veganism, and going about trying to change the world through that. I kind of went vegetarian completely on my own, but after I was pretty solid in it, I was able to--I don’t know if you’d say take comfort, but heard about other people that were doing the same thing and that kind of made it a little bit easier... Straight Edge is also something that was born through the punk movement. It’s a philosophy of you don’t drink, smoke, or do drugs—healthy living. It’s something that I think people from outside the scene, who never listen to that music, would always question and find strange—especially because the whole punk scene, heavy music, skateboarding, tattoos, all the kind of stuff for most people a + b means that they’re obviously doing drugs. ‘Hold on a second here, you won’t even drink a beer? McDonalds?’ They see whatever and they automatically assume.”

He seemed to say that he liked way these bands used veganism to change the world. Vegetarianism neatly fit with his self-image of an “idealistic.” The fact that he was surrounded by others who adopted the same mentality comforted him and helped him explain his lifestyle to those who did not understand his choices. These positive experiences act as reinforcements for the individual to consider full veganism or to continue being a vegan for many years.

**Sustaining Lifestyle Despite Challenges**

*Transition*

Once becoming vegan (meaning that one does not eat meat or animal byproducts), many hurdles still present themselves. The transition may be the hardest:

“You miss things. Your brain is telling you, I want to eat this. Like, if you’re vegetarian you might still be eating cheese, and you’re going to miss those things. you love the taste of the raw vegan food. It has such a fresh, clean taste to it. You find that you crave that kind of food, you don’t want to eat anything
greasy or with dairy on it. It doesn’t mean you won’t cheat once in a while. Everybody I’ve talked to has said, “oh heck yeah, nobody’s one hundred percent perfect.” You go to somebody’s house and they have cheese in the fridge and you make yourself a cheese sandwich. I mean, no one’s perfect. [pause] But, if you’re vegan, you’re doing pretty good.”

As Mindy makes it clear, becoming vegan is not a light decision. Some people need to take certain steps in order to sustain the vegan lifestyle. Many of the people I interviewed have or do work in vegan restaurants in order to constantly be around others with their views. Melvin, a man in his 40s, also had a vegan roommate, which made the transition easier for him:

“So, suddenly, I had the job and I had a living situation with a roommate who was kind of like “I could eat this way too.” So, we picked up lots of granola and did some shopping together ...I think the healthiest way of coming to this way of eating is to do it gradually, let the body get used to it and build up to it. I’m not for cold turkey kind of change for a diet. I think that’s why it was so long-lasting for me. It’s that I did it gradually and, you know, I let go of things. I still have some animal stuff going on—even though I know eating completely raw is possible. There’s something about it, there’s a lot to it. Yeah, I think you’ll see as you talk to more people, what’s been the common thread in keeping them moving in that direction and sticking with it ‘cause I never would have...it was never a campaign for me. I’m not for the long haul...it was very much day to day and I just found that path worked for me. I dealt with it; I dealt with the repercussions of eating that way and it wasn’t something I was willing to do.”

Melvin will rarely have cheese, but he won’t hold back. He never used the title “vegan” as a motivation to sustain his lifestyle. This is an important distinction that Mindy draws attention to in the previous passage; veganism may, in fact, be defined on a continuum rather than being part of a clear-cut binary.

Cheating, Criticism

“Cheating,” or occasional dairy or meat eating, is not unheard of. Meat-eaters are not the only criticizers of veganism; vegans may judge others and themselves. Mindy considers someone who may eat cheese occasionally, such as her and someone like Melvin or Geoffrey, as still being vegan. Certain vegans see the lifestyle in a more restrictive way, with clear-cut
rules that keep one on the path. Geoffrey, who is now forty and has been vegan since attending college at UCLA, describes going to an organized vegetarian potluck on two different weekends:

“I said to her--she’s into health--I said I’m vegan but I have cheese sometimes. She said ‘DO NOT call yourself vegan if you have cheese…do you know what they do to those cows?’ Another time, I brought a pizza to this potluck from a veggie restaurant. This man said they use whey, a milk protein, in the sauce, and he went berserk. He put a big sign on it, “this contains whey!” Everyone grabbed a piece, though. Some people take it very very seriously; it’s almost a religion.”

There is a type of hierarchy within veganism based on how low one can eat on the food chain. Geoffrey occasionally gets the veggie burger at Fatburger, whereas some other vegans would never step foot in an establishment that would encourage the murder of animals. Melvin looks up to people like Mindy, who “go raw,” eating only uncooked raw food, and refers to it as “the golden echelon of veganism,” whereas Geoffrey looks at fruitarianism, a diet of only fruit and supplements, as “an extreme.” On the vegan continuum, too far to the left or right is deemed as unhealthy and excessive.

Much criticism comes from the outside. Phil, who recently served in the army for one year in Afghanistan, initially did not want to relive the experience of being vegan in the military, but he proceeded to open up later in our interview.

Phil: “I think I didn’t eat more than two thousand calories a day for about three months—maybe I was at about a thousand calories. I was eating like crackers and lettuce on bread and that kind of stuff.”

Laurel: “They didn’t cater to you at all? Nothing?”

Phil: “No...that was, once again, utterly ridiculous. And trying to explain to people why I’m there being me and explaining to some dudes from Texas, you can imagine. Being in those situations, where, you know, I was just talking to one of my friends today about it. I was explaining why I don’t eat honey while we were in the process of a fire mission and people were actively being killed on the other side. I was explaining why I don’t eat honey; the irony is pretty, I mean you have to be able to laugh about it. [I force a smile] I mean if you think about how ridiculous that is about the honey. Why do I continue doing this? It makes sense to me, so I’m gonna do it. If I was just like all my friends there, and I was a chain smoker and I drank whenever I could and I freaking ate meat like everybody else, wouldn’t this all be a lot easier? Like getting along with people. Yeah. The whole
reason why I went in the military is that there’s a part of me that’s just this bleeding heart liberal that wants to change the world and save every last person and whatever. That’s what put me in the military. I probably would have just stayed in Japan and said “oh Fuck, sucks for you.” And just left it. It was that part of me that wanted to make a difference, and that part of me is the same part of me that, you know, They, uh, once they found out that I was vegan, they did pretty much everything in their power to make sure I didn’t make it through.. In the same way, it makes sense, because I was a couple of days away from completing the three week initiation. Had I made it through that, Ranger, medic school, the special forces medic had something called a goat lab, where they shoot and then sew it up just to practice on flesh. They stab it or slice it up or chop off one of its legs off and you get to practice. I knew that I was not going to have any part to that. And it’s great fun for the guys who’ve said they’ve done it—great experience. I’m glad that later I got to do that—on people, not on goats. People then say that’s pretty screwed up that you wanna do it on people, but these were people that were screwed up, so I was actually helping someone. I mean, I don’t know. It seems like it should be against the law to be able to do that—to have these animals that you’re stabbing and then shooting…I have “vegan” tattooed on the back of my neck from the punk rock days. We were all standing in formation, the very first day of rip, they pretty much find a way to make everybody miserable and it’s just like the first day of anything. They try to make everybody confused, you know, some dudes cried, like freaking sissies, whatever. Some dude saw that and ran over and looked at it. “Holy fucking shit, we have a vegan” Then, “are you a vegan?” he asked me. I said roger sir. Whatever, he was mad. The first week, they were giving it to me--and good. You don’t want to ever stand out in something like that. You never want to actually be the guy who looks like he’s doing the wrong thing or look like you’re not like everybody else. You want to be a complete clone of everyone.”

Phil experienced the same practical challenges that other vegans do, but in a more magnified sense because of the strict military environment. In the military, one is not supposed to be an individual or challenge the status quo. He not only found himself constantly explaining himself to his superiors and peers, but he missed out on important medical technique training. Phil’s veganism has had harsher consequences than other vegans I have talked to, because he experienced more than slight discomfort in a restaurant setting. Phil’s veganism has helped him to assert his masculinity, because he has fought many obstacles to sustain his lifestyle. He looks down on people who “cheat” in a restaurant when he has traveled rough terrain while
maintaining his lifestyle. Before he was vegan, he viewed veganism as a “sissy” way to live, and he is very conscious of his self-image. It was clear that it is important for him to stay consistent in his vegan ideology, and he experienced the same dilemma that other vegans do—the issue of still having to subscribe to a system that does not hold his point of view. Like Melvin who plays in an African drum band that uses animal skins, Phil prioritized his life in such a way that fighting for his country was more important than opting out of the military system altogether because of its practices. He, fortunately, was able to adapt his life to the military, but it was not easy:

Phil: “But, after a week, and I didn’t give up, I was able to do all the runs. This was a couple of weeks after basic training and I was able to get whatever food I needed, I could just run to the supermarket and get it at night, because this wasn’t a twenty-four hour thing.”
Laurel: “Well, it’s great that you even got that far. So you had to actively go out and find places where you could get food you said?”
Phil: “Well, while I was in training, yeah. I was in Fort Benning, Georgia for basic training, then I had no access to anything; it just sucked. But after that, in Airborn, I drove my car down; it was almost kind of like going to school except nine to five you’re learning how to jump out of planes; it’s awesome if that’s the kind of stuff you like. Um, and then I kept the blender in the back of my car and I’d just make protein shakes and stuff like that, buy some soy milk.”
Laurel: “That’s a good idea.”
Phil: “I would keep veggie burgers in there, but they won’t keep that long. Any kind of protein bars, I’d just keep them in the trunk of my car for any chance I’d got. While you’re in rip, you have to carry a canteen just to show you’re in a training scenario. So, I would empty out the canteen and put like vegan cream cheese if I was going to breakfast, or vegan margarine. So, I mean it was as ridiculous as you can imagine. I was sitting there all covert [he acts as though he’s at the table hiding something underneath]. People would just be like “Muir, what are you doing?” But, is it ridiculous? Yeah. But, anything that’s worth doing, you’re gonna do it, and do it well. And if it’s not worth doing, you won’t do it.”

Unlike others, Phil actually had to hide the fact that he was a vegan to avoid criticism. He was able to find ways to remain neatly inside the mold of a military figure; sometimes this included sacrificing water in his canteen and making extra trips to his car. Rather than people being in awe of his self-restraint as a vegan, as Phil would have liked, outsiders saw him as unable to
remain within the community structure, which, in the military, is completely meat and dairy eating. Urban vegans like Jake, whose major complaint is that people do not focus on his healthy eating habits enough, has not experienced being an outsider on the same level as Phil.

**Future Directions**

In the future, I would like to talk to various groups of people in order to have a more comprehensive view of the vegan lifestyle. People in the military, animal rights activists, and doctors would provide a thorough analysis of vegans’ motives and experiences. Some vegans who fight for animal rights, for example, see the choice to become vegan as a clear-cut decision between right and wrong. However, I think that the issue is much more nuanced than this. There are so many more questions to be asked regarding religious/spiritual life, drastic protest measures, animal sacrifice for the sake of improvement in medicine, etc. General trends are very difficult to find in a small-scale study; however, individual stories have provided the backbone for future probing. I would like to delve deeper into people’s life experiences completely apart from veganism and see if I can find more similarities that are worth exploring on a wider scale. For example, I have noticed a trend among vegans: almost everyone I talked to has moved around many times in their life and are not satisfied in one place. For some of them, Los Angeles is just a stopover on the way to another location where they do not plan on staying long either. I suspect that the decision to become a vegan may stem partly from a need for some type of stability in one’s life, whether consciously or not. Countless other connections could be explored in further studies.
Re-Dreaming the Black Female Body
By Allison Manuel

Introduction

Feminist author Patricia Hill Collins gives special attention to the events of the Academy Awards of 2002 at the outset of her chapter on “Redefining Black Gender Ideology” of Black Sexual Politics. During the ceremony actress Halle Berry became the first African American woman to win Best Actress, followed by actor Denzel Washington’s achievement of Best Actor, marking the second time an African American man has won the award. It is a startling fact, to begin with, that Black actresses and actors are only attaining such recognition for the first time in the 21st Century. However Hill Collins’ concerns address deeper issues. She asks why it is that Berry, in spite of her many fine performances, won Best Actress for a her role in Monster’s Ball, in which she engages in two erotic interracial sex scenes—one of which centers explicitly on her butt—with actor Billie Bob Thornton (Collins, 2005).

The image of Thornton’s contact with and command over Berry’s sexualized body—in particular her rear—appears to be part and parcel of a black-booty-driven culture. It is one that has been a long-time in the making—from the exhibition (and eventual medical dissection) of female slave Sara Baartman’s buttocks for a white audience in imperial England, to performer Josephine Baker’s rump-shaking dances that captivated audiences in the 1920s and 30s, to singer Beyonce Knowles’ “Bootylicious” music video released in 2001. Seen in this context, this particular performance by Berry and the majority-white audience that enabled its affirmation calls into question what has changed about the racialized exploitation of the black female body since its colonial inception. This historical montage images a definite but shifting reproduction and reorganization of white patriarchal power held over the female black body. It points to a system of patterns and alterations that was of central concern in social theorist Walter Benjamin’s musings over the seemingly contradictory nature of “modernity.” He defined the modern as “the new in connection with that which has always already been there,” and further elaborated that “the sensation of the newest, the most modern, is in fact just as much a dream form of events as the eternal return of the same” (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 180). Benjamin’s words
speak to the heart of postcolonial concerns—that we have left the formal economic, political, and social order of colonialism, yet the relationships embedded in our institutions, cultures, and even our minds continue to mimic what came before.

Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy have taken up endeavors to complicate the relationships between colonized and colonizer, origin and modern, in order to incorporate forms of ambivalence and ambiguity into formerly rigid theoretical frameworks about the nature of oppression. Applied to the field of visual culture, their work provides insight as to how to create images that pose critical resistance through the shifting of paradigms to open space for nuance and flow between cultures and relationships of dominance. However, given that their work largely does not deal with the relationship of gender to these concepts, the visions offered by black female artists have the potential to center narratives that often go unrecognized.

For the past semester, I have engaged in-depth with the work of a variety of dynamic contemporary African American female artists such as Emma Amos, Carrie Mae Weems, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and Alison Saar. In spite of the scope of my exploration, I find it fruitful to focus on one artists’ work in particular for the scope of this paper in order to apply her work and its implications in a more in-depth way.

The work of Brooklyn-born photo, film, and video installation artist Lorna Simpson defies concrete alignment with any revolutionary artistic movement. Her art is neither the surreal of the mostly white male Parisian “avante garde” that drew from “the primitives’ under the heel of European colonialism” (Kelly, 2002, 159) to create art to conspire against Western domination. Nor is it the “superreal” of the Black Arts Movement that sought to identify the pure, essential black form and, in the process, created delimiting images for both black males and females as only black heroes, black queens, members of black heterosexual families, and black warriors. Simpson fixes the camera on her subjects with an “oppositional gaze”—one that is informed by her position as a woman of color. In Black Looks: Race and Representation, author bell hooks (1992) makes the important distinction that the gaze of a black female is not essentially an oppositional one, but rather “black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (p. 128). In that vein, the images of the female black body Simpson
creates radically reconfigure, rather than re-inscribe, conventions of race, gender, identity, history, culture, and memory. hooks (1992) suggests, that it is the “transgressive image” that must be striven for if we are to envision radical alternatives for change in the future:

For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldview and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking. (p. 4)

Rather than turning her view to the “flip side” of binaries of oppression, Simpson’s images interrogate the basis for those binaries in the first place. In so doing, she does not resort to the path of moral relativity. She is intentional in the unearthing of generations of oppressions buried in the layers of history and uncovers their systematic reproduction in every-day life often veiled by normalized smokescreens and “politically-correct niceties.” However, her images also visualize understandings that complicate dualistic thinking and easy distinctions between “good” and “bad.” By confusing conventional paradigms of race, gender, sexuality, and history and Simpson offers visions of new, more humane ways of looking, feeling, and relating to ourselves and each other.

**Colonial Criss-Cross and Connected Lives**

Walter Benjamin grappled with the issue of origins throughout his work as a central preoccupation of modernity. According to Benjamin, nineteenth century industrial capitalism deployed “archaic images to identify what is historically new about the ‘nature’ of commodities” (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 67). The Victorian Era brought concerns about what was essentially “different” about the modern moment to the fore, sending historians and anthropologists in search of a coherent, linear story of origins of the Family of Man (McClintock, 1995, p. 40-4). This story would be linked to a tale of origins of nation states as a part of the predetermined evolution of modernity (p. 357).
Simpson’s *Square Deal* (1990) considers the process of re-membering involved in any unified familial or national history. The work depicts two window-shaped frames that divide four female figures in one frame beside four square-shaped braids in the other. In between the two frames is a small plaque that reads, “their story doesn’t square with yours try and square the two.” The combination of the text with the visual unity between the square-shaped picture frames and braids suggests the attempt to impose a singular narrative of family origins upon different subjectivities. Simpson’s comments on the work relays that the initial inspiration for the piece came from her own grandparents’ stories of family history: “Family stories are often told in code and in such a roundabout way, and as the stories are passed down they take on heroic and mythological proportions” (Simpson et al., 2002, p. 133). Seeing global processes through the local context and vice versa is a recurring theme in her work. Thus it is not surprising that the illusory search for a “square deal” in family history can have implications for the history of national origins as filtered through the trope of the Family of Nation—a prevalent theme in McClintock’s writings.

McClintock asserts that nationalism necessitates a singular glorified notion of beginnings and progress. Governments impose a unified narrative of origins as the bedrock for a coherent national identity and culture. It offers an inception story, often of mythological proportions, that serves as the point of departure for the linear progress of the nation that follows. However, as McClintock (1995) discusses, this tale of national origins (and progress thereafter) often serves to obfuscate the incredible violence required to draw its national borders and sustain its development (p. 357). The nation of the United States was built with, by, and over black bodies. When children are introduced to the “Declaration of Independence,” it is not included that the man who penned the words “all men are created equal” was a slaveholder. If a glorified past is the aim, it would follow that the narratives of former slaves would be left out in the process of re-membering the national birthing story; that their persistent marginalization in the present-day would be left out of a discussion of national progress. Benjamin argues that the process of excavating and hearing these forgotten or silenced histories must be a deeply psychological and dynamic process—not merely a unilateral reversal of the history of the colonizer for that of the colonized:

If bourgeois history writing is to be overturned, then it is not a question of replacing it with a Marxist narrative. Rather, the goal is to ring to consciousness those repressed elements of the past (its realized barbarisms and its unrealized dreams) which “place the present in a critical position. In the dialectical image, the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility acts as a lodestar for the assembly of historical fragments. (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 338)

According to Benjamin, re-membering the past must be taken on as a conversation between the many different subjectivities involved. This conversation is necessarily a psychically-charged one, bringing to the fore conflicting and contradictory explanations and reconstructions of the past’s connection to the present. The importance must not be unifying them into a universal story that makes coherent sense. Rather the emphasis must be upon understanding the relationships between the contradictions and dislocations in the stories of different parties and why some parties’ stories have been strategically left out along the way. The “dialectical images” that Simpson creates can demonstrate the way in which a mobile pasts that continue to haunt the present.
In his *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Social Consciousness*, Gilroy contends with the way in which the history of mobility, tumult, and dis/relocation engendered through colonialism has structured the experience of the African Diaspora. He argues that these flows inevitably criss-cross any attempt to form a unitary national history:

The history of the black Atlantic since [the arrival of conquest to its shores], continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 16)

The passage, reshaping, and anchoring of colonial and imperial power from one place to the next and emergent resistance to those forces has been a constant. It is a constant the complicates a sense of stability in historical memory and notions of shared culture contained in a nation state. However, it has provided linkages to the experiences of other formerly colonized peoples across the globe. Simposon’s photographic work entitled *Same* (1991) grapples with similar issues of origins, progress and the routes through which the conditions (social, historical, political, etc.) that organize people’s lives travel. She depicts panels of nearly identical upper torsos of black women’s bodies whose hair are connected by a long, sweeping braid. Many of the women depicted have bare shoulders, while others wear plain white cotton T-shirts. Below the panels are fragments of text that refer to the women—two of which read “were not related” and “had never met.” Though they appear identical from behind, their differing positions and garb and the accompanying text suggest that these are different women that occupy distinct spatial and/or temporal locations. However they share an unmistakable resemblance and connection. In this way, the piece images the way in which present conditions within the *localness* of one place or one person’s life are connected with conditions of the past and other places. I emphasize the use of the word “localness,” as Simpson evinces a similar understanding of the local as does anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown in *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*. Brown avoids speaking of social processes that are shaping and shaped by the space of Liverpool as confined within the enclosed space of a locality. However, she recognizes that “subjectivities and concrete practices” of people in a local space hinge to transnational processes of racial and gender
formation (Brown, 2002, p. 5). Local practices and historical and transnational processes are, in fact, mutually constitutive. Gilroy (1993) considers this to be at the heart of the tension between the roots and routes that have shaped the black Atlantic, wherein:

movement, relocation, displacement, and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions and where, as we have already seen, there are long histories of the association of self-exploration with the exploration of new territories and the cultural differences that exist both between and within the groups that get called races. (p. 133)

He erects the image of the ship as the physical vessel that linked different local spaces and peoples with its colonial course. He argues that it is this mobility, rather than a rooted sense of culture fixed in a place, that brought modernity into being with its cyclical flow that carried peoples into contact and conflict where the vessel dropped anchor (p. 16). The historical context of Western/European colonialism and imperialism, as transnational regimes of power, has generated displacement and reverberations that have been felt throughout history to the present day. These reverberations traverse the globe, touching different locations and taking different forms. The contact has not been a unilateral imposition, as that spatial and temporal travel reshapes its imprints. Thus, it is critical to be attentive to “the inner asymmetry and differentiation of black cultures” that takes shape in different communities. However, Gilroy cautions against enabling the local components of black culture and history to eclipse consideration of the “special modalities” that have emerged from the colonial project and share some measure of continuity (p. 120).

In Same, fragments of text that lie below the panels such as “knew illness,” “were let go for the same reasons,” and “their displeasure was acknowledged in the same octave” suggest that parts of these women’s experiences are shared, echo one another, are generated by similar forces. Simultaneously Simpson anchors the women’s subjectivities in distinct personal actions or experiences that shape their lives with text reading “didn’t wear their hair the same way” or “read different translations.” However, there is an ambiguity as to which text corresponds to which figure. The meanings that the audience applies to the text are also open to interpretation according to the audience members’ own biographies. Continuity joins the women in the form of a thick braid, yet the panels fragment the picture so as to imply ruptures in history, space, and biography.
Mimicking the “Master” and the Power to Subvert

Bhabha originally conceived of his “mimic man” as operating in a colonial context, in which colonizers had to cultivate a class of indigenous persons to carry out their mandate in the colony. To that end, they created educational institutions to train those selected individuals in the rules and ruling gestures of the colonial regime. In this way, mimicry becomes “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha, 1997, p. 153). Thus the “mimic man” should be able to ascend towards “civilization” to a certain controlled extent but never be able to attain it entirely, for in the colonial discourse, only the true colonizing class could possess the inherent capacities for governing a subjugated people. Nonetheless, Bhabha asserts that this capacity to ascend to an “almost-but-not-quite” civilized state proves to be destabilizing for the colonizer-colonized relationship: “Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance that coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses and immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.” 153 That English culture could be approximated and mimicked by the
Colonized highlighted the ambiguous and arbitrary nature of the evolutionary capacities that were considered to be exclusively possessed by the ruling class.

I relate this destabilizing and threatening vision of mimicry to Simpson’s video installation *Corridor* (2003), that views through a narrow corridor two black women of distinct historical moments as they move through their daily household routines. The woman on the left is a runaway slave who works as a servant in the historic 17th-century Coffin House in Newbury, Massachusetts. The woman on the right is a housewife leading a life of leisure and loneliness in a house designed in 1938 by Walter Gropius in nearby Lincoln. (Simpson, 2007, n.p.) Both women share a resemblance to Bhabha’s “mimic man.” Having fled the Southern plantation, the woman on the left has been “liberated” to work in the house of the moneyed middle class. She has been acculturated into the structures and “becoming” behaviors of respectable white society so that she is fit to maintain order of the domestic space of their household. The woman on the right appears as a 1950s housewife, judging by her dress and the furnishings and design of the household. However, given the racially discriminatory housing covenants that were in place during the period of white flight into the emerging 1950s suburbs, a black family would not have been able to purchase a house such as the one depicted. Perhaps she has married a white man and so is able to enter the lifestyle of white, middle class womanhood. Or perhaps Simpson has, with intent, placed her in a role that she would have had no chance of assuming during that time. In either case Simpson has purposefully positioned her so as to appear out of place to the audience, as black women have no place in the historical imaginary of suburban middle class womanhood of the 1950s. However, she moves through all of the practical and cultural gestures of a white suburban housewife’s daily routines. According to Bhabha (1997), the ambiguity therein points to how deeply destabilizing mimicry of the master’s ideals, behavior, and culture can appear should they come face to face with the mimic (wo)man:

The menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I’ve described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object...They are also...the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire that alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as ‘inappropriate’ colonial subjects. A desire that, through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those
disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. (p. 155)

View video at: http://lsimpsonstudio.com/filmvideo03.html

These women’s mimicry is threatening to the dominant class as it “rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from its essence.”(157) These “inappropriate subjects” that were thought to need disciplining and regulation have appropriated the facets of the ruling class in a nearly identical fashion. These tropes were supposed to be integral to the nature of the ruling class, therefore legitimating their status as rulers. Here, they appear not so essential to their humanity after all. The discriminatory basis of these features appears deconstructed, and according to Bhabha, “that form of resemblance is the most terrifying to behold.” (157) In the process, the vision of the mimic woman undermines the exclusive nature of these features and opens up the space to critique them. In both frames, the “master” of the house never appears and the women go through the motions of their day without surveillance or regulation. Yet both women appear to be caged inside of the image of freedom that they have attained. In acting out these ideals of freedom, these women’s experiences of these ideals appear rather
unfulfilling—mundane at best, entrapping and isolating at worst. As the women work, soft, undulating piano music plays in the background. However, the serene classical melody is disrupted periodically by a cacophony of blaring horns of the brass band jazz era. The horns seem to be a screaming alarm, disrupting the performance of the white middle class “American Dream.”

McClintock (1995) points out the importance of attending to the risks that exist in “locating agency in ambivalence” (p. 63) with relation to Bhabha’s mimic man. Colonial subjects’ mimicry, though it may disrupt the discourse of the colonizer’s identity, does not do anything in the way of social action to enact historical change. Bhabha writes, “caught in the Imaginary as they are, these shifting positionalities will never seriously threaten the dominant power relations, for they exist to exercise them pleasurably and productively”(p. 64) This form of mimicry endured for a long time under the colonial regime and contributed to its sustenance. However, it is Simpson who exercises agency in placing these women in positions of mimicry that open up windows for the viewers to assess their lives and perhaps their own in an intimate light.

The vision of these women’s lives questions the paradigm of historical progress, as both women are caught within similar, albeit differentiated in terms of level of leisure, structures of domesticity. The housewife serves as a vision of the life as “mistress of the house.” It is a vision that the servant on the left might dream of attaining, though she has already attained the ideal lifestyle open to black women of her position during that time period—and in her solitude appears to the audience as if the house she works in could be her own. Both lifestyles appear empty and unfulfilling. Both are relegated to isolation. For example, the servant ends her day writing at her desk alone and the housewife ends hers staring across the table she has set for dinner at the empty seat—unfilled by her “beloved” husband. Yet the artist does not depict them in a mocking way. In fact the camera appears to offer an objective lens, a “window on the world”(Romanyshyn, 1999, p. 32) of their lives, as Romanyshyn describes the appearance of linear perspective of traditional photography and film. Of course the artist’s lens is not merely a disinterested window, as she orchestrated the events with an artistic and conceptual vision in mind. However, the emphasis on mimicry rather than mockery captures subtle but poignant expressions of their emptiness. In the process, it opens space for viewers
to see themselves in the frame and perhaps question their own ideals that they might posses about American freedom and middleclass lifestyle.

Filmmaker Isaac Julien argues, “The issue is not one of a binary moral substitution, which only serves to reiterate whiteness as the dominant model, but a more general re-articulation of the meaning of ethnicity, including whiteness, in which race no longer operates at the margins as an issue of representation” (Iles, 2002, p. 107). In that vein, Simpson offers images of black women that are morally ambiguous—whose bodies are both victims of abuse and sites of strength, both broken and reassembled. She does not aspire to create portraits of black women as unequivocally positive in order to save them from the negative meanings associated with “not white” that have been historically produced and contemporarily reinscribed. She questions the basis for our moral binaries and points to their historical construction as an impetus for their complication. In drawing from the theoretical frameworks of a variety of postcolonial theorists—namely Bhabha, Gilroy, and McClintock—we can see the necessity for incorporating space for ambiguity and ambivalence to enter into the ways we conceptualized identity formation, subjectivity, origins, and resistance. Simpson’s work demonstrates how these notions can be applied to visual representations. She creates space for the envisioning of the full subjectivities of black women through allowing them to be, quite simply, complicated. Yet she takes care to embed their images with ghosts of a past of colonialism that have contemporary consequences. To that end, she strives to create images that avoid reproducing conventional binaries through power reversal. In doing so, she encourages ambiguity and ambivalence to enter into the interpretive frameworks of her audience and poses alternatives for different ways of seeing.

Works Cited


“Keep in mind that I knew it was a dream the entire time. I mean, it’s not every day that some random guy leads you through a strange version of Hell for no apparent reason.” As I sat there on the red leather couch that was about as comfortable as a bag of jagged rocks, I couldn’t help but think that my psychologist had no interest whatsoever in what I was saying. She was seated on a comfortable-looking arm chair, scribbling notes on her brown clipboard. I wasn’t here because I thought she could help at all, in fact I wasn’t even sure there was a problem with having a weird dream. However, I was paying her good money to listen to me rant and rave and she was going to sit through all of it whether she liked it or not.

So there I was, floating blissfully through the land of sleep and fatigue when I first met him. He said his name was Mike and that he was sent to my dreams in order to lead me through the Inferno, the part of the afterlife where condemned souls must eternally suffer for their earthly transgressions. Without hesitation, I decided to follow him through the sub-conscious reality of my dreams; a place where time doesn’t progress in the same fashion as the outside world and I could float through the air like one of the condemned souls I was about to meet. I never questioned who my guide was in his earthly life, or even if he was still alive in the world above and just caught in a dream like I was. It didn’t much matter; I was going on a tour of Hell.

We arrived at the front porch of a dilapidated, burning house that appeared to be only one story high. There was an old man rocking back and forth on an oak rocking chair. He had piercing eyes of judgment that made me uncomfortable standing in front of him; I could feel his eyes peering into my soul. He was the gatekeeper, the one who sent the condemned souls to their appropriate realm of the Inferno. Mike told him of our journey and without a word, the old man opened the door to the house and we quickly darted inside. Mike and I were standing on the first floor of the Inferno.

Ahead of me, I saw a multitude of people; they didn’t appear to be in much discomfort, but they were moving around at such a slow pace that I originally thought they were frozen
solid. Mike informed me that these were the people who walked too slowly in the earthly world, the people who make you late to your important business meetings or your final exams because they walk as if they were wading waist-deep in rapidly drying concrete, especially when it’s raining out and you forgot your umbrella. These people took their ability to walk for granted and now they are forced to walk at an excruciatingly slow pace for all of eternity. What makes it worse is that there is no scenery at all that could make their near-stagnant condition more enjoyable, not even a shrub. I knew some of these slow-walkers in the world above, and I saw a familiar face in the distance. He was a classmate of mine in the third grade. He walked so slowly in front of me during the designated, class-wide trip to the bathroom that by the time I finally got there, I had missed my chance to go. My bladder almost burst that day and I never forgot it. Now, in this desolate land of slowness, I could avenge myself. I ran up behind his slow-moving figure and flicked him so hard in the ear that my hand stung. I immediately laughed and ran away; he would never catch up. Mike hid a smirk and reprimanded me for my actions. From then on, I promised not to antagonize any other soul; if only I had not wasted my one, permissible harassment so soon.

It was time to descend to the first subterranean floor of the house. Mike explained that the slow-walkers were allowed to live above ground because their transgression was not as grave as the others. There were four floors in total underground and the only way to reach them was by means of an extremely slow and rocky elevator, obviously designed to further the punishments of the condemned souls on the path to their eternal resting place. This elevator ride was so horrifying that I’m not even going to recount it. Needless to say, I can’t walk past an elevator even now without cringing; I take the stairs.

The second floor of the inferno housed all the people who felt the need to be within three inches of your face while talking to you (three inches is a rough estimate, I’m not sure how far the cut-off distance actually was). These are the people that are usually telling you some random story and they’re so close to you that you can feel your own breath bouncing off of their faces and back into yours. Mike told me that these souls are forced to wear magnetic force-fields that do not allow them to be within five feet of each other. Every five minutes, a monstrous demon pulled a lever with his mighty paws and the force-field dropped. The souls would float toward each other until they were about a foot away, and then that demon would
reactivate the force-fields and the souls would repel one another. It might not sound like a bad punishment, but the grief in the souls’ eyes showed that they were suffering immensely, so much so that I cannot bear to talk of this realm any longer.

As we entered the next floor of the Inferno, I was baffled to find that I was standing in an endless corridor with a countless number of doors on each side. Mike clapped his hands and the doors immediately became transparent. Each room was no larger than a coffin and there was one soul per room. The souls had been driven to insanity after being locked up alone for eternity. This floor of the inferno contained the souls of people who refused to greet their acquaintances in passing; people that would deliberately turn away from a familiar face in order to avoid exchanging pleasantries. I’m sure you’ve interacted with a person like this before. You spend all semester in a class with him and he refuses to speak to you in public. You can see him walking toward you from a mile away and you keep eye-contact with him the entire time. You raise your hand to wave and say hello and he immediately turns away. He just walks past while you’re left standing there with your hand in the air. Why is it so hard for him to wave, smile, or even nod in your general direction? These souls will suffer here in solitary confinement for all eternity, where they will never have the opportunity to deny a salutation ever again. I saw one of my classmates down the hall and immediately rushed to his door. He was alone, mumbling to himself and twitching uncontrollably. I put my hand up against the door to show that I sympathized with his pain, but not even after so many years of confinement would he greet me. He averted his glance at once, proving that he had earned his punishment. I still felt sorry for him, but Mike beckoned me to enter the horrific elevator once again and descend to the fourth floor.

The fourth floor was flooded with an odor so offensive that Mike had to force me out of the elevator. Imagine an odor consisting of potato chips, pickles, and rotten eggs. The smell emanated from the hundreds of rows of sofas in front of an equal amount of television sets. This floor was inhabited by the lazy. They were the people who never went to class, never did their work, and never studied. They played video games all day and spent the weekends in a drunken stupor. Their punishment was one that fit their crime all too well. They were forced to lie on their sofas wrapped in what appeared to blankets with sleeves, or slankets as we would call them in the above world. These slankets were devices so torturous that they
restricted all movement of any sort, not to mention they were not at all practical. The souls bound in these horrifying devices could not move even to attend to their bodily functions, thus causing the vomit-inducing odor. Worst of all, the souls were forced to watch repeats of the old television show “Sanford and Son.” Besides having a very catchy theme song, it was a true punishment to watch. To this day I have never watched a full episode; I’m not sure anyone ever has. This level of the Inferno disgusted me so much that I willingly reentered the elevator and descended to the last and final realm of punishment.

I walked out of the elevator and there he was, Lucifer himself. I would have known it was him even if Mike hadn’t told me who he was. He stood higher than three skyscrapers stacked on top of one another, but Mike helped me float up to the beast’s mouth. I have never seen such a creature so horrifying in my life. His true appearance cannot be put into words, only that he was the master of all demons. Lucifer kindly opened his mouth and allowed me and Mike to peer inside, past his enormous epiglottis, through his esophagus and into the very pit of his stomach. I could see this appalling realm of suffering as if I were only a few feet away. Here burned the souls of the braggarts and those who made their blinding achievements known to all. There is always one person in every social group who has to make it known that he is capable of much more impressive feats than everyone else. If you tell a story about how you finally made it down the bunny slope at the ski resort, he tells everyone he cruises effortlessly through the double diamonds. If you just set a personal record at the annual 5K run, he runs full marathons in record time every weekend. If you stopped a burglary by calling the police about a suspicious-looking man, he single-handedly busted a gigantic drug ring by pursuing, apprehending, and beating down all the criminals involved. Here he must bathe in the burning acid of Lucifer’s digestive system, never to see the light of day again.

“And then I woke up,” I said to my psychologist, whose eyes had immediately grown heavier with the burden of yet another patient’s nightmares. “Now you tell me” I said with a sincere note, “what does this all mean?”

**What does it all mean?**

“An Inferno of Pet Peeves” is set against the backdrop of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and is meant to explore common pet peeves experienced by many people in society. The story is
framed by a narrator’s visit to a psychologist, during which he explains a dream of his in which he tours a version of Hell that punishes all those with irritating habits. This story explores the narrator’s pet peeves and his subconscious attempt to gain revenge on all those who have annoyed him in the past. The narrator of course is not crazy, but is merely frustrated by sociological forces that confront everyone on a daily basis. We all have a list of pet peeves and it seems as though someone triggers one of those pet peeves at least once a day. Whether you are constantly annoyed by slow-walkers, people who talk loudly on their cell phones, or people who try and top any story you might tell, we all have a list of behaviors that simply annoy us. How then, is it possible to live in such a frustrating world? One approach, which this story tries to follow, is to use humor. If you can learn to laugh at these minor annoyances in society, then you can learn to accept them. Sometimes, it is hard not to laugh when your pet peeves are triggered on a regular basis. Without a doubt, there will always be someone snapping gum in year ear in class or talking loudly on the phone on the bus. If you can view these occurrences in a humorous light, you can live amongst these constant frustrations.
The Female Lunatic: A Story of Truth, Denial, and Healing
By Kelsey Yarnell

She has come undone. She is shrieking loudly and incoherently, mumbling words with little meaning. She is shaking uncontrollably, her limbs spasmodically lashing out. She tears at her skirts, rips at her hair, gnashes her teeth. She is everything a lady ought not to be, and everything woman invariably is: emotional, raw, void of reason and rationality, a beast to be reckoned with. She is Ophelia in Hamlet, the frenzied Russian peasant in The Brothers Karamozov. She is Dora, a hysteric female patient of Freud, called “repulsive” by one follower (Herman 1992:14). She is female: the demonic half, the mysterious half, the half afflicted with sentimentality and repressed desires, eternally explained in man’s terms and on man’s grounds.

I myself have been guilty of a couple of crazed lash-outs—usually directed at my laptop, or occasionally my older brother. I may or may not have struck my ex-boyfriend in the face. I was Ophelia, briefly. But never the real Ophelia, the bedraggled, raving madwoman in Shakespeare’s Hamlet who meets death in drowning herself. Ophelia presents the archetypical lunatic female. She is both beautiful and completely unhinged, a complex knot of sexual tension defined by her relationship to both her lover and her father. Considering that Sparknotes.com is a dominant force in education today, I found it helpful to explore her character on the website, which briefly described her as dependent on men to tell her how to behave. What this is implying is that Ophelia is responsible for her own lapse into insanity because she is passive and unable to take command of her own life, when in fact, Ophelia is bullied by her father and verbally abused by her lover. Furthermore, not enough of her story is told to even fully address the causes of her mental breakdown. I find it disturbing that a modern interpretation of Ophelia would continue to treat her in these terms, but the idea that hysterical women are responsible for their own madness is one that has long been accepted. In the sixteenth century, symptoms of insanity in a woman would have been attributed to “erotomania”—the effects of repressed or unrequited love. In the nineteenth century, hysteria in young girls was often attributed to
the “sexual instability” common to women during puberty. And in the twenty-first century, we see insanity clothed in medical terms as schizophrenia (Kaplan 2000). In this dark, abusive, and misogynistic history of “knowledge,” however, there has been a brief flicker of hope, a blip of consciousness and then a tragic reversal of awareness, precipitated by a single man: Sigmund Freud.

In the 1890’s Freud studied eighteen different female hysterics—by simply talking and listening to them—and came to one shocking conclusion. In 1896, he wrote The Aetiology of Hysteria, which reported that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood (Herman 1992). In this paper, Freud discussed thoroughly the process by which he delved deep into the minds of his patients for causes of hysteria. He initially found that while some patients had experienced true sexual trauma during adolescence, others seemed to have been pushed over the edge by relatively trivial physical sensations—a hand brushing against a knee, for example. But he was not content with the idea that these particular patients were inherently unstable; “It seemed an obvious thing, then, to say to ourselves that we must look for the determinants of these symptoms...in experiences which went still further back” (Gay 1995:102). Freud refused to write off his female patients, going so far as to say it was “obvious” that he must look deeper.

When Freud came to his conclusion that these women had been subject to childhood abuse, by essentially bringing his patients to re-enact those experiences, he did not doubt the truth of their memories, instead arguing that “the behaviour of patients while they are reproducing these infantile experiences is in every respect incompatible with the assumption that the scenes are anything else than a reality which is being felt with distress and reproduced with the greatest reluctance” (Gay 1995:103). Is this the same Freud who believed all our actions were motivated by unrealities? Why did he not hypothesize that these women were simply acting out repressed sexual needs by falsely reproducing childhood trauma? The Freud that I have come to know and despise would have said that these women were disturbed because they did not have penises and/or because they had not been able to sleep with their fathers. But this Freud had not sold out quite yet. He conducted his research and wrote his
paper with compassion, empathy for the repressed, and acknowledgment of the horrifying capacity of humans for violence.

When Freud presented his paper to the Viennese Society for Psychiatry and Neurology in April of 1896, he was promptly rejected, partially on the grounds that his thesis would accuse a huge majority of men as sexual predators. Within one year he re-canted, withdrew his findings, and eventually developed his theory of psychoanalysis, which, as I have stated, is based on a ridiculous dream-world, in which humans are reduced to being playthings of bizarre, mythological motivations (the Oedipal complex) and the monstrous and bestial control of the Id. Following Freud’s repudiation of his findings, he continued to meet female patients, but relegated their symptoms to the world of erotica rather than of violence. Dora, a woman who had been treated by her father and his friends as a “sexual toy,” broke off treatment with him when he tried to explore how she was aroused by the situation, marking the death of Freud’s potential as an agent of change (Herman 1992). The Aetiology of Hysteria could have engendered a total social revolution by bringing to the forefront of public consciousness the appalling frequency of child abuse and sexual abuse. But authority needed to keep their voices quiet, and maintain the illusion that men were rational and harmless, and women were crazy.

Without the shady, sinister yin, there can be no illuminant, reasonable yang. Female is the dark side of yin and yang, male the light. The existence of clear-cut, self-righteous reason requires a twisted, irrational mentality. Without wrong (female) there is no right (male). As Virginia Woolf said in A Room of One’s Own, woman serves as man’s “[looking glass] possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 1957:35). Likewise, hysterical women have long served to make men feel as though they must be on the other end of the spectrum - keepers of reason, knowledge, and sensibility. Men of science and men of authority looked at panic-stricken, women racked with mental anguish, and consequently confirmed their own level heads and righteousness. By telling female patients they were delusional and sexually perverted, they could continue to deny that they were the sick ones, the child-abusers, sexual molesters, and transgressors against nature, human life, and harmony.

Freud, his early patients, his findings, and his failure cannot account for the entire history of the portrayal of the woman as hysterical, however. As I have discussed,
Shakespeare’s Ophelia first appeared onstage in the sixteenth century, and continues to be tormented onstage as the epitome of decadent feminine lunacy. Furthermore, it is a picture that subsists in popular culture today. One of my favorite French films, released within the past five or six years, depicts a dangerous young woman inflicted with erotamania. In He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not, the seductive and artistic Audrey Tatou torments the family of the object of her affection, eventually tries to kill him, and is finally confined in a mental institution. I love the film because it is a psychological thriller, and because I love all things French, but I cannot help seeing that it perpetuates the dangerous stereotype of the woman as incapable of handling love and sex without falling off the deep end. Is it the demands of society (i.e. relationships, raising a family) that infect women with mental illness, or is it abuse, hatred, and unjust pressures and expectations? Or, are all those things we deem as “cruel and unusual” actually tied to convention? As Freud’s cases of sexual violence would demonstrate, abuse is too often the rule rather than the exception.

The Brothers Karamazov may have been written almost one hundred and thirty years ago, but, just as Shakespeare’s portrayal of Ophelia continues to bear relevance today, so too does Dostoevsky’s provocative description of “women of great faith.” In the novel, crowds of “crazy, wailing” peasant women wait to see the saintly elder Zosima, who cures them quickly of their hysteria with his prayer (Dostoevsky 2003:59). The narrator reflects on the nature of these women, how he had witnessed them as a child “[shrieking], or [barking] like dogs, their cries filling the church”, and how he was told that they were feigning hysteria to avoid work, and that they could be cured with a firm reprimand--a discouraging and retroactive evaluation of mental illness, even in the nineteenth century. However, Dostoevsky redeems the context of the novel in the following explanation: “it was a terrible female disease, particularly widespread in Russia (which shows what a hard life Russian peasant women have), a sickness resulting from exhausting work following too soon upon a difficult, abnormal labor without medical help, and from an intensely unhappy life, full of brutality and ill-treatment, which, although common enough, is beyond the powers of endurance of some women” (Dostoevsky 2003:59). I find it surprising, and refreshing, that this particular piece of information is even included in the narrative, as it is somewhat out of place.
I do not feel that Dostoevsky had a feminist agenda when he wrote this; rather, I think it is there more to provide a pretext for the characterization of Zosima. However, it does undoubtedly make a powerful suggestion- that women- in nineteenth century Russia, twentieth-century America, everywhere, every century- are often forced to bear the heavy burdens of labor, motherhood, childcare, and domestic abuse without hope of alleviation or acknowledgment of their suffering. The “hysteric” then are simply the products of the most extreme cases of violence and fatigue. And where these women should be viewed as proofs of the disturbing commonality of rape, incest, and general abuse, society has instead treated the “crazy village girl,” Dora, and Ophelia as examples of the inherent evil in the female nature.

Although we have seen progress in the prevention of abuse and misogyny, there does not seem to be an easy cure for violence, hatred, sexual abuse, and injustice. Awareness of is obviously key. However, as Freud’s career would show, authority and the desire to maintain the status quo are powerful forces that too often quiet the repressed. And even if violence is prevented, what about the survivors? What cure can there be for women who are already inflicted with mental disease? In The Brothers Karamzov, Zosima is able to quickly cure a young girl of her symptoms simply by listening to her, placing a stole on her head, and saying a prayer. And although this is attributed to the fact that the women were convinced that they themselves were possessed, and that the elder could immediately exercise them of their demons, this explanation leaves something to be desired--is Dostoevsky saying that the women were indeed possessed? Considering that the condition is said to be stress-related, the reader is clearly not meant to believe that their symptoms were self-induced or imagined. Zosima does exercise the genuinely ability to heal the peasant women who come to him in suffering and pain: Zosima knows the power of active love.

Zosima listens to the distraught, accepts them without judgment, and seeks to make a connection with them. He succeeds where we most often fail--we attempt to live like islands, isolating ourselves from the downtrodden and the “insane” in order to secure our own petty feelings of pride and self-righteousness. So, instead of trying to empathize with the most wretched of human beings--in this case, the hysterical woman--we ostracize them. It is tragic that Freud, of all people, exercised the notion of active love briefly in The Aetiology of Hysteria in 1896, and so quickly replaced that notion with denial, ignorance, and cruelty, but it does
provide powerful proof that healing, awareness, and truth do exist. Unfortunately, as in the case of Freud, they are too often silenced out of fear of change, just as the men reacting to his work rejected the reality of sexual abuse and did not want to humble themselves and admit their own guilt. I do not pretend to know the simple solution to the prevalence of abuse and pain, or to the continuing subjugation of the female sex. But I do suggest that hysteria has too long remained the subject of self-interested voyeurism rather the reaching hand of active love, of which all people have the potential to exercise; after all, if Freud showed sympathy for women- albeit briefly- then we are all capable of compassion.

Works Cited


Erin Simmons

Erin is a member of the class of 2010 in the College of Arts and Sciences where she is a double major in Sociology and Communication. This is the first time that she has ever had her writing published, so it very exciting for her. She was inspired to write this piece because of a group project in her research methods class. Her group surveyed a small group of students about the hookup culture on campus. She found the topic and the implications of the data very interesting and wanted to take it farther and look at data from a larger sample with a more extensive investigation to see what the culture at Boston College was really like, why the students make the choices that they do and how they feel about it overall.

This research project was a large undertaking and she would not have been able to do it without the help of Professor Deborah Piatelli, the members of her research methods group who helped inspire the project, and all of the people who participated in the focus groups and took her survey. She would like to extend her thanks to everyone involved.

Stafford Oliver

Stafford Oliver is a member of the class of 2010 in the College of Arts and Sciences. He is a sociology major with minors in history and international studies. He previously published “Sneaker Mania: An Examination of Sneaker Culture” in Dialogue: The Undergraduate Essay Journal of Boston College. In addition to SocialEyes, he is involved with the Pedro Arrupe International Program. This paper was the result of a rewarding group survey project in Deborah Piatelli’s Research Methods class. He extends gratitude to Professor Piatelli for her wondrous her guidance. He would also like to thank Aly, Matt, Keerror, and Catalina for their input, and the best co-author ever, Kristin Reed.

Kristin Reed

Kristin is a senior at Boston College in the College of Arts and Sciences, majoring in English with a minor in Faith, Peace and Justice. This is her first campus publication and she really hopes this
piece sparks much needed conversation about the state of cross-racial interaction on campus. She would like to thank Catalina Tang, Aly Alzor, Matt Gavin, and Keeror Colquitt for their efforts in this group project, whose insights were essential in this research. Also, she would like to extend my deepest gratitude to her co-author Stafford Oliver and their research advisor Professor Deborah Piatelli.

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Daniel Kenny is a senior at Boston College in the College of Arts and Sciences, double-majoring in Sociology and History. He is currently working as an Undergraduate Research Assistant under Professor Eve Spangler of the Sociology department. Previously, Dan has the honor of having his paper “Microbicides: A New Frontier in HIV/AIDS Prevention” published in Elements, Boston College’s Undergraduate Research Journal. He was inspired to write this paper for SocialEyes about the culture of drug experimentation on college campuses, and would like to thank Sociology professor David Karp for all his support while writing this paper.

**Laurel Manlow**
Laurel is a senior sociology major with women’s studies and film studies minors. She wrote this paper during a research internship experience for the sociology department at UCLA and hopes to continue with sociology in graduate school. At BC, she is on the board of Amnesty International and is the Copy Editor of the progressive news source, *The Gavel*.

**Allison Manuel**
Allison Manuel graduated in 2009 from Boston College’s School of Arts and Sciences, where she majored in Sociology and minored in History. While at BC, Allison worked diligently to promote grassroots movements for social change, going as far as Southern Mexico’s School of International Training to advance this cause. She was also the Director of Communications for the GLBTQ Leadership Council, and was also a member of the Global Justice Project at Boston College. Additionally, Allison worked for Jobs with Justice, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and Community Change, Inc. to work on issues of labor rights and structural racism. Currently she is working at the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition,
where she is the Educational Organizer; she is working to develop community leadership and local schools. This piece was inspired by Professor Zine Magubane's “Postcolonial Theory” and Professor Stephen Pfahl's “Images and Power” courses at BC. She would like to thank these two professors for the new ways of thinking, seeing, and knowing their classes and the conversations they generated opened for her. She also would like to send her thanks to Professor David Karp for his constant support for her work and sustained willingness to engage in dialogue about her ideas.

Michael May
Michael May is a junior at Boston College, from Oradell, New Jersey. He is an Honors student in the Carroll School of Management, double-majoring in Finance and English, and is also a member of BC’s Alpha Sigma Nu Honor Society. Currently, Michael is working part-time for Boston College Catering, and is also a Junior Editor for BC’s undergraduate yearbook, Sub Turri, where he has also has his writing published in the past. This piece was inspired by a writing assignment in his Western Cultural Traditions class, where he had to write his own version of Dante’s Inferno. Michael would like to give a shout out to his roommates in Gabelli 206, and his friends in Edmonds, Voute, and off-campus. He would also like to thank his parents, and this two brothers, Richie and Danny, for all their encouragement.

Kelsey Yarnell
Kelsey Yarnell is an English major and French minor in the School of Arts and Sciences, class of 2011. She wrote this paper because she wanted to show that people should not always accept things at face value, i.e. cultural theories. She thinks that much of humanity has been written off as scientifically explicable, when in reality, all humans are capable of horrific violence and of great love, regardless of brain chemistry or “repressed desires.” Originally this paper was about a character in Dostoevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov,” a monastic who cares for “female lunatics” out of a genuine love and forgiveness that can be found only in faith in God. She would like to thank Professor Susan Michalczyk for her help with this paper.