Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century

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Edited by

Myc Wiatrowski and Cory Barker

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FOREWORD

THE ONCE AND FUTURE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE[1]

GARY HOPPENSTAND
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

My relationship with the study of popular culture began long before I arrived at Bowling Green. I was an English major at the time, back in the 1970s, attending The Ohio State University. I was then taking a class in contemporary American literature, and I well remember that the first of our major essay assignments was to select a Twentieth-Century American author and compare that author to another. I chose Ernest Hemingway, because the author that I really wanted to study was the crime fiction writer, Dashiell Hammett, and Hemingway seemed the closest match (certainly closer than Sherwood Anderson, my second option did). I wrote my paper and dutifully turned it in on time. When I received it back a week later, there was a massive "F" scrawled at the top in brilliant red pen, and if that was not embarrassment enough, the "F" was circled and underlined several times. There was nothing else written on the paper, nothing except a "see me" statement at the end of the paper, also scrawled in blood-red ink.

I was mortified. I had never received such a low grade before, even in my less dutiful days during my sophomore year in high school. I immediately set up an appointment with the professor to inquire what went so drastically wrong. When I arrived at the professor's office the following day, he very much looked the part of the shaggy scholar, sandaled feet propped up on his desk, wearing faded jeans with peace-sign patches sewn on his back pockets (remember this was the 1970s), and sporting a flannel shirt that probably hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine in over a year. I sat down in the proffered seat for students and withdrew the embarrassing paper from my backpack. I asked the professor what was wrong with the essay. "Was it badly written?" I inquired. "No," he replied. "Was

it unorganized?" "No," he said again. Was my analysis of Hemingway's work in any way inferior?" "No," he stated, with finality. "Then, what was the problem?" "With unwavering stare he told me in an emotionless voice: "What you needed to do and what you failed to do was to explain in your work why Hemingway is a great author in comparison with Hammett, who was merely a pulp hack."

The next day I dropped the class and changed my undergraduate major to Secondary English Education.

Sometime later, I was doing research in the undergraduate library at Ohio State when I ran across a publication that changed my life in education forever. It was the *Journal of Popular Culture*, published at Bowling Green State University and edited by someone named Ray Browne. Wonder of wonders, the issue even featured an article on detective fiction, a subject that was one of Ray's most passionate scholarly loves through the years, as well as one of my own. Nowhere in that article did it state that detective fiction was inferior to American or British literature (i.e., "Literature" with a capital "L").

Upon further investigation, I discovered that, in addition to being the editor of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Ray Browne was the Chairperson of something called the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University. I also learned that there was a graduate program in that Department, an M.A. in Popular Culture. At the time, I remember that I was in something of a quandary over my future. I was student teaching nearly illiterate tenth graders the indecipherable joys (to them, anyways) of Edgar Allan Poe at a rural Columbus, Ohio high school that boasted a sixty percent dropout rate. Apparently, the likes of Edgar Allan Poe could not compete with raging hormones and the mysteries of souped-up Camaros. With this limited experience, I naturally had my doubts about becoming a public school teacher. Therefore, I did what any other befuddled college graduate did at the time; I decided to delay my entry into the workforce by going to graduate school. My first, and only, choice for graduate school was the M.A. program in Popular Culture at BGSU.

My initial class at BG that fall semester in 1981 was with Ray Browne. He was teaching a course on popular fiction, and on the first day of the class, in walks Ray carrying a grocery bag full of paperback books. After emptying the bag on his desk, he tells us to select a novel, read it, and report on it the following week. Thumbing through the pile of books, I found no copies of Hemingway, or Fitzgerald, or Thoreau, or Hawthorne, nor any copies of the accepted British contingent: no Shakespeare, no Austen, no Brontë sisters. Instead, there were only cheap paperback editions of Mickey Spillane, Barbara Cartland, Ray Bradbury, and Stephen King. I

selected a copy of a Ross Macdonald/Lew Archer detective novel, and spent the next week reading it with unabashed delight and taking copious notes for discussion next class period.

A few of my graduate student colleagues were quite perplexed with Ray's method that first day of class, mystified that no cultural or literary theory was to ground our work, that the issue of aesthetic quality was obviously to be treated as a subjective interpretation rather than an objective truth, and that the traditional elite evaluations of the literary establishment were to hold no water whatsoever, either in the course or with him.

What I later came to understand about Ray Browne's methods was that he was a type of political subverse, not "political" in the sense of Democrat or Republican political, but political in the sense that he was rebelling against the academic expectations of the humanities of that day.

As Ray defined it then (and many times later), he saw the study of culture dividing into three categories. The first category, which he termed the "Impact Approach," involved the analysis and evaluation of high or "elite" art. This approach, Ray claimed, was the current standard of measure in humanities departments across the country. Art Departments only studied fine art, Music Departments only studied the masters, and English Departments only studied the literary canon. The problem with the Impact Approach, Ray told us then (and many times later), was that it snubbed some ninety percent of all cultural expressions. Art Departments would ignore commercial illustration, Music Departments would ignore Rock 'n' Roll, and English Departments would ignore popular fiction. Ray emphasized this last fact with the proclamation that he wanted to know more about what the woman in the checkout lane of the local grocery store was reading than what the gray-haired, tenured English professor at the local college was forcing students to read in class.

The second approach to the study of culture Ray defined as the "Determinist Approach." This he likened to the work of the Marxist theorists who saw culture as determined by ideology, and employed to manipulate the so-called unwashed masses. Ray scoffed at this idea, claiming that if the Determinists were correct in their argument, then every movie made would be a box office hit, every paperback book published would be a bestseller, and every song produced would be a chart-topper. Ray's point was that people themselves—the unwashed masses—had the power to determine what they wanted, and that the producers of culture, at best, could only hope for the best. Nothing was truly determined in cultural production other than uncertainty.

The third approach to the study of culture, the one that Ray advocated, was the "American Studies Myth-Symbol Approach." Though he was the

first to admit that the Myth-Symbol school had its serious drawbacks, he would also argue that its strengths far outweighed its limitations. Ray wanted us, as his students, to examine culture and the products of culture through the lens of symbolic representation. He wanted us to ask, "What does it mean?" rather than "How good is it?" or "How does it control us?" and the Myth-Symbol Approach best supported such a stance for the study of popular culture.

Ultimately, I came to understand that what Ray Browne was *actually* defining in that class was a theory of popular culture studies that was profoundly anti-theory. I believe that Ray felt that theory—even the venerable Myth-Symbol Approach—often got in the way of our true understanding of culture, which he interpreted as being entirely popular culture.

Ray was a generalist in the truest sense of the word. He was interested in larger connections more than he was in specific details. He was fascinated by context more than he was by abstraction, and he felt that to approach the study of popular culture, one needed to know as much about the entirety of the surrounding public culture as possible. To understand Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, for example, Ray thought that one needed to comprehend the nature of Victorian crime, the quality of Victorian law enforcement, the values of the British working classes, the morals of the British elite classes, and so on. Ray once told me that the effort to study popular culture in its proper context is a lifelong occupation, that there is no end to assessment of popular culture, only more questions to ask when we discovered facts that answered previous questions.

To know everything about everything is, of course, impossible; this is why we as students and scholars always seek to narrow our gaze as much as we can in our work. Ray, conversely, always encouraged us to look through the telescope rather than through the magnifying glass. Ray's truth *was* that truth is a very tricky thing to handle; hard to get at, but immensely rewarding once revealed. Ray's students were, in a profound sense, politically subversive in their own right of the established academic order of things, an order that did not believe in the apparent nonsense of non-disciplinary thinking.

Ray always wanted us to see popular culture as democratic culture—as democratizing culture—as "water to a fish," he would often say… literally, as the entirety of our cultural expressions. He saw popular culture extending well beyond Russell Nye's more limited concept of mass-produced and mass consumed culture. Popular culture was what we ate, what we said, what we thought, how we behaved. Such thinking no doubt resulted from his work as a folklorist. The creation of culture, for Ray, was always community driven. He railed against the narrow-mindedness of

elitism and elitist thinking. He despised the concept of the literary canon, though he himself was expert in the literature of the canon, having published a book on Herman Melville.

Perhaps Ray's position as an academic subversive is best summed by his history of the Popular Culture and American Culture Associations published in 1989, which he titled *Against Academia*. As his students in the popular culture program at Bowling Green State University, whether we really knew it at the time or not, we all were studying to be future academic subversives, just like Ray.

At least that is what the assessment of popular culture was for me during my graduate student career at BGSU, studying with Ray Browne. What the present holds for our field reveals something different.

The Academy today desperately needs courses in popular culture, if only to counteract the overspecialization of the humanities. As the disciplines in English literature, art history, philosophy, and history move towards more specific—even myopic—research trajectories, the popular culture generalist must protest ever more vociferously against this trend by asking the "so what" question. What is the most valuable commodity for our expanding body of knowledge? In an era of dwindling university resources—especially in the humanities—what is a better investment of time and money: Studying an obscure, self-published novel that maybe a handful of elites read over one hundred fifty years ago, or studying the work of a bestselling writer, read and enjoyed by millions of people worldwide?

Unfortunately, the field of popular culture studies is under siege today, but in a different way than in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Ray Browne and Russell Nye were fighting their own battles to develop recognition for the field. Back then, blatant academic snobbery was their biggest enemy.

I remember, for example, that when I first moved to Bowling Green in 1981 as a graduate student, I rented an old, run-down house on Liberty Avenue and when the landlord met me to conduct an initial inspection of the house before I moved in, he asked me if I was a grad student at BG. I replied that I was, and he informed me that he was a professor teaching in the Sociology Department. He then asked me what I was going to study, and I replied that I was an M.A. student in Popular Culture studies. He suddenly looked dumbstruck, and his attitude changed visibly. "So, you're going to work with that roller coaster guy," and then laughed." I said no, I was going to study with Professor Ray Browne, editor of the *Journal of Popular Culture*. "Well, that's the roller coaster guy," he again stated. Apparently, he found some great amusement in demeaning someone who

wanted to either teach or study popular culture, which seemed strange to me for anyone who was truly serious about sociology.

I came to learn very quickly during my graduate school years—and for the decade or so afterwards—that "authentic" scholars did not involve themselves in popular culture. It was during those years that I came to understand the type of intellectual prejudice that Ray Browne must have endured for many years, but whereas I chose to disguise my own true research interests at times in order to survive, Ray had miraculously prospered with his courageous, even revolutionary, agenda, creating a Department of Popular Culture, a *Journal of Popular Culture*, a *Journal of American Culture*, a Popular Culture Association, an American Culture Association, and a BGSU Popular Press that at its height published thirty to forty titles per year. Ray, of course, went on to have many, many more accomplishments during his impressive career, including bringing national media attention to popular culture studies. So many accomplishments, in fact, that I do not have the space to enumerate them all. He did all of this as that "roller coaster guy," that seeming buffoon to the conservative Academy. How many of those so-called serious academics are remembered today? Ray, on the other hand, helped to change our very perceptions of what culture means.

Today, the fight for respect is significantly different to the way it was in Ray's time. During the period following Ray's retirement, virtually every college and university had at least one course in popular culture studies. These courses may have been called film studies classes, or media classes, or cultural anthropology classes, but they were all really about the study of popular culture.

With the recent downturn in the economy, however, at major research universities across the country, humanities programs have been hit the hardest with the ever-growing constrictions of dwindling financial support. Those controlling the purse strings argue that we need more investment in the medical and hard sciences, since that is where the pot of gold is located for the big research grant dollars. In addition, because the humanities have been cut to the bone, programs and departments in the humanities have turned on each other like starving wolves, determined to have that last morsel of funding at all costs, without realizing that all are starving in the process.

Thus, the question of academic snobbery in the humanities has appeared again, but this time motivated by financial competition within university budgets. Today, the argument is made—once more by those controlling the purse strings—that if a given humanities department has only "X" number of dollars, then this financial limitation forces universities and

colleges to make the difficult decision of what to offer and what not to offer. Is it any wonder that the comic course fares badly in an unequal contest with the traditional American Lit survey course? Equally demeaning, university departments will list a meager number of high-enrollment, bubble exam lecture classes at the freshman or sophomore levels to draw in large student enrollment numbers so that they then can justify the listing of a senior-level Shakespeare class that enrolls only ten students. Financial pragmatism—supported by traditional elitist thinking—is continuing to harm the study of popular culture in ways that are both programmatically shameful and academically counterproductive.

Yet, as bleak as the prospects are now, the future of popular culture studies holds a certain measure of promise for graduate students, which, again, I would argue is attributable to the legacy of Ray Browne's vision. Ray understood fully the power of publication in a competitive academic environment. His creation of the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the BGSU Popular Press has done a great deal to insure the prospects of young faculty in a dwindling university tenure-track environment. What Ray proved with the formation of these two important publication venues was that popular culture scholarship sells many books and journals. Most university presses that are experiencing the same belt-tightening budgets as their departmental counterparts have learned what Ray knew: Quality books about popular culture sell more robustly than, say, the book-length examination of some culturally esoteric topic. Books about popular culture also tend to find a more significant number of course adoptions than the umpteen-hundredth study of Henry James. From large research universities, to smaller liberal arts colleges, to community colleges, new faculty in the humanities quickly discover that peer-reviewed book publication—even if the book is about a popular culture subject—is one of the more important measures of hiring, promotion, and tenure, perhaps even the most important measure. Interestingly, even so-called prestigious Ivy League publishers have moved their own popular culture titles to print. Yale University Press, for example, published a book in 2010 entitled *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* by Tom De Haven. Can you imagine Yale University Press publishing something like that twenty years ago, or even ten years ago? It is plainly obvious that print muscle—including books on popular culture—grips the dwindling number of tenure-line positions in a way that makes it difficult for even the most jaded academic snob to dismiss out-of-hand.

Finally, the future of popular culture studies rests with our current cohort of graduate students. Numbers do not lie, and a survey of regional or national meetings of the Popular Culture Association reveals a healthy and

growing selection of graduate student research in popular culture. Even in the more traditional programs and departments, graduate students at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels are moving their work into less traditional (and I would imagine) more rewarding areas. Thus, so long as the flow of young scholars continues to study popular culture, to write about popular culture, and to find jobs where they can bring popular culture expertise to the classroom for the next generation of future scholars, then popular culture studies—as a vital area of scholarly inquiry and employment—will continue to thrive and grow.

In closing, I know that Ray would have been very pleased with the Popular Culture Scholars Association, whose work has brought these essays together, and its efforts to support popular culture research on all levels. I know that Ray would have been extremely grateful to have the conference from which these papers were drawn named after him. On behalf of Ray, his family, his many friends across the country and around the world, as well as the fine faculty of the Department of Popular Culture and the great staff of the Ray and Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies at the Jerome Library at Bowling Green State University, I would like to thank these scholars for honoring his memory. And I especially would like to thank them for inviting me to be a part of it.

Dr. Gary Hoppenstand
January 2013

Notes

[1] This essay was originally delivered as the Keynote address for the inaugural Ray Browne Conference on Popular Culture on March 31, 2012 at Bowling Green State University.

PREFACE

POPULAR CULTURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

MYC WIATROWSKI AND CORY BARKER

In the late 1960s, Dr. Ray B. Browne came to Bowling Green State University where he founded the Department of Popular Culture, one of the nation's preeminent academic departments focusing on popular culture studies. During his early years he was also instrumental in founding the Center for Popular Culture Studies, the BGSU Music and Sound Recording Archive, and what is now known as the Browne Popular Culture Library. With help from many others, notably his wife Pat Browne and colleague Bill Schurk, BGSU became a haven where students and scholars were given an opportunity to consider the cultural forms of their everyday lives and to examine the everyday world around them.

Forty years later, in the fall of 2011 as historical milestones were drawing near, students and faculty at BGSU reflected on the history of popular culture studies in the United States, and noted that our everyday lives are now much different than when Ray and others first laid the foundations for what would become our own work. New mediums, genres, and industries have been introduced into the complex world of popular culture and innovative perspectives, methods, and models have presented new ways in which to investigate popular texts. In light of these changes, and in order to celebrate some landmark anniversaries, the Popular Culture Scholars Association chose the spring of 2012 as a fitting moment to invite researchers from across the world to join us in Bowling Green, Ohio to attend the Ray Browne Conference on Popular Culture. At this conference, we would consider how we are examining the prominent subjects, concerns, and ideas of twenty-first century popular culture. You hold in your hands the result of that gathering, *Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*.

As founder of the Popular Culture Association, the Department of Popular Culture, *the Journal of Popular Culture*, the Center for Popular

Culture Studies, and the library, which now bears his name, there was never a doubt that we would name our conference in honor of Dr. Browne. His contributions to the discipline and his impact on our shared research simply cannot be ignored. Raised in Alabama, Ray thought he saw "that there was a great field of everyday life that needed to be studied and understood."[1] Indeed, the idea that the everyday was significant became the foundation of his career, and he became a passionate advocate for studying all aspects of the world around us, which he believed was vital for a civilization to flourish and continue. He wrote:

> Popular culture is the voice of democracy, speaking, and acting, the seedbed in which democracy grows. Popular culture … democratizes society and makes democracy truly democratic. It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, and diversions; it is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion—our total life picture. It is the way of living we inherit, practice, modify as we please and then pass along to our descendants. It is what we do while we are awake, and how we do it. It is the dreams we dream while asleep.[2]

It is this idea, that popular culture is ubiquitous, important, and essential, that was our guiding principle as we sought to bring scholars from around the world together to examine the work we were doing in the present moment.

As we prepared the conference in early 2012, we hoped that it would offer a representative example of contemporary popular culture scholarship, and work from a shared platform for understanding the study of popular culture as we move forward into the new millennium. That popular culture deserves detailed discussion and analysis for multiple perspectives is beyond question, yet we did not anticipate the response to our call from scholars, nor did we anticipate the overwhelmingly positive reception that first conference received. Creating this collection from the works presented at the conference was never our original intention. However, many of the scholars who presented at the conference were interested in expanding their ideas, and continuing the dialogue begun that weekend. We hope that the thoughts that were originally presented then, only to coalesce here, can offer some contribution to the ongoing academic discourse surrounding the cultural forms of everyday life.

There is a plethora of academic works on the study of popular culture. However many of these volumes are dedicated to particular approaches, methodologies, theories, or texts. This collection functions on a somewhat different level. This is not a collection dedicated to a text or a methodology, nor to great works of the discipline. It is a snapshot. It is a moment

frozen in time where we can explore the work that we are doing, and the theories and methods we are using to do it. Readers may notice that some of our contributors are tenured university faculty, while others are at various points in their graduate career, and yet others (at least at the time when first presented) are undergraduate students. This collection attempts to gather a representative sample of the work on all academic levels by scholars of popular culture, and to manifest in written form the conversations that began with the Ray Browne Conference on Popular Culture. This collection brings together a variety of scholars from around North America, a decision that was in part intentional; however, as you will see, the scholars utilize a vast array of approaches to offer a unique and interdisciplinary method to studying popular culture. We hope that these works reveal to our readers the myriad of ways in which popular culture can be and is studied.

Astute readers may also notice that many of the scholars in this collection have connections to Bowling Green State University, the Department of Popular Culture, and Ray Browne. This was an intentional choice, though not one that grew out of nepotism or some elitist belief that BGSU represents a focal point in the field. Instead, these connections to that university or that department are in a way thematic—tying together the past and the future. Several of the contributors in this collection were students and disciples of Ray Browne, many of whom have gone on to teach at various universities around the country (and the world). Other contributors are, or were, more recent students in the BGSU Department of Popular Culture, and received their undergraduate educations from various institutions across the globe. Still others are connected to BGSU only in that they came to Bowling Green to share in the academic discourse that we hoped to ignite with our conference. In a way, the ties to BGSU serve as a direct link to the past and situate the study of the field in a sort of living timeline of scholars spreading into a vast web of influence across the globe. Yet, these scholars link to Dr. Browne, and as we recognize where we are in the moment and how we proceed into the future of the field, we believe that it is important to understand the links to our past and to continue to recognize Ray Browne's contributions to the discipline.

This collection is divided into five distinct sections based on thematic links between the articles. We believe that this sort of division gives a useful form to the text and functions as a key for pedagogy. The Introduction, written by Dr. Gary Hoppenstand (Michigan State University; Editor, *the Journal of Popular Culture*), explores the necessity of popular culture studies. He situates his understanding of the field both historically and within the greater study of the humanities as a whole. He is, however, for-

ward looking (and hopeful) as he envisions a future populated by current and future generations of students who choose to examine popular culture through a variety of interdisciplinary approaches and in a multitude of academic departments.

Part I of the volume seeks to explore questions of ideology and methodology in contemporary popular culture studies using three examples from scholars who each analyze the necessities of the field utilizing different perspectives. Dr. Bob Batchelor (Thiel College) writes on the need for scholars of popular culture to function as public intellectuals. Batchelor lays out an argument for not only why academics, particularly those who study everyday texts, need to be public intellectuals, but also suggests how to implement public intellectualism as a discipline for the scholar of popular culture. Dr. John Fitzpatrick (University of Tennessee, Chattanooga) utilizes his training to examine how the study of popular culture is employed as a pedagogical tool in other disciplines, merging fields together in a truly interdisciplinary way. Focusing on philosophy, Fitzpatrick examines the works of Chuck Klosterman and explores how to tie those everyday texts to the theories and practices of philosophy as a discipline. Finally, Dr. Margaret King (Director, Cultural Studies & Analysis) applies lessons learned as a private sector cultural analyst to examine how and why we use our cultural constructions to achieve real world objectives. She examines methodologies for exploring cultural artifacts and texts to find how these everyday objects make meaning in our lives, and explores ways to utilize those meanings in a significant and measurable way.

Part II of this collection focuses largely on contemporary examples of analysis of one or more primary texts using a variety of approaches. Walter Merryman (Bowling Green State University) presents a textual analysis of ideology and morality in the 2010 animated film *Batman: Under the Red Hood*. Merryman explores the relationship between the characters of Batman and the Joker, and how this relationship builds and reinforces a particular set of ideologically informed values that on the surface seem to create an unresolved tension. Tony Nagel (Independent Scholar) explores questions of nationalism and national identity in the British television serial *Doctor Who*. He examines the power dynamics inherent in the program and parses through the complicated cultural layers to find meaning in the program's unambiguously nationalistic message. Kate Reynolds (Bowling Green State University) investigates player choice, sexuality, narrative, and virtual relationship dynamics in the video game *Dragon Age: Origins*. Reynolds explores how relationships construct narratives and engage players to create meaning. Lastly, Molly Weinberg (Bowling Green State University) examines conventionality in unconventional family sitcoms. She

argues that while *Full House* and *The Brady Bunch* were landmark series in their subversion of family conventions in their time, they still functioned to reinforce gender normative ideals.

In Part III, the articles center on the theme of community building around, as well as fan reactions to, popular texts. Sean Ahern (SUNY, Buffalo) explores the fan experience through the subcultural community, known as furries, whose members appropriate and reinvent fantasy basketball in a self-serving context. Justine Moller (Brock University) researches *Twilight* fandom and fan pilgrimages to Forks, Washington. Closing Part III, Corrigan Vaughn (University of California, Santa Barbara) examines the nuances of *Star Trek* fandom in virtual spaces, specifically on Tumblr, an online microblogging platform. Vaughn argues that virtual fandoms can give us insight into the mass mediated world around us in an information age.

Part IV explores issues of gender and the body in contemporary pop cultural discourses. Cory Barker (Indiana University) explores representations of masculinity in contemporary reality television paying particular attention to what he terms "labor reality" television programs that focus on people performing their jobs. Travis Limbert (Independent Scholar) considers how the titular character in *Doctor Who* reinforces and subverts the traditional heroic modes of masculinity. Limbert uses a structural approach to identify the Doctor as a hero, and explore how the character's performance may or may not create a traditionally recognizable hero. Anna O'Brien (Bowling Green State University) analyzes the performance of ethnically identifiable gender roles by non-ethnic peoples in her exploration of online Weeaboo cult figures. Finally Myc Wiatrowski (Indiana University) explores the creation of a new model of masculine identity in American discourse through an analysis of the American television serial *Chuck*.

It is our hope that these articles offer a useful approach to the contemporary study of popular culture. We believe that these works create a text that is at once useful to the most invested scholar of popular culture yet still accessible to the most novice students of the field. We also believe that this collection, when taken as a whole, gives a small overview of the types of work done by popular culture scholars on all levels today. This work cannot possibly be as exhaustive as we'd like it to be, nor can it show the great variety of approaches scholars today are taking to study a vast number of diverse texts. However, we envision this collection as a starting point of sorts, or as the beginning of a conversation. One that we hope will continue well into the future.

Notes

[1] Leslie Wilson, "Conversation with Professor Ray B. Browne," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* (*1900-Present)* 1, no. 2 (Fall, 2002).
[2] Ray B. Browne, "Introduction," *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Pat Browne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 1.

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PART I

CREATING PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS: POPULAR CULTURE'S MOVE FROM NICHE TO MAINSTREAM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BOB BATCHELOR
THIEL COLLEGE

> To be a public intellectual is in some sense something that you are, and not so much something that you do. Many scholars are intelligent and highly regarded professors, but they are somehow not public intellectuals.[1]
>
> —Christopher Hitchens, 2008

Recently, I attended a panel examining autoethnography as a research tool at the Central States Communication Association annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio. Autoethnography is a fascinating form of qualitative research that enables the scholar to become part of the study, thereby addressing a topic's consequence on both the researcher and society. The roundtable, "Autoethnography and Communication: Connection, Applications, and Possibilities," featured nine scholars who have used autoethnography as a line of inquiry as they pursue their scholarly dreams and aspirations.

I dutifully took notes in the packed-to-capacity hotel meeting room on the fourth floor of the ornate, historical landmark Renaissance hotel, situated within the city's venerable Tower City complex, one of Cleveland's most striking skyscrapers. Despite the chilly weather outside, waves of heat pulsed through the room. The energy of the packed space fought vainly against the damp air and body heat. Many in the audience fanned themselves with their conference programs or other available scraps of paper in a final attempt at finding relief.

As is often the case at academic meetings, listening to the speakers launched a frantic, somewhat feverish number of ideas to pinball around my brain. The room itself seemed to promote contemplation. The ceiling dripped with multiple antique chandeliers, while mirrors lined the walls,

projecting and reflecting distorted images and glimpses of people in motion, fanning, while others sat attentively. Panelists' voices zinged off every reflective surface. The room seemed almost day-dreamy. I began to wonder: How might I apply autoethnography to my own work? Was I willing to "open the kimono" and allow readers to witness the vulnerabilities of an academic coping with the scholarly life in the twenty-first century?

Imagine my surprise, then, when Andrew F. Herrmann, a communications scholar at Eastern Tennessee State University, announced in a booming voice that he was an "angry autoethnographic scholar." Herrmann explained that he was fed up with the cloistered way his colleagues went about dutifully talking to one another, rather than the public at large. He criticized the communications discipline for its obsession with writing for what he called "The International Journal of Two Readers" and chided autoethnographers to "leap off the page" and "talk to people on the outside." He lamented that his colleagues' books were not found on the shelves at Barnes & Noble or found on the pages of *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*, or even *Ladies' Home Journal*.[2]

As Herrmann explained, our world is created by words and stories, which makes scholars uniquely qualified to participate in public dialogue. He urged those in the session to begin speaking on a larger stage, if nothing else, to counter the attack on the humanities currently being won by the likes of talk radio blowhards and state legislators grabbing at whatever hot button topic that might appeal to voters.[3] In other words, Herrmann advocated for autoethnographers becoming public intellectuals (PIs).

Suddenly, like an alarm going off in my head, pieces of my disparate readings and patches of thinking about public intellectualism came together more clearly. What became obvious is that my ideas regarding the role of the academic community as members of the wider society were not unique. This rationalization may have dejected me on a different topic; after all, I am an academic. Am I not supposed to be the smartest person in the room? What I imagined, based on the coincidence of Herrmann's plea, my being there to hear it, and my own work on popular culture enthusiasts as public intellectuals, is that scholars all over the nation and across disciplines are making similar appeals to their colleagues, imploring them to become activists and/or public intellectuals.

The call to arms regarding the academic community's responsibility for engaging in public debate is not a new topic, yet it seems particularly urgent today. Perhaps we stand facing a watershed moment for intellectualism in the US, not unlike other epic moments in the nation's history, ranging from interventions in World Wars I and II and entry into wars in

the Middle East and Vietnam to domestic challenges like race relations and women's rights. Even closer to home, we see the outcomes of a lack of public discourse from reports of schools "failing" under the current standardized management paradigm to neighborhoods chock full of foreclosed homes, while the global banking system receives public funds to prop up its operations. They are "too big to fail," while the people funding the system are too small to matter.

Put bluntly: The dummies are winning.

Okay, so in addition to using Herrmann's remarks as third party validation for my topic, I also hoped to provide a brief model for autoethnography, tapping into a bit of what I learned in the session. Rather than continue in this mode, however, I would like to turn to a more traditional style in hopes that my own plea for beefed up public intellectualism will fall on kind ears.

Why We Need Public Intellectuals

As one might imagine, research for this essay revealed that public intellectuals spend quite a bit of time talking about themselves and others deemed PIs. In fact, in 2001 legal scholar Richard A. Posner wrote a book called *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, published by no less than Harvard University Press. He ranks the top one hundred PIs from 1995-2000. Posner ranks himself number seventy.[4]

Since the public and media loves lists of just about every shape and size on any topic, *Public Intellectuals* gained quite a bit of attention. Yet, its underlying theme is both compelling and confounding. Posner claims that most PIs are not very good at doing PI-related work. Instead, the so-called thinkers most often fall back on flawed logic, display a limited understanding of statistics, and, generally, fill the airwaves with bluster and careless blather.

But, I do not want to shoot my own case in the foot before I really get started, so let us quickly move from Posner to another PI—the esteemed scholar/writer Todd Gitlin. In his 2006 *Raritan* article "The Necessity of Public Intellectuals," Gitlin begs for PIs to activate because the nation is in such a sorry intellectual state—more or less a nation of dummies, though that word is mine, not his. In the piece, he lays much of the blame (surprise, surprise) at the feet of the Republicans, calling them "the party of unreason … devoted to unreason."[5]

Gitlin provides poll data that demonstrates just how dumb Americans are. One example is quite famous, so readers might remember it. In March 2005, an ABC News survey revealed that some two years after the Iraq

war began 79 percent of Republicans and 37 percent of Democrats still believed that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. A quick Google search and we could certainly find a glut of similar poll results… you know, the kind that simultaneously make us cringe and want to immediately move the family to Europe, or at least Canada.

Teachers across the K-16 spectrum can attest to the weapons of mass destruction poll numbers and add from their own multitude of personal anecdotes to demonstrate how much the public needs to engage in more nuanced, contextualized information consumption. For example, a master's degree student at a large, Midwestern state university recently defended her thesis on Captain America and the withering American Dream. She passed with flying colors, providing a critical, analytical examination of the topic and its broader popular culture consequences. Yet, during the general audience Q&A session, an audience member (college student) asked about Captain America and propaganda during World War II. In the course of asking the question, he stopped… more or less scratched his head… and asked the collective body when World War II started. No one in the audience of fifteen or so jumped to answer him, perhaps out of shock, but probably some trepidation about getting the answer wrong. Moreover, it became clear via further questions that he asked that this student probably could not even identify the decade in which World War II began.

A hush descended on the room for a moment. The adults present flashed knowing looks and small shrugs. To be perfectly frank, it is painful to find one in a situation where a student exposes some general lack of knowledge that can be used as a marker for denigrating an entire generation of college students. Suddenly, the faculty lounge whispers and gripes about students not reading, being unable to write a coherent sentence or two, and not being able to communicate effectively explodes into view. There is nowhere to hide and little constructive that one can say. Yet, teachers find themselves in these situations almost daily. The politicians argue about assessment markers and the cost of education, yet they do so far removed from the classrooms where the nation's educators find themselves tied up in knots over the decline of education and its consequences.

My goal, however, is not to simply point out the countless examples of how ignorant, unreasonable, and uneducated people are in contemporary America. I want to offer solutions, not just pile on the problems. However, first there needs to be some analysis specifically identifying why popular culture scholars can excel in the public intellectual function.

The Power of Popular Culture

The power of popular culture is in the way it connects people. One could reasonably argue that it is in the connections with and between objects and people that the definition of popular culture resides. As an aside, while I could dive into a lengthy explanation of how scholars have defined popular culture over time, I am not that interested in such an endeavor. Such an inquisition may still be relevant outside academe or in the battle of the minutiae that takes place within the ivory towers; I find that by obsessing about the definition we are often doing little more than attempting to justify it as a field of study for those who critique that idea. A more fruitful cross-examination might center on what aspects of culture not considered "popular" in contemporary society. The ubiquity of the Web and around-the-clock access via handheld devices makes this an era of hyper-popular culture, in which people not only expect, but also demand, continual entrée to mass communications.

In essence, then, popular culture is not a kind of thing, as most definitions attempt to explain, like the antithesis of high art or culture. Rather, popular culture exists in the impulses that draw members of the global community to a person, thing, topic, or issue that arise out of the juncture of mass communications, technology, political systems, and economic institutions. In other words, I am proposing that we view popular culture not as an object, say Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's Soup can painting, but as the interface itself that draws viewers to or repels them from that artwork. Examining Warhol's piece, it is not that a person says, "Wow that is popular culture." Instead, it is the confluence of seeing the image; interacting with it based on one's own life experiences; adding context, history, experience, and personality; and then creating a new meaning of it personally that defines popular culture.

Ray Browne once explained popular culture, saying, "It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, diversions, heroes, icons, rituals, psychology, religion—our total life picture."[6] My redefinition asks that we acknowledge that it is more than just the world around us; it also includes the exchange between a popular culture object and a person's assimilation of the thing—all the thoughts, emotions, and manners in which one consumes it.

The meaning of popular culture exists in absorption and consumption rather than in attempting to define a tangible object as low, high, or middlebrow on a fabricated scale of hierarchies. In this respect, *popular culture* might be seen as a verb, not a noun, the total mental and physical in-

teraction with a topic and the new synthesis or creation that occurs as a result of that fusion.

Returning to the notion of popular culture as a connector between people, it is no wonder then that film and television play a central role. These mass communications channels define and encompass our national dialogue. Television and film are the great equalizers—essentially providing Americans with basic talking points across race, political ties, gender differences, or any other demographic features that usually separate them. The narratives, regardless of the reason they attract or repel us, give context and a way of interpreting society and culture. As millions of Americans interact with mass media, whether watching the same movies and television shows or listening to radio programs, a common language develops that opens new lines of communications.

The downside, however, is that the fascination with popular culture diverts attention from important challenges the nation confronts. In this light, popular culture serves as a kind of placebo. The obsessive, loving nature of cult objects, for example, intensifies this diversion critique of popular culture because the focus on a specific cult influence distracts people and, at the same time, enables them to feel good about the world without really forcing them to directly confront critical issues.

Personally, I am tired of fighting the perceptions of colleagues who wonder whether writing and researching about popular culture topics is scholarly or academic enough. In contemporary America, popular culture is pervasive. Like Neo when he decides to enter the Matrix, there is no escape or turning back.

I asked Leigh H. Edwards, an associate professor at Florida State University, her thoughts about the role of public intellectuals, particularly given her place within a theory-based English department. She explained:

> It would be helpful for the efforts of academics who do public intellectual work for that work to be valued by academic departments. I say this because pop culture scholars often make substantive efforts to speak to broader audiences, in everything from PBS documentaries to online magazines like *Pop Matters*. But when academic departments just see that labor as something 'extra' that doesn't really count or isn't much valued, I think that does a disservice to the broader project of pop culture studies. Trying to do public intellectual work should be seen as a worthwhile endeavor within academia, and I think we have a long way to go in that regard.[7]

Popular Culture: From Idea to Discipline

Ray Browne and his colleagues brought popular culture studies into academe, establishing it as a viable scholarly subject, and then built organizations and an infrastructure that enabled the topic to grow into a true discipline. Simultaneously, technological innovations and new mass communications channels amplified popular culture's importance and centrality globally. Browne's pioneering work created the vital framework that allowed the field to grow and prosper.

Yet, while the foundation Browne and his colleagues built provided a vehicle for success, the twenty-first century necessitates a shift in thinking about popular culture's role. As such, a significant "pressing issue" in this new era is for popular culture scholars to move beyond defining what popular culture is to a broader analysis that demonstrates the subject's socio-economic and cultural implications for the contemporary world.

My call is for popular culture scholars to use their work as a basis for engaging with local, regional, national, and international communities as public intellectuals. We no longer need to emphasize the quirky or offbeat in our work to get media attention, nor should we continue to feel like second-class academics based on what critics say about our discipline. Instead, popular culture scholars should capitalize on the public's enduring interest in the subjects we study to participate in important debates as public intellectuals.

Popular Culturists as "Omni-Disciplinary" Scholars

When we expand our own interpretations, and simultaneously overcome residual notions of having to prove popular culture's importance within academic studies, we can play a valuable role as public intellectuals, drawing on our strengths as multi-disciplinary thinkers, historians, communicators, and people who naturally engage in critical thinking. As a matter of fact, I argue that popular culture scholars are not simply multi-disciplinary, but actually "omni-disciplinary," a move from merely being able to interpret across disciplines to a state of creating constant interpretive and analytical frameworks that span all barriers, or as the definitions of the words would have one believe, from "many" to "universal."

The beauty and value of popular culture is its ability to let people explore the ideas, topics, people, and influences that matter to them most. This exercise actually forces people to engage in higher-order critical thinking skills involved in the formation of new ideas and impulses. As we wrestle with our own thoughts, dreams, and aspirations through popular