ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: PERFORMING NERD: THE NERD STEREOTYPE IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Michael John Boynton, Doctor of Philosophy, 2017

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The primary function of the nerd stereotype—like any other stereotype—is to reinforce and reify cultural hegemony, to delineate who has access to power and who does not. In this dissertation, I argue that the nerd stereotype performs this function in two essential ways: the heteronormative dynamic and the exclusionary dynamic. As a sort of social script, the stereotype reifies compulsory heteronormativity by denouncing those who, in a Butlerian sense, misperform their gender/sexuality with regard to prescribed masculine/feminine behaviors. This heteronormative dynamic is, then, at its core an anti-intellectual one, using prescriptive notions of masculinity and femininity to demonize intelligence and critical thinking. The nerd stereotype also simultaneously operates to ostracize a number of marginalized identities (women, blacks, Asians, Jews, etc.) from educational, scientific, and intellectual empowerment via the exclusionary dynamic, while allowing certain upper-class, straight white males access to that empowerment.

Taken together, these two dynamics often seem in paradoxical conflict, simultaneously denouncing intelligence (mocking nerdy white males), yet problematically reserving that intelligence as the province of hegemonic white masculinity. In this contradictory fashion, these two complex dynamics are consistently reflected in the persistent performance of nerd representations as both comic sexual failures and predominantly (although not exclusively) white males.

With this configuration of the stereotype in mind, this dissertation examines the ideological origins and popularization of the nerd stereotype in U.S. popular culture from 1945 to 1989, its most formative period. A genealogical survey (or cultural history) of various performance texts (film, television, magazines, etc.) that include stereotypical nerds—from early issues of Archie Comics to the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds*—this study focuses on how the nerd stereotype reflects specific moments of identity politics and anti-intellectualism in particular cultural contexts. Using performance studies, cultural studies, and recent scholarship on white masculinity as a theoretical guide for analysis, this work arrives at the conclusion that the nerd stereotype is not only a vitally important facet of American popular culture in a general sense, but also that this stereotype reinforces a general anti-intellectual sentiment while simultaneously scripting intelligence as the province of hegemonic identities.

PERFORMING NERD:
THE NERD STEREOTYPE IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Preface: Of Provisos and Positionality

Perhaps the best place to start is to state where this particular scholarly journey began. The impetus for this study arose while I was taking a graduate level course on "The Spoken Word" with Dr. Laurie Frederik at the University of Maryland, College Park in 2010. The course, which deftly blended the study of various aesthetic and non-aesthetic performances, performance studies, and cultural anthropology covered such fun and fascinating topics as stand-up comedy, the American legal system, and various forms of oral tradition. One of the topics covered was slam poetry: not only did we make an ethnographic jaunt into D.C. to experience slam firsthand, we also read and discussed Susan B. A. Somers-Willet's book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, which focused especially on the multifaceted issue of race with regards to slam.

Buried within the third chapter of this book (pages 69 and 71) was an offhand mention of a little-known subgenre of slam known as "nerd slam," which immediately caught my attention. My interest was piqued. As part of the course, I did a small study on the nerd slam. I drove up to Philly, met and interviewed nerd slam master Shappy Seasholtz, and watched him perform some nerd slam poetry. It was an immensely fascinating experience.

The small assignment was complete, but I was left with a number of larger questions regarding this vague conception of "nerd." What, exactly, is a nerd? Are there multiple types of nerds? Who self-identifies as a nerd, and who has the epithet thrust upon them? Who is *allowed* to be a nerd? How might race, gender, sexuality, class, education, nationality, ableness, ethnicity and other identificatory markers intersect with a "nerd identity"? Is it even useful or fair to consider "nerd" as an identity? A youth style? A subculture? A slur word? An "intellectual persuasion"? A rallying point for "nerd pride?" And what are the cultural politics involved in all of the above? Also, what is the best way to study this vaguely conceived nerd phenomenon?

Thus began a long and complex journey where I have wrestled with these questions and many more. This dissertation is a first step, an attempt not to offer easy answers to these questions (as if such a thing were possible), but to gather together some of my thoughts and impressions on a few of, what I feel, the most intriguing issues raised by nerds. My primary hope is that it is of use to other scholars in a wide range of disciplines should they come across the nerd in their own work, and that they, too, will challenge and contribute to the discussion and join me on the journey…

…But is this *really* where my journey began? Perhaps I'm being somewhat disingenuous in saying so. In many ways, the journey is much more personal, and began much earlier for me. I grew up a little… different. I enjoyed going to school and learning. I valued education. I was shunted into Gifted and Talented programs back when many schools had no idea what that entailed. I got straight A's. Later in life, I not only went to college, but to grad school…and *that* multiple times for multiple degrees. I wanted to be a professor, to continue learning and teaching, to continue becoming as "smart" as I could muster. And for better or worse, this sort of relationship to learning and intelligence makes one, well, *different* in American culture.

Perhaps it is also telling that my own aesthetic tastes and connections to popular culture also set me slightly apart. In many ways, my real journey into understanding

nerdom began in elementary school, where the first audio cassette I bought was not Wham!, Madonna, or Foreigner, (I'm really dating myself here!) but Weird Al Yankovic's *Dare to Be Stupid*—I see this simple purchase as one of the pivotal initial stages in forming my own, shall we say, "nerd identity," although certainly not the only one. I had a cadre of close-knit, nerdy friends as I grew up. I read Sherlock Holmes and Stephen Hawking for fun while I was in middle school. I obsessively watched *Star Trek: TNG* throughout high school. I was—and still am—an avid gamer, and I distinctly remember how much I cried (spoiler alert) when Aerith was murdered in the Playstation classic *Final Fantasy VII*.

So let me be frank: I am a nerd. Or more accurately, I self-identify as a nerd. But with such a fraught and complex term, what does that mean or entail? Am I a nerd because I am a scholar? Am I nerd because I like (am a fan of) certain things that nerds are *supposed* to like? Am I a nerd because I say so or because people believe me to be so, be it in a celebratory or pejorative sense? And maybe—as friends of mine have pointed out over the years—maybe I am a nerd because I am doing one of the nerdiest things possible: studying and writing about nerds. (Does that make me a *meta*-nerd? Or does using the term "meta-nerd" make me even more of a nerd?)

The reason I mention my own background is because, like many contemporaneous scholars influenced by postmodernist thinking, I feel it is important to address my own subject-position. Am I biased for (or against) nerds as I may well be one? I will leave it to you, the reader, to be the judge, although I have strived to be as "objective" and "fair" as one can. Although I must warn you, dear reader: As you are currently *reading a book* (let alone a scholarly one about nerds), you may well be a nerd yourself.

As for my own positionality, I will baldly state that I am a white male American, which in a multitude of ways and in a multitude of contexts allows me certain privileges and powers: this I cannot deny. Although I currently work in academia, my background is more working- than middle-class. And I also self-identify as gay: take it as you will. As I will be addressing race, gender, sexuality, class, and a wide range of identities throughout this work, I feel especially compelled to share this personal information. Generally speaking (and understanding that declaring positionality in a preface may be a bit faddish in scholarship nowadays) I do firmly believe we scholars should do so rigorously.

With regards to positionality, it may also be important to acknowledge that my own, shall we say, "intellectual identity" is rooted in performance studies, critical theory, culture studies, popular cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, queer theory, and critical race theory. These and related disciplines/theories influence my way of thinking, as well as my identity. Too often, I feel, we scholars forget to acknowledge that there are a number of different knowledges, and a multitude of ways of knowing: and instead of acknowledging a number of various perspectives on a given subject of study, we too often fall into the trap of only focusing on our own discipline's perspective at the expense of others. We may well acknowledge that our race and gender influence our thinking, but not the simple notion that the very filter of our disciplinary expertise may affect our thinking as well. With this in mind, I have approached this work in as much of an "interdisciplinary" fashion as I could muster. First of all, I tend to appreciate good interdisciplinary scholarship as a reader, so it is only natural that I should try a similar tack as a writer. Second, with a subject as complex as nerds, which reaches into fields as

wide-ranging as astrophysics to feminist theory, from pop culture to calculus, from child psychology to film studies to the history of computing, the inherently interdisciplinary subject almost demands an interdisciplinary approach to do it due justice. It may be faddish to toss around the term "bricolage," but again, I find it the best and most useful way to tackle the topic at hand.

This is not an ethnographic, nor an autoethnographic study. However, I do feel comfortable stating that my research has been "ethnographically-influenced." While I may not have lived with a tribe of nerds for many years (except perhaps myself and my boyfriend,) I have also not been content to conduct my research merely through books alone. I fully acknowledge that my thinking has been influenced by numerous personal conversations, trips to various conventions, midnight showings of *Harry Potter* movies, surfing around the internet (that highly problematic bastion of so much nerd culture,) and, simply, living the so-called nerd lifestyle. I have even delved into "participatory ethnography" and took part in a few nerd rituals to get the insider's perspective. This may well open me up to charges of being a dilettante or, on the other hand, of "going native," as it were: honestly, I'm sure both charges are somewhat fair to a degree.

If anything, I feel like both my research methods and, importantly, my overall style of writing, dance around the ethnographic. It is my goal to balance a "scholarly tone" (whatever that may mean in terms of integrity/obfuscation/elitism) with something a bit more accessible so that, in the ethnographic spirit, the very people I am writing about can read this and rightfully partake in the discussion. As such, my tone may at times be informal, even satirical or wry or read like parody, which I feel best welcomes a wide range of nerds to the table. Hopefully I have inundated the pages with excessive footnotes to appease the scholars and balance out this informal style.

If there is something I do take very seriously, given that the subject matter on hand deals so deeply with issues of knowledge and power (who is allowed to have both and who isn't) is that a sundry number of knowledges should not be excluded from the conversation: feminist, womanist, black feminist, queer, perhaps even "nerdist," etc. And if I do entertain a serious bias, it is in the fact that I believe it is wrong to essentialize one form of knowledge as appropriate and to afford "the rest" minority status—for me to aver otherwise would not only make me a hypocrite throughout this work, but it would be, in my mind, unethical as well.

This work is not a full-fledged "history of the nerd" either. Such a work might have great use-value and validity, but that was not my particular aim with this project— and part of me wonders (and worries) what such a "history" would entail. What sort of historiographic approach would such a chronicling of history, to be thorough and competent, demand? The very concept of nerd is so complex, nebulous, fluid, and contradictory, that I fear a full-blown history would likely suffer from the same issues. That said, perhaps an amazingly brilliant historian someday will tackle those issues and wow us all, and I look forward to that day… but sadly I am not that historian.

That said, I fully admit that this study encompasses a "historical overview" of the American nerd stereotype over a 45-year period, from the mid-40s to the late 80s. Again, however, I see this more as a "genealogical consideration" of the nerd, rather than a rigid history *per se*. I am using a brief historical overview to loosely trace how the nerd stereotype has shifted and changed over the years in American culture, with the specific aim of charting changes and fluctuations in what (and how) "nerd" *means*. In other

words, I am attempting both a synchronic and diachronic approach to figuring out what "nerd" might entail. The nerd is not a stable concept unto itself, and doubly so when examined temporally and contextually, and that is, simply, part of my primary point. To be more precise (and to not avoid the issue,) my historiographical approach can be understood as working within the frame of *cultural history*—an especially befitting approach in light of my own expertise as a scholar of performance (theatre, film and television). Further, as the nerd stereotype is itself a distinctive feature of popular culture, the subject matter also demands such a cultural approach.

It should also be noted that this project is deeply indebted to theory: it is an exploration of the nerd stereotype from a critical theoretical perspective focusing on identity, performance, performativity (yes, two very different things), and culture. And as stated previously, a bricolage of various theoretical approaches is employed throughout. I find this to be both a strength and a weakness, albeit necessary. This framework is fitting and appropriate for the subject matter, but leaves itself wide open to charges of being spread entirely too thin. And I will happily be the first to acknowledge and admit that this is indeed the case. My only defense is that I feel this is the best method to tackle the task at hand—understanding the slippery concept of the nerd stereotype—and that I beg your indulgence as you read on.

This slipperiness is likely one major contributing factor as to why so few scholars have written about the nerd. There certainty seems to be a widespread interest in better understanding the nerd in a number of various disciplines, especially among sociologists studying relationships between high school-aged teenagers. However, those who do study nerds, or in the very least have nerds arise in their scholarly work, all, to my mind, avoid the critical issue of what they mean by nerd—more often than not, they skirt around the subject with a pat definition that they are "smart" or "socially awkward" with little further definition or exploration. It is with this in mind that I have embarked on this work: to create a model or theoretical framework that will hopefully fill a gap in our understanding of this peculiar cultural phenomenon and that will allow future thinkers and writers something useful to build upon.

Before properly embarking on this exploration, a word regarding terminology. Already, I have been using words and phrases like "nerd," "the nerd," "nerdiest," "nerdism," etc. And throughout this work, a multitude of similar terms will be used, mostly with a sense of playful abandon: "nerdosity," "geekieness," "nerdity," etc. Part of this is due to the slippery nature of terminology in general: dictionary definitions, after all, are not absolute. That said, one of the primary goals of this work is to elucidate and hone in on useful definitional frameworks—not to set them in stone, but to suggest common ways of considering the complex concepts so as to help scholars and laypeople alike, people from many disciplines, a common reference point. Before delving into those definitional issues, I do want to emphasize this: more often than not—as I have already done so up to this point—I tend to use "nerd" or "the nerd" in the singular. I do this mostly when referring to the overall concept of nerd in a general sense, and as one of the main purposes is honing in on the concept of nerd, considering it in the singular may help to concentrate our efforts. That said, I feel it is vitally important to state now that while there may be value in figuring out what a singular concept of nerd may be, there is certainly no such thing as an absolute, essential concept of what a nerd is and must be. In reality, "nerd" means many different things to many different people in many different

contexts, and we must remain open to multiple perspectives on that front. Furthermore, we must guard ourselves against considering or defining "nerd" in an exclusionary fashion, leaving out people who may want to define themselves as such (women, non-whites, etc.). It may well be more useful to use "nerds" in the plural, and when I wend away from more theoretical and conceptual consideration and more towards the praxis of everyday lived nerd realities, I will likely switch to describing many different types of nerds: for, in fact, there are many different types, which brings us back to the very definitional problems this work attempts to address.

With these various approaches, provisos, and subject-positions addressed, I have one final order of business: acknowledgements.

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Introduction: Scrutinizing the Nerd Stereotype

"Nerds" and American Culture: Why Investigating "Nerds" Matters

Most Americans are familiar with the popular term "nerd" and have a general

sense of its meaning. Nevertheless, this wide-ranging familiarity does not mean that

people know exactly how to define what a nerd is, nor does it mean that they can

effectively describe all the characteristics that delineate a nerd—whether they might be

identified by others as a nerd, or even self-label themselves as such. And yet many of us

"know one when we see one." According to popular imagery and so-called conventional

wisdom, a nerd is someone who is unfashionably dressed, physically unattractive,

socially inept, clumsy, bespectacled, and entirely too smart for his/her own good. The

nerd,[1] along with its many conceptual cousins (the geek, the dork, the dweeb, the spaz,

the grind, the freak, the egghead, the brain, etc.) is a prominent figure and descriptor in

American culture.[2] Various nerd narratives and related nomenclature manifest themselves

on elementary school playgrounds, at the local Cineplex, in the aisles of merchandise at

bookstore chains, among relationship experts, and even within the discourse of national

politics.[3] Yet despite the persistent and pervasive dissemination of nerd imagery in

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[1] While I often refer to "the nerd" throughout this work, it is important to realize that this is meant in the general discursive sense: in actuality, there are many types and categories of nerds. "The nerd" refers to a capacious social construct, not an individual nor a monolithic entity or identity. Interestingly, many self-proclaimed nerds are exceptionally active in their own highly specific categorization and self-definition, debating over the definitions of terms like "nerd," "geek," and "dork," and whether or not such descriptors apply to themselves.

[2] More accurately, the nerd is a distinctively American concept, specific primarily to United States culture in particular—although likely due to popular media and the globalization of U.S. entertainments and culture, the nerd manifests to varying degrees throughout the North, Central, and South Americas, as well as other places all over the world. That said, the focus of this dissertation is solely U.S. cultural manifestations of the nerd.

[3] While it may be readily understood that nerd discourse pervades our schools and the mass media, it may seem odd at first to find the same discourse permeating romantic relationships and politics, just to name two of the most surprising. The recent proliferation of nerd-oriented dating websites like Geek 2 Geek (http://www.gk2gk.com/) and pop self-help books such as *A Girl's Guide to Dating a Geek* speak to the

American culture, there is no stable understanding of how a nerd is defined, or what nerd discourse might reveal about U.S. culture.

While this lack of stable meaning may be surprising on the surface, the instability of "nerd" endows it with multiple meanings that offer it a unique sense of pliability and power. The various ways nerd constructs can be understood and applied are dependent on both context and circumstances. For example, to be called a nerd in a school hallway might be considered slanderous and a disturbing part of childhood bullying. On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, a contemporary American in their late twenties or early thirties may happily, even proudly, self-define him/herself as a nerd. There is even a recent linguistic penchant of using the words "nerd" and "geek" as a verb to describe devotion or deep appreciation. Along those lines, there has recently been a conspicuous "rise of the nerd"—a proliferation of supposed "nerd pride" in the U.S. This is perhaps best exemplified by recent bestsellers like Alexandra Robbins' 2011 *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, as well as a sharp increase in various mediated representations of nerds, from television (*The Big Bang Theory* [2007-present]) to the web (nerdist.com). In short, roughly during the 1990s/2000s, the nerd somehow transformed from being a social pariah to being (somewhat problematically) trendy and hip in certain corners of American culture.

I would argue that the "rise of the nerd," along with nerd discourse in general, is intimately woven into the cultural fabric of contemporary America. Accordingly, I

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discourse in relationships. As for politics, there are an intriguing number of politicians who self identify as nerds (Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, as one small example) as well as those politicians who declare and decry their opponents as nerds (many attacks on Obama, for example [see the conclusion for more]). Various discourses about nerds are practically everywhere. See Omi M. Inouye, *A Girl's Guide to Dating a Geek* (Lexington, KY: omionline.ca, 2007). Also see, as an example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdHMKzWJ-SA (accessed March 30, 2017) for a YouTube clip of Fox News coverage of Rick Snyder's "one tough nerd" political campaign ad.

believe nerd discourse offers a number of rich avenues for research, despite (or perhaps because of) its complex, shifting, and multifaceted constructions.[4] After all, a "nerd" can be understood as a lived identity, a stereotype, a subculture, an aesthetic, and/or a performance. Parsing through these various nerd constructs, however, particularly within the discipline of performance studies, offers us yet another way to explore the dynamic relationship between our lived realities and artistic expressions. Moreover, in dissecting nerd-related imagery and performances, we are also granted the opportunity to trace how a seemingly innocuous construct speaks to serious-minded issues within our broader society.

More specifically, as I shall discuss below, since nerd constructs and their related variations are intimately connected with perceptions of *whiteness*, *masculinity, anti-intellectualism, power,* and *hegemony*, it is especially useful to study and better understand them, particularly given the recent state of affairs regarding identity politics in American culture. I would also argue that, rather than dismissing "nerds" as some sort of pop culture frivolity, it would behoove us all, scholars and non-scholars alike, to pay a bit more attention to "the nerd," if for no other reason than to pay more attention to current racial and gender issues in the U.S. and their relationships to intelligence and education, complex and problematic though that relationship may be. After all, art and media—most especially popular art and media—circumscribe belief systems that can ultimately have very real, material effects.

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[4] By "nerd discourse," I mean the codified language of a field of inquiry as well as the Foucaudian notion of an entity of sequences and signs that are enouncements. More generally, in understanding discourse as a body of texts meant to communicate specific information, data, and knowledge, nerd discourse is comprised of texts relating to the nerd construct and its particular characteristics therein.

Defining the "Nerd Stereotype"

When I first began my own in-depth study of "nerds" (broadly construed, for the moment) I must confess my original impulse was to examine how the nerd suddenly transformed from a "negative" stereotype to a "positive" identity. My initial focus, then, was primarily on U.S. popular culture roughly between 1990 and 2010, when the nerd changed from being "uncool" to being "cool" (albeit marginally and problematically), a trend that I refer to as the "rise of the nerd."[5] However, as I dug deeper into this seemingly innocuous pop cultural phenomenon, I eventually discovered an immensely complex and convoluted cultural conundrum that was profoundly tied to issues of identity formation and politics. Why is the nerd so often imagined to be a white male? Would it be correct to assume that "the rise of the nerd" merely reflects the ascendancy of computer technologies? Or do identity formations such as race, gender, sexuality, and class play a bigger role in the construction of the nerd stereotype?

It quickly became clear that if I were to ever examine this "rise of the nerd"—which I still intend to do in the near future—I would first have to provide a much-needed, stable foundation of research.[6] After all, the "negative" nerd stereotype did not merely

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[5] While I touch upon this "rise of the nerd" briefly in my conclusion, this specific topic is something I hope to address separately in future work.

[6] Unfortunately, there has not been a lot of sustained scholarly work on the nerd, only a few key texts scattered across disciplines exist. Some of the most useful and interesting resources that address nerds include Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Mary Bucholtz, *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Mary Bucholtz, "'Why Be Normal?': Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls," *Language in Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 201-23; Mary Bucholtz, "Geek the Girl: Language, Femininity, and Female Nerds," in *Gender and Belief Systems: Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Women and Language Conference, April 19, 20, and 21, 1996*, Natasha Warner, Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Monica Oliver, Suzanne Wertheim and Melinda Chen, ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 119-31; Mary Bucholtz, "The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 84-100; Olan Farnall, "Transformation of a Stereotype: Geeks, Nerds, Whiz Kids, and Hackers," in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, 2nd ed., ed. Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 233-40; David Anderegg, *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of*

appear out of nowhere in the 90s only to be eventually transformed into something

(somewhat) cooler. The politics and cultural machinations involved in this traceable

metamorphosis are, surprisingly, much more complex than I could have anticipated. So in

order to better understand this metamorphosis, I needed to first have a much more

thorough understanding of the nerd stereotype in and of itself, and its cultural particulars

in historical context—any sociological approaches to other nerd constructs (like the nerd

identity or nerd subculture, for example), would have to wait. And this is exactly what

this dissertation explores: the nerd stereotype in its genealogical and cultural context in

the decades preceding its 1990s/2000s transformation.

So when did the nerd stereotype appear? If the late 80s/early 90s serve as a

terminus for the project at hand, where should we begin? A brief look at the origination

of the word "nerd" is informative for these purposes, even though the etymology of

"nerd" is hazy and anecdotal at best, much like other slang terms of its ilk. That said, the

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Them (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007); Lisa Holderman, ed., *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Alex DiBlasi and Victoria Willis, ed., *Geek Rock: An Exploration of Music and Subculture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Social Text* 71, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 49-64; David A. Kinney, "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School," *Sociology of Education* 66, no.1 (January 1993): 21-40; Qin Zhang, "Asian Americans Beyond the Model Minority Stereotype: The Nerdy and the Left Out*," Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no.1 (February 2010): 20-37; Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 260-83; Lori Kendall, "'The Nerd Within': Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity Among Computer-Using Men," *Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353-69; Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 2 (April 2000): 256-74; Lori Kendall, "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011): 505-24; Jonathan P. Eburne and Benjamin Schreier, eds., *This Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Neil Feineman, *Geek Chic: The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2005); Ashley Lynn Carlson, ed., *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015); Laura Mattoon D'Amore, ed., *Smart Chicks on Screen: Representing Women's Intellect in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); and Alex Langley, *The Geek Handbook: Practical Skills and Advice for the Likeable Modern Geek* (Iaola, WI: Krause, 2012). Funnily enough, one of the most useful texts on nerds is not a standard scholarly work but a quirky mock-ethnography by Benjamin Nugent called *American Nerd*. My present study is much indebted to Nugent's treatment of the nerd. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of my People* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

anecdotes are very suggestive, especially as they are expressed, adjudicated, and critiqued through online forums today.[7]

The "folk-etymology" of the word "nerd"—and who and what it represents—indicates that the nerd stereotype began to concretize in popular culture during the late 40s/early 50s. While there are many possible origins, three early (and traceable) uses of "nerd" have garnered the most purchase in terms of establishing possible origins of the term.[8] One of the first appearances of the word is its rather nonsensical use in Dr. Seuss's children's book, *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950). Another is its employment in a 1951 *Newsweek* article—an application that suggests a derogatory meaning. The third is a somewhat dubious (yet adamant) claim from the annals of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, claiming that the term—despite an alternate spelling—has roots in the institution's oral history and college traditions.

The earliest textual reference to the word "nerd" appears in *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss, published in 1950. The word, however, is not employed in a specific fashion: it is used to describe one of the outrageous, imaginary creatures that might populate the zoo in question—and it is a rather grumpy-looking creature at that. The line reads "And then, just to show them, I'll sail to Ka-Troo/And Bring Back an IT-KUTCH a PREEP and a PROO/a NERKLE a NERD and a SEERSUCKER, too!"[9]

Notably, merely a year after the initial publication of *If I Ran the Zoo*, the word "nerd" had become prevalent enough to merit mention in a prominent American

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[7] For one of the most thorough and useful personal blogs regarding both "nerd" and "geek," their etymologies and definitions, see Jim Burrow's website "The Origin of the Nerd." Jim Burrow, "The Origin of the Nerd," http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/NerdCorner/nerd.html (accessed June 27, 2015); another useful website is World Wide Words, "Nerd," http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-ner1.htm (accessed July 16, 2015).

[8] Jim Burrow, "The Origin of the Nerd," http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/NerdCorner/nerd.html (accessed June 27, 2015).

[9] Dr. Seuss, *If I Ran the Zoo* (New York: Random House, 1950).

periodical. One of the first print-uses of the word "nerd" that bears, or at least presages, its more contemporary usage is in a 1951 *Newsweek* article on teenage, regional slang entitled "Jelly-Tot, Square Bear-Man!" The article mentions "nerd" in passing, and yet raises important associations for the concept: "In Detroit, someone who once would be called a drip or a square is now, regrettably, a nerd, or in a less severe case, a scurve."[10] In this usage, the term takes on a general, pejorative meaning: i.e. an unpopular person or "square." The article also suggests that the term may have arisen in the Detroit area, or at the very least, the surrounding region. This is highly suggestive, given the location's complex manifestations of racial and working-class tensions at the time.

The third etymological anecdote regarding the term "nerd" claims the term was originally spelled "knurd," which is "drunk" spelled backwards. This usage supposedly arose among college students to differentiate the "cool" kids who liked to drink and party from those "square" students who instead prioritized studying.[11] Many Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) alumni, in particular, are adamant that the term originated on their New York State campus through oral tradition, despite the lack of archival evidence. One of the earliest, *traceable* uses of the term at RPI was in a 1965 campus humor magazine, which featured the word with its alternate spelling of "nurd." Much later than the earlier uses of the term in the early 50s, this usage does suggest that "nurd," albeit still relegated to youthful slang and oral tradition, had absorbed, for pejorative purposes, the key properties of knowledge/intelligence and asocial behavior.

Importantly, these three early etymological anecdotes associate "nerd" with the distinctive youth culture of the post-war period. The Dr. Seuss children's book, the

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[10] "Jelly-Tot, Square Bear-Man!," *Newsweek*, October 8, 1951, 28.
[11] Jim Burrow, "The Origin of the Nerd."

Newsweek article on teenage slang, and even the collegiate "knurd," all associate the nerd with American youth. This notion of nerd as primarily associated with the politics of age is further strengthened by the fact that most of the early mentions of nerd in the 50s arise primarily in comics, cartoons, and mass media forms geared to the new teenage consumer.[12] While this notion of "nerd" being a term both originated by and intended for young school-aged boys and girls is perhaps commonsense, even for today, it is of particular interest when considering what qualities and characteristics "nerd" implies, and helps to point the way towards a working definition for the nerd stereotype.

So what does one even mean by the term "nerd"? If taken rather broadly and reductively to mean someone persecuted (or maybe celebrated) due to their smarts and/or social awkwardness, a victim of generically construed anti-intellectualism or social pressure, we find that first and foremost, nerdiness hinges on one's behavior, one's actions, their interests and hobbies, their passions. There are too many nerd interests to list, but some of the most prominent include reading books, tinkering with chemistry sets, listening to classical music, collecting comic books, building and operating electronic gadgets like ham radios or computers, and perhaps most pervasively, excelling in academics. Clearly there are too many widely disparate nerdy activities to mark any one as definitive. It would, I feel, be more useful to affiliate nerds with a broader appreciation of technology (technophiles), and, perhaps even more accurately, as "epistemophiles," people with a profound appreciation of knowledge storage and creation. In many ways, a core characteristic of the nerd is that brainpower is not merely a practical means to an end (cultural or economic capital) but that there is a sense of pleasure in learning and in knowing, a sort of deep play derived from intellectual exertion. For the time being, these

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[12] Jim Burrow, "The Origin of the Nerd." See especially the comic "Freckles and his Friends."

general notions of nerdiness should suffice as we hone in more specifically on the one nerd construct under examination: the nerd stereotype.

Like any stereotype, the nerd stereotype is a cultural construct, an imaginary manifestation of hegemonic discourse that represents both the hegemony and otherness in peculiar and imbalanced relationships of power. In a simple formalistic sense, all stereotypes tend to have 1) an image component and 2) a list of "defining" characteristics. It is this image component, the imaginary appearance of any stereotype, that allows one to leap to first impressions at a mere cursory glance, that gives the stereotype its "you know one if you've seen one" visual markers, markers that tend toward extremity and exaggeration. As for the list of characteristics prescribed by stereotypes, they tend to revolve around ascriptions related, unsurprisingly, to power along a very simple and essentializing binary logic: intelligence/stupidity, physical prowess/weakness, moral fiber/duplicity, civilized/bestial, attractiveness/ugliness, practicality/impracticality, maturity/infantilism, hypersexual/asexual, etc.

With this basic understanding of the stereotype in general, we can understand the nerd stereotype in a similar vein. In terms of stereotypical imagistic representation, the nerd is, first and foremost, unattractive. Whether represented as male or female, regardless of the current styles or fashions, the nerd stereotype always relies on an image that renders the subject as sexually unattractive and presupposes this inherent ugliness. Whether their body is represented as obese or woefully scrawny, the stereotypical nerd is unfashionably dressed, unkempt, disheveled, and lacking personal grooming skills. Along these lines, the nerd is often represented as ungainly, awkward, clumsy, and famously inept at wooing, dancing, and making love. Simply put, the stereotypical nerd is

performed as ugly and foolish to remind people *not* to act like or be a nerd, not to engage in nerdy behaviors.

The various details and specifics that constitute the imagistic component of a stereotype take on a rather simplistic symbolic value, one that purposefully does not require an advanced understanding of semiotics to unpack: indeed, the visual markers are meant to operate as totalizing and representative indicators rooted in "common sense." For the white male nerd stereotype, such indicators abound, such as the jacked-up pants, the pocket protector, the bow tie, etc. Of course, no visual marker is more synonymous with the nerd stereotype than the thick, black horn-rimmed glasses. The "meaning" of the glasses is clear: this person reads too much (or perhaps now stares at a computer screen too much), this person prioritizes function over fashion, this person is separated from the real world by a technological apparatus. And as is often the case, the stereotype also tends toward the extreme, so the glasses become heavy prescription, Coke-bottle bottom, impossibly thick horn-rimmed glasses, further rendering the nerd figure as ridiculous, foolish, and even more unattractive.

The other important visual marker associated with the nerd stereotype is that of whiteness. And not just whiteness: pasty pale, never-goes-outside hyperwhiteness.[13] Not only does this tend to make whites the primary focus of nerd representations, it also tends to associate those ethnicities and races oddly deemed "almost white" as nerdy in the cultural imaginary: namely—certain minoritized groups of Jews and Asians. From another perspective, the imagined whiteness of the nerd is placed in sharp contrast with the supposed "hip cool" problematically associated with blackness. While I intend to

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[13] For more on "hyperwhiteness" and the nerd, see Mary Bucholtz, *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

explore and trouble these particular racial and ethnic associations throughout this work, the nerd stereotype, first and foremost, should be understood as predominately associated with whiteness, but certainly not exclusively.

As for the laundry list of characteristics commonly associated with the nerd stereotype, they include but are certainly not limited to the following: hyperintelligence, immaturity, obsequiousness, passivity, physical weakness, etc. And as suggested above in regard to a wide range of nerd constructs, stereotypical nerds tend to be associated with being overly obsessed with certain hobbies and interests, from reading books, doing homework, programming computers, enjoying math/science, or "geeking out" over specific media fandoms like *Star Trek* and *Harry Potter* (especially those relating to the genres of science fiction or fantasy.)

It is this association with particular hobbies, interests, and behaviors that is the most peculiar aspect of the nerd stereotype. After all, in terms of performativity, it appears clear that one of the primary functions of the nerd stereotype is to allot which hobbies, interests, and behaviors are "inappropriate" for particular identities.[14] A young American girl who enjoys math and science is reminded via the nerd stereotype that she is misperforming her ideal gender norms, just as a young American boy who prefers computer programming over American football is reminded that he is misperforming his. Neither the boy nor the girl, the nerd stereotype instructs them, will ever be found attractive or be appreciated, labeling them social misfits for their lack of proper vigorous heteronormativity.

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[14] For more on "performativity" and the concept of misperforming gender, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The ascription of certain hobbies, interests, and behaviors as properly masculine and properly feminine is, of course, problematic and potentially oppressive. After all, how can one explain the paradox of how a love of math, science, or critical thinking feminizes males, yet also somehow masculinizes females? How might one explain the contradiction of how memorizing baseball statistics and player names (a task requiring quite a bit of brainpower) renders a male subject masculine, yet memorizing the periodic table of elements or all the episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* renders a male subject feminine? But this is precisely how a stereotype operates: a highly suspect, faulty binary logic that supposedly appears "natural."

Much of the difficulty in defining the nerd stereotype lies in the fact that there are such a seemingly wide and disparate range of interests that might render one a nerd. After all, someone could be slandered by the epithet "nerd" for behaviors as seemingly different as being a teacher's pet, obsessing over *Dr. Who*, working as a physicist, or being an outspoken public intellectual. That being said, the interests that tend to define the nerd stereotype typically revolve around education, intelligence, and science. If any core characteristic connects these various interests, it may well be the project of civilization, always placed at odds via binary logic with nature, the animalistic, the primal and primitive, the physical, and of course the sexual. So if the nerd stereotype represents the hypercivilized egocentric individual who has lost touch with the physical, sexual, animal human body (and perhaps their id), it then follows that nerdy interests tend towards those that civilize, whereas non-nerdy interests tend towards the more bestial.[15]

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[15] I often use the terms "overcivilization" and "hypercivilization" interchangeably throughout this work. However, it should also be emphasized that this particular characteristic is not the same as being sociable, "fitting in," or being popular—the nerd is, after all, usually never performed with these qualities. Rather, by being hypercivilized, the stereotypical nerd is distanced from nature and the natural, preferring rules,

This may well explain why, for much of the nerd stereotype's history, the nerd is often portrayed as the hapless victim to the physically violent, uncivilized bully stereotype.

This overcivilization/hypercivilization of the nerd stereotype—especially when coupled with the nerd's supposedly inherent unattractiveness—also explains another vitally important defining aspect of construct: namely, that the nerd is a sexual failure. So out of touch with their sexuality, the nerd stereotype is usually rendered through performance in one of two key ways: as coldly asexual and oblivious to all things romantic and sensual, or so utterly and ridiculously desperate for sexual contact that the nerd is doomed to comic failure in their preposterous attempts to procure love, affection, or even merely intercourse. The supposed "lesson" of the nerd stereotype is blatantly clear in this regard: if you assume too many nerdy characteristics, you will be misperforming your prescribed gender norms and in turn your compulsory heteronormativity, which of course inherently renders you an unattractive clown or social pariah.

As particular facets/processes of overcivilization, the interest in education, intelligence, and science may therefore be taken as defining aspects of the nerd stereotype. This is not to say that all scientists are nerds, or vice versa. Nor is it to say that all intellectuals or educated individuals are nerds, or vice versa. It should also be stated that being a real-life nerd does not inherently make one intelligent, wise, or progressive, either: there are many supposed nerds who are not highly intelligent, and who continue to indulge in racist, sexist, and homophobic practices, let alone conservative politics. To conflate all scientists, intellectuals, highly educated or left-leaning individuals with nerds

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regulations, technologies, order, structure, symmetry, logic, numbers, etc. The stereotypical nerd does not know how to "let loose" or "have fun." In short, a nerd can be an uncivilized slob with no social graces and still be hypercivilized.

would be folly. That said, there are important correlations here regarding the performance of "braininess" more generally construed that will be explored throughout this work.[16]

So in short, the nerd stereotype may be defined as a construct of hegemonic discourse that renders the civilizing characteristics of intelligence, education, and appreciation of science/technology as appropriate only *in moderation*—and only for certain individuals within post-WWII American culture. For to be hyperintelligent, to enjoy academic forays, to be genuinely passionate about science and technology, and to perform superlatively in scholarly spheres—all the while failing at being athletic, socially adept, etc.—(so the nerd stereotype tells us) creates an undesirable persona, leaving an individual to be perceived as foolish and unattractive. Why? Because these behaviors prevent us from performing our gender norms "appropriately," from portraying characteristics deemed ideally feminine/masculine. The imagined threat of the nerd stereotype, then, is a failure to lure and attract the opposite sex, a failure of compulsive heteronormativity.

With this definition of the nerd stereotype in mind, I would like to further posit the central thesis that the main function of the nerd stereotype—like any other stereotype—is to reinforce and reify cultural hegemony, to delineate who has access to

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[16] One of the aspects that makes discussing American anti-intellectualism such a murky business is that most people want to appear smart, and have a love affair with the acquisition of facts, yet still distrust others with too much intelligence. In other words, Americans appreciate *knowledge*, but not *intelligence*. So it might be more useful to consider nerds as being "smart" or "brainy" as opposed intelligent, *per se*. But as those terms are so generic, I feel they only serve to make things murkier. Interestingly, Aaron Lecklider uses the concept of "brainpower" to popularize all of these related notions of intelligence, "to reference the complicated ways in which intelligence was invoked to empower the wide swath of Americans who did not necessarily have access to the institutions of higher education." (4) However, I feel "brainpower" is not entirely appropriate, as the nerd stereotype is more about attacking intelligence than promoting a populist appropriation of intelligence. So for the time being, I will continue to use "intelligence," "intellect," and "intellectualism" to encompass this performance of "braininess" of the nerd stereotype, primarily because of its inherently anti-intellectual nature. See Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 4.

power and who does not, and what form that power should take. Further, I argue that the nerd stereotype performs this function in two essential ways: the "heteronormative dynamic" and the "exclusionary dynamic," which are essentially two sides of the same "gatekeeping" coin.[17]

First, the nerd stereotype serves a heteronormative dynamic by shaming individuals—primarily (yet not exclusively) straight white males—into properly performing their heteronormativity/masculinity/femininity by eschewing extensive/critical intelligence (a sort of in-group function.) One of the most common portrayals of this kind is the much-ridiculed failed masculinity of the stereotypical white male nerd. It is important to note, however, that while the nerd stereotype has been predominately associated with white males and white masculinity and represented as such, the nerd stereotype has for much of its history not been limited to only straight white males: interestingly, for example, women have long been represented as unattractive nerds up until the mid-80s, when the nerd stereotype particularly focused on mainly male representations. What both male and female nerd representations draw upon, however, be they white or otherwise, is a shared prescriptive heteronormative discourse. Simply put, the heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype is a sort of cultural script that suggests that having too much brainpower is a misperformance of gender identity. This in turn is inherently an anti-intellectual dynamic.

Second, the nerd stereotype simultaneously serves an exclusionary dynamic, rendering the Other (women, blacks, Asians, Jews, etc.) as unworthy of access to any material power associated with intelligence, education, science, or related discourses (a

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[17] I borrow the phrase "gatekeeping function" with regards to the nerd stereotype from Ron Eglash and his insightful article on the subject. See Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Social Text* 71, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 49-64.

sort of out-group function.) This exclusionary dynamic likely needs no immediate explanation: by persistently (although as we shall see, not entirely) representing itself predominately as white and male, the nerd stereotype mirrors and reinforces racist and sexist ideologies that lead to discriminatory practices in education and workforces. And yet as shall be examined in this work, even when non-white and non-male identities are represented as stereotypical nerds and supposedly lauded for their intelligence in popular media, they are still excluded from any tangible power.

With these two dynamics in mind, it becomes apparent that the nerd stereotype is rife with contradictions and paradoxes. On one hand, the nerd stereotype mocks intelligence, yet on the other, it reserves that limited intelligence for a select few. One of the key contradictions of the nerd stereotype explored in this dissertation involves the frequency with which certain identities are represented as nerds in popular performance; namely, how consistent (overdetermined) representation as a nerd *and* the lack of representation are *both* delimiting and damaging for the represented identities. In other words, despite the seeming contradiction, being performed as a stereotypical nerd and *not* being performed as a stereotypical nerd are both prejudicial acts.

Take, for example, the supposed whiteness of the nerd stereotype: that, too, has experienced flux over the course of time, first incorporating Jews, then Asian Americans, and even later in the 90s, African American males. Clearly the nerd stereotype more often than not excludes the Other, focusing primarily on white male nerd representations, but as this study will argue, it can also paradoxically include the Other as potential nerds in particular historical moments when the intelligence of that Other needs to be ridiculed and marked as less threatening—the nerdy feminist of the 70s, the Asian nerd of the 80s,

and the black male nerd of the 90s, for example.[18] In other words, when intelligent folks

began to upset the hegemonic status quo, the nerd stereotype acknowledged this

intelligence, yet was also used to put them in their subordinated place in the social

hierarchy.

The heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype—especially that of ridiculing

white men who are too intelligent (and *ergo* feminine) for their own good—needs a bit

more explanation, and perhaps a few caveats as well. It should hopefully go without

saying that it is certainly not my intent to reify white masculinity, to fall into the trap of

again making the angry white male feel like it is he who is the marginalized victim. On

the contrary: it is my intent to deconstruct and critique biased notions regarding white

masculinity, to challenge how this hegemony constructs knowledge and power. And as

both whiteness and masculinity studies have shown us, this hegemony often operates not

only by the ruthless exclusion of the Other, but also by a pernicious self-policing of the

in-group dynamic as well. After all, there are instances where being slanderously called

"a nerd" is an aggressive act meant to shame a young white boy into behaving "more

masculine," "more macho," "more straight." Taken in this sense, the nerd stereotype,

depending on context and how it is deployed, can also be seen as a stark reminder for

white American males to prioritize bully behaviors over nerdy ones, to perform their

gender and their heterosexuality properly, or to suffer the punitive consequences.[19]

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[18] Sadly, African American women seem to be doubly excluded from nerd representations. In fact, the
extreme paucity of female African American nerd characters in performance is downright disturbing. That
said, the recent release of the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) seems to be one of the first truly prominent
representation of such characters, so perhaps the tide is finally turning? For more on the book on which the
movie is based, see Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of
the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (New York: William Morrow, 2016).
[19] We see this sort of slander mainly in our schools, and it is worth noting that there is often a conflation of
the epithets "fag" and "nerd" as terms of emasculation. For more on the conflation of these terms, see

With this definition of the nerd stereotype, its primary function, and its two core cultural dynamics—the "heternormative dynamic" and the "exclusionary dynamic"—in mind, it is my goal with this work to go into greater detail as to how these functions operate in their varying historical contexts, focusing on how the nerd stereotype is deployed to reinscribe white straight American male hegemony in a multitude of different, often even contradictory ways.

Analyzing a Stereotype: Theoretical Considerations

This study traces the formation and popularization of the nerd stereotype in American culture from roughly 1945 to 1989. Furthermore, this study operates under the notion that to best critique any stereotype it is vital to both historicize and politicize the cultural formation, despite how stereotypes inherently naturalize (and essentialize) themselves by mystifying and obfuscating their historical origins as well as their political functions. The goal, then, is to create a general cultural genealogy of the nerd stereotype, highlighting how it is specifically imbricated in particular performative moments in United States history and participates in shaping and/or reifying the identity politics of its day, scripting peculiar relationships along the indices of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and age. As such, my theoretical framework for this dissertation utilizes a combination of approaches grounded in cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, critical race theory, queer theory, performance studies, and white masculinity studies. As so much of the nerd stereotype hinges upon the relationship between whiteness, masculinity, and anti-intellectualism in particular, these three tropes serve as prominent pillars within this study.

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especially David Anderegg, *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007).

My notions of whiteness are rooted in Richard Dyer's foundational *White* as well as David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*. I have also been strongly influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* and bell hooks's *Black Looks*, both of which provide valuable perspectives on white hegemony as constructed in opposition to the Other. More recent works that have informed my thinking on the construction of whiteness include Matt Wray's *Not Quite White* and Hamilton Carroll's insightful *Affirmative Reaction*. Taken together, these works provide a useful foundation for thinking about whiteness that have especial resonance with the nerd stereotype.[20]

For example, Dyer usefully posits in *White* three elements that constitute the embodiment of whiteness: Christianity, race, and enterprise/imperialism. Garnered from Christianity, whiteness for men is modeled by Christ, a model "of a divided nature and internal struggle between mind (God) and body (man.)"[21] With regards to the embodiment of race, Dyer suggests that white men in particular are of a divided nature, with the presence of dark sexual desires (associated, inevitably, with the darker races) that forever threaten their whiteness. Interestingly, Dyer writes of white men:

> There is a further twist. *Not* to be sexually driven is liable to cast a question mark over a man's masculinity—the darkness is a sign of his true masculinity, just as his ability to control it is a sign of whiteness—but there can be occasions when either side discredits the other, the white man's masculinity 'tainting' his whiteness or his whiteness emasculating him.[22]

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[20] For these valuable resources on whiteness, see Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2007); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[21] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 17
[22] Ibid., 28.

That latter occasion certainly speaks to the nerd stereotype, often represented as an emasculated hyperwhite male who is—to quote "Weird Al" Yankovic—too "white and nerdy" for his own good.[23]

With regards to masculinity studies, much of my thinking on the emasculated male nerd (as well as the masculinized female nerd) has been deeply informed by Gail Bederman's *Manliness & Civilization*, Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, David Savran's *Taking It Like A Man*, and Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*. Of especial note is R. W. Connell's *Masculinities* and Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America*, the latter of which served as a particularly useful historical guide and checkpoint for this genealogical study.[24]

Connell's *Masculinities*, by way of brief example, also suggests an intriguing gendered perspective on the male nerd stereotype. When examining the social organization of masculinity, Connell focuses on four general relations among various masculinities: Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity, and Marginalization.[25] Suggesting that there are a number of subordinated masculinities oppressed by a dominant or hegemonic masculinity—most conspicuously and oppressively gay masculinity—Connell highlights how such subordinated masculinities are often symbolically associated with an abject femininity. Interestingly for our purposes, Connell writes:

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[23] "Weird Al" Yankovic, "White and Nerdy," in *Straight Outta Lynwood*, Volcano Entertainment, 2006, http://itunes.com.

[24] For these valuable resources on masculinity, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005); and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[25] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005), 76.

> Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. The process is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist, mother's boy, four-eyes, ear-'ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on. Here too the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious.[26]

So, whether construed as a manifestation of hyperwhiteness or a manifestation of subordinated masculinity (or even more likely, a bit of both), the nerd stereotype is deeply linked to a sense of failed white masculinity. Furthermore, the subordinated masculinity of the nerd figure inevitably implies the hegemonic masculine figure, and the stereotypical nerd is usually juxtaposed with the image of "the ideal American man," both of which vary subtly throughout the history of American culture. As such, this extended examination of the nerd stereotype primarily uses white masculinity as its critical and theoretical foundation, examining both stereotypical nerd performances and performances of supposedly "ideal" hegemonic American masculinities.

With these general theoretical considerations in place, my study will examine various examples of the nerd stereotype from a wide variety of media, from comic books to Hollywood films, from singular episodes of *Father Knows Best* to plays from the Broadway stage, to celebrity gossip to the covers of *Newsweek* and *Time*. My analysis of these instances of the nerd stereotype will be situated historically, not only with regard to identity formations such as race and gender, but also in relation to the dominant cultural discourses of intelligence, trust in science, and education reforms. As one might suspect, when anti-intellectualism, distrust in science, and poor educational standards dominate a particular cultural landscape, the nerd stereotype thrives in its most pernicious manifestations.

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[26] Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

In terms of anti-intellectualism, I find myself particular beholden to Hofstadter's seminal *Anti-intellectualism in American Life,* despite its often polemical and at times problematic (let alone dated) nature.[27] Still, Hofstadter's work remains tantalizing and highly useful—not only for work on intellectuals and anti-intellectualism in American culture, but also for work on nerds and the nerd stereotype. Case in point: although Hofstadter is hesitant to formulate a specific definition for "anti-intellectualism," he does state that "The common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life."[28] The nerd stereotype, then, could be considered one way in which the "life of the mind" is so minimized. Further, he argues that "The ideal assumptions of anti-intellectualism" find that intellectuals, quite akin to nerds, "are pretentious, conceited, effeminate, and snobbish; and very likely immoral, dangerous, and subversive."[29] So while the intellectual and the nerd may be different in palpable ways, as two related lives of the mind, they both come under similar fire on similar grounds from anti-intellectual sentiment.[30]

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[27] For a wide range of various resources regarding American anti-intellectualism, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959); Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: BasicBooks, 1973); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: BasicBooks, 1987); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009); and Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[28] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 7.

[29] Ibid., 18-19.

[30] Hofstadter also interestingly defines "two basic qualities in the intellectual's attitude toward ideas— qualities that may be designated playfulness and piety," qualities that I would argue also apply with

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While it is beyond the scope of this study to thoroughly examine anti-intellectualism and its relationship to American culture since Hofstadter, his work provides a useful framework for tracing, in a general sense, anti-intellectual sentiment during the period in question. As Hofstadter suggests—and scholar Daniel Rigney usefully distills and develops—there are three major influences on American anti-intellectualism (or perhaps even types of anti-intellectualism): anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflexive instrumentalism.[31] Much of anti-rationalism is rooted in religious fundamentalism and evangelicalism; much of anti-elitism can be found in political populism; and much of unreflexive instrumentalism is fostered by the narrowly practical economics of capitalism. With these understandings in mind, one may trace the presence and influence of anti-intellectualism by following popular American culture's relationship with evangelicalism, populism, and cut-throat capitalism: when these sentiments are in the ascendant in the culture, so too is anti-intellectualism. And in these moments, as we shall see, so too is the nerd stereotype.

While the theoretical considerations for this study of the nerd stereotype involves situating race and gender (primarily white masculinity) as well as anti-intellectualism in its historical and political context, it is also necessary to account for the very form and function of the stereotype itself. Accordingly, much of my understanding of the nerd stereotype has been informed by a wide range of scholars that have examined other stereotypes. Taken all together—be it Ronald L. Jackson II's paradigm of scripting onto the black body, David L. Eng's examination of the feminized Asian male, or Bhabha's

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remarkable precision to the nerd identity. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 27.

[31] For a useful review and updated distillation of Hofstadter, see Daniel Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter," *Sociological Inquiry* 61, no. 4 (November 1991): 434-51.

useful notions of fixity and ambivalence—I am indebted to a wide range of scholars for my theoretical approach to deconstructing stereotypes.[32]

Take Patricia Hill Collins's work on black female stereotypes—or rather controlling images—as a small example. As Collin's reminds us in her *Black Feminist Thought*, "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence," and that stereotypes provide just such justifications.[33] Furthermore, she argues that the social injustices and intersecting oppressions perpetrated by stereotypes are based on binary thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification. This suggests that in order to understand how a stereotype operates at a basic level, it is necessary to examine how the stereotype manifests and performs these imbalanced oppositional binaries ("white/black, male/female, reason/emotion, culture/nature, fact/opinion, mind/body, subject/object").[34] And as already suggested above, this is one of the key analytical strategies that I will be employing throughout this study of the nerd stereotype, both relating it to a number of varying intersectional identities as well as disturbing the binaries that underpin its discursive operations.

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[32] For more of these valuable resources on stereotypes, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, revised ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994); Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 94-120.
[33] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 76.
[34] Ibid., 77.

Overall, this work on the nerd stereotype relies on a number of theoretical considerations in order to best examine prominent and telling performances of the nerd stereotype within specific eras, relating those performances to a complex of identity politics, and deconstructing the formalistic components of the stereotype such as its image, characteristics, binary logic, and relation to other stereotypes. Subsequently, as this study is a cultural history that focuses on the ever-shifting evolution of the nerd stereotype, the chapters move forward in a relatively chronological fashion.

The Four Phases of the (Early) Nerd Stereotype

This study of the nerd stereotype traces its development from the late 40s/50s—when, as noted above, evidence suggests the slang term "nerd" came into usage—up to its popularization in mainstream American culture in the late 80s, spanning a roughly 45-year period stretching from 1945 to 1989. I begin with 1945 mainly due to the dropping of the atomic bomb and the end of WWII, which had a major impact on all of American society, its relationship to scientists and intellectuals especially. I conclude roughly with the start of the slow transition out of the neoconservative, hypermasculine Reagan Era, when George Herbert Walker Bush takes office in 1989. By this point, the nerd stereotype has been firmly ensconced in the American imaginary, and after this point and into the 90s, that stereotype undergoes substantial shifts and challenges, not to mention the aforementioned "rise of the nerd." I have roughly divided the period in between these two pivotal dates into four distinctive "phases" of the nerd stereotype, and broke the body of this dissertation into four "Parts," each covering a phase (or specific date-range), and each possessing two chapters.

As for my reasoning behind breaking the overall period of study into four, roughly 12-year phases, I have done so primarily because I noticed subtle, yet vitally important shifts in the quality and quantity of nerd stereotype performances between each of the phases, shifts that in turn reflect important cultural changes during these phases. As I studied this phenomenon, I came to understand that these phases (and their respective stereotypical nerd performances) mainly reflected the cultural ebb and flow of American anti-intellectualism as well as identity politics more generally construed. In other words, just as perceptions of race, gender, and intelligence shifted substantially in U.S. culture from the 40s to the 50s to the 60s to the 70s to the 80s, so too did the performances of the nerd stereotype.

That said, it should be clearly stated that the shifts between these phases, while reflecting important moments in American culture, are indeed subtle, and that the overall nerd stereotype in performance seemingly remains rather fixed and consistent throughout the entire 45-year period under study. After all, both the hegemonic and exclusionary dynamics of the nerd stereotype remain throughout all four phases, even if they manifest in rather different ways. Yet, as Homi Bhabha suggests, the stereotype "is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated."[35] Bhabha refers to this process as "ambivalence," the force of which gives the stereotype its currency, ensuring the stereotype's "repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures."[36] So while the nerd stereotype may appear much the same throughout the entire period under

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[35] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 94-5.
[36] Ibid., 95.

examination, each phase suggests how its anxious repetitions reflect very real, very different cultural changes.

Part I covers the first phase of the nerd stereotype—what I call the "Nerd Origin" phase. This part focuses on formative representations of the nerd (what I call "proto-nerds") in American popular culture from approximately 1945 to 1957. This phase serves as the overall "ideological foundation" of the nerd stereotype, suggesting that there is good reason as to why the nerd stereotype originated at this specific historical juncture. Combining the pronounced upswing of anti-intellectualism of the time and the strict "culture of containment" that segregated along racial and gendered lines, it is the identity politics of this historical moment that provide many of the core features and characteristics of the nerd stereotype that remain with us today.[37] Accordingly, I divide my exploration of this Nerd Origin phase into two distinct, but related chapters: the first focusing primarily on the formation of the white male nerd stereotype, and the second focusing on the nerd stereotype from the perspective of the marginalized Other.

Chapter 1 examines how the nerd stereotype is primarily a product of post-war youth culture, one that combines the various characteristics of other concurrent expressions: namely the sissy, the mad scientist, the egghead, and the square. These four characterizations, in varying ways, merged discourses involving anti-scientific sentiment, deviant intelligence, "uncoolness" and asocial behaviors, and failed performances of masculinity/femininity. Importantly, by drawing upon these four period-specific characterizations, this chapter further posits that this is the time when the performance of the young nerd stereotype (such as Dilton Doiley, a character from Archie Comics) was

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[37] For more on the discourse of containment of the post-war period, especially "domestic containment," see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988).

predominantly associated with failed white masculinity, which not only articulated its heteronormative dynamic, but also linked the nerd stereotype with the figure of the young white straight male.

If the white male nerd stereotype comprises the subject of chapter 1, chapter 2 explores the nerd stereotype in relation to the marginalized Other—namely Jews, women, blacks, and gay men. Whether represented by stereotypic nerd performances or ostracized from such representation, each of these identity formations were excluded from power (such as education and occupational opportunities) due to the exclusionary dynamic of the nerd stereotype, albeit in very different ways. From its very beginning, the nerd stereotype was deployed in conjunction with hyperintelligent Jewish stereotypes (the overly studious "greasy grind," in particular) just as American Jews were being assimilated into whiteness. Yet rather than being empowering, imagery relating to the intelligent Jew was used against him/her, as evidenced by the long-standing admission quotas in higher education that limited their access to power. Women were often included—albeit perhaps not as frequently as their male counterparts—in stereotypical nerd representations. In this chapter, I posit the notion that the female nerd stereotype was one small engine in the larger machinery of patriarchal pressure to ensure that women did not pursue careers, intelligence, or education in the "culture of containment" that typified the period. In contrast to the strong association of Jewishness with the nerd stereotype, African Americans were entirely excluded from any sort of nerd representation at the time—a phenomenon that would persist from this first phase up through the 80s. This echoes much of the segregationist politics of the era, which persisted in marking blacks as primitive, hypersexual, physical beings, which in turn marked the hypercivilized,

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asexual, hyperintelligent nerd as hyperwhite. This complete lack of representation of black nerds also highlights America's long-held fear of the intelligent, educated, empowered African American. Interestingly, while distancing the nerd stereotype from racialized (and racist) perceptions of physical strength and sexual prowess, the nerd stereotype also absorbed much of the homophobic sentiment of the period, thereby conflating the effeminate nerd stereotype with the intelligent sissy and the immoral gay esthete.

The second phase of the nerd stereotype—and therefore Part II—covers 1957 to 1969, from the launch of *Sputnik* to the Apollo 11 moon landing. Thanks mainly to the space race, I argue that this period saw a slight, if problematic recuperation of intellect, liberalism, education, and science. Far from being a true celebration of intelligence and an end to anti-intellectualism, however, much of the discourse of this second phase focused on how to make intelligence "useful" and "practical" (now that it was needed for "the greater good," i.e. to support hegemony), and on how to render intelligence somewhat redeemable for white men. Two important trends, therefore, dominate this phase: the preponderance of the tolerable, useful nerd sidekick character, and the problematic attempts to reconcile intelligence with white masculinity by evading charges of effeminacy and sexual failure that were so deeply connected to brainpower for white men. Therefore, while much of the exclusionary dynamic of the first phase remains relatively consistent throughout this second phase, there is a notable difference in how the heteronormative dynamic operates between the first and second phases: if the first phase oversaw an overall rejection of the oddball nerd, the second saw a problematic attempt to place the nerd in his proper (i.e. subordinated)

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position on the hierarchy of both work and masculinity. Therefore, my examination of the nerd stereotype in the second phase—the "Nerd Employment" phase—focuses mainly on the heteronormative dynamic and the two primary ways that the nerd in performance was represented: as a "tolerable nerd," a helpful sidekick employed in service to a properly masculine hero; and as an "anti-playboy," a nerd whose failed sexuality was deployed to offset the virile masculinity of the role model playboy. While these two tropes tend to overlap, I examine each in their own respective chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on the tolerable nerd stereotype, a trope that I argue attempts to reconcile putting the nerd to work (and in their proper place) during this second phase. As long as these nerd sidekicks used their brainpower and techno-savvy to bolster the powers that be, their nerdy behaviors are tolerated and treated as humorously benign. As such, this chapter focuses primarily on the two types of technological wizardry that would not only come to trouble and fascinate the American cultural sphere of the era, but also become vitally crucial associations of the nerd stereotype: The Cold War space race and the steady infiltration of "electronic brains"—also known as "computers"—into corporate America. Accordingly, in terms of the white male nerd stereotype, this era is when the nerd is rendered as either a mere sidekick to the masculine astronaut hero (what I loosely refer to as a "NASA nerd"), or, as the 1957 film *Desk Set* demonstrates, a feminized, misfit computer programmer who is supposed to serve his (or her) manly corporate executive bosses.

If chapter 3 focuses mainly on how the tolerable nerd stereotype attempts to reconcile putting American intelligence to work, then chapter 4 examines the white masculinity of the nerd stereotype during the second phase in greater detail. Reacting to

the pivotal social movements of the 60s—primarily the Civil Rights Movement, the

nascent Women's Movement, and the Student Movement—many white American males

retreated from these growing threats to their white masculinity by attempting to reconcile

the supposedly feminizing nature of intelligence, mainly to keep brainpower to

themselves. In short, hegemonic American white men needed role models for a sort of

masculinity that allowed for a modicum of cultured intelligence, yet reaffirmed their

manliness. They turned not only to a stereotypical understanding of the British for their

role models, but mainly to the popular archetype of the playboy, which attempted to

redeem intelligence through male hypersexuality. Interestingly, while playboys like

James Bond served to stoke the white American male ego, nerds were situated as "anti-

playboys," relatively popular characters (we even find some notable nerd protagonists

during this phase) that offset the playboy lifestyle by representing not only what

constituted too much intelligence, but also a lack of proper sexual prowess. Overall, the

chapter argues that while nerd performances increased slightly in prominence in light of

the recuperation of intelligence of the time, it did so only in deference to a white male

hypersexuality that, in turn, explains why those nerd performances are so vividly enacted

as feminized white male failures.

The third phase of the nerd stereotype, stretching roughly from 1968 to 1980,

constitutes Part III of this dissertation. This phase might best be labeled as the "Nerd

(Un)Popularization" phase, loosely spanning the assassinations of MLK and RFK to the

election of Ronald Reagan as President (a decidedly political framework). Stated simply,

this crucial period is when the nerd stereotype shifts from the somewhat "positive,"

playful, tolerable portrayals in the 60s to the rather malicious portrayals of unpopularity

later in the 80s. Additionally, not only did nerd performances change in quality, but they also changed in quantity, becoming more and more prevalent through the 70s, moving towards becoming a truly popular stereotype in American culture. In accordance with this important trend, chapters 5 and 6 examine some of the potential causes and ramifications of this exponential growth of the nerd stereotype during this period. Arguing that the primary cultural factor for this rise of the stereotype is the concordant rise of neoconservatism, instigated as a sort of backlash against liberal intelligence and civil rights (most especially the rise of feminism in the late 60s/early 70s), these two chapters examine how the growth of neoconservative sentiment in American culture greatly nurtured anti-intellectualism, anti-feminism, and hypermasculinity, all of which in turn profoundly fostered the nerd stereotype.

Chapter 5 begins with a deep examination of the social shifts that enabled the popularization of the nerd stereotype in the third phase—economic, political, and cultural. Most significantly, this chapter attests that this process of becoming a prominent American stereotype takes place concordantly with a shift towards New Right, neoconservative politics. As anti-intellectualism increased and trust in science decreased, it is unsurprising, then, to witness the nerd stereotype grow in popularity in the U.S. as well. With these contributing factors established, the chapter moves into examining the popularization of the nerd stereotype in popular performances more specifically. Charting how the nerd shifts from the periphery of slang and youth culture and into the mainstream, I argue that the growth of nerd performances can be traced from a small picture in the *National Lampoon* to the sitcom *Happy Days* to the larger-than-life nerds of *Saturday Night Live*. With both the growth of the nerd stereotype and its neoconservative

roots established, chapter 5 concludes by examining the particular neoconservative—i.e. mainly white male—backlash to the rise of feminism in the late 60s/early 70s, a deeply significant turning point for the nerd stereotype. After all, the Women's Movement presented a serious and powerful attack on white male hegemony: So perhaps it is unsurprising that the backlash against feminism conflated feminists with charges of both being lesbians and being female nerds—a bizarre phenomenon that is evidenced by popular reactions to the nerdy character Velma from the animated classic *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!*

Continuing the investigation of the late 60 and 70s, chapter 6 focuses in-depth on the relationship between (white) hypermasculinity and anti-intellectualism as expressed by popular cinematic icons of the period. If the second phase (1957-1969) of the nerd stereotype saw a problematic attempt of white male hegemony to reconcile intelligence with masculinity, this third phase (1968-1980) saw the opposite: the growing trend towards tough guy hypermasculinity embraced a decidedly anti-intellectual stance, as evidenced by cinematic macho male heroes like Dirty Harry and Rocky. Accordingly, even medial, everyman, "new man" characters—such as those often portrayed by Dustin Hoffman—also found themselves caught in this bind between intelligence and hypermasculinity, and inevitably the latter would win out over the former. However, this growing divide between hypermasculinity and intelligence in the 70s is best encapsulated by the figure of the Jewish schlemiel, a comedic character that emphasized the supposed connection between intelligence and hypomasculine sexual failure. The many characters of Woody Allen, in particular, highlight how the Jewish schlemiel fully embodied the

nerd stereotype, providing a brainy figure of ridicule, a type of emasculated,

hyperintelligent neurotic sexual loser.

Finally, Part IV—and chapters 7 and 8—bring this work on the nerd stereotype to

its fourth phase, examining 1978 to 1989: essentially spanning the Reagan Era.[38] If the

previous period saw the steady popularization of the nerd stereotype, it is the late 70s and

the 80s (the "Nerd Debased" phase) that comprise the true heyday of that stereotype.[39] It

is no accident, then, that there are an incalculable number of stereotypical nerd

representations that populate this cultural moment. It is also no accident that the nerd

stereotype flourishes in a time dominated by Reagan-inspired neoconservatism, anti-

feminist backlash, pronounced anti-intellectualism, and a strong assertion of white male

hegemony throughout American culture. In short, just as America seemed to be retreating

back to the "culture of containment" that it nostalgically remembered from the 50s, the

nerd stereotype reasserted itself much like it did at that time: as a useful tool for covertly

undermining social justice, limiting the advances of marginalized groups, and sternly

reminding white men the steep price to pay for being too intelligent, effeminate, and that

dirty word: "liberal."

Focusing on the figure of the stereotypical white male nerd in the 80s, chapter 7

looks at how the steady rise of neoconservatism in the 70s turned into the apotheosis of

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[38] I loosely define this fourth phase around the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who held office from 1981-1989. Reagan was, after all, seen as a key icon of not only America at the time, but the supposed apotheosis of neoconservatism and ideal hypermasculinity as well. I start a couple years earlier with 1978, however, as the cultural sentiment that led to his being elected president in 1980 obviously extends before his presidency. President Carter oversaw the Camp David Accords in 1978, perhaps the highlight of his presidency, and the sharp decline in his popularity from that point forward very much fostered a rise in popularity for Reagan. That, and *Space Invaders* was released in 1978, sparking one of the first nerdy video game crazes. See chapter 7 for more on the parameters of this date range.

[39] This is not to say that the stereotype did not continue to flourish, even become more popular after this date. In many ways, it did become even more popular and prominent in later years. However, the stereotype also began to come under concerted fire in the 90s and the 00s, and began to be, in a fashion, deconstructed and changed into something new. I will touch briefly upon this phenomenon in the conclusion.

neoconservatism in the 80s, which among other things catapulted both anti-intellectualism and masculinity to new extremes. This cultural emphasis on an even more ardent form of physical, brutal, and anti-intellectual hypermasculinity is especially evident in the "hard body" action heroes of the era, such as the decade-defining character of Rambo. In addition, the 80s also witnesses a particular emphasis on the nerd/jock binary, a new sort of deployment that valorizes the jock stereotype as an ideal model of American masculinity. In contrast to the glorified hypermasculine jock, the 80s white male nerd is especially humiliated and debased during this phase, a markedly more brutal treatment than in previous years. Yet despite this highly negative treatment, fostered by the anti-wimp sentiment of the period which rendered nerds as masculine failures, these nerd characters also embodied white male entitlement, perhaps best summed up by the various nerd characters found in the John Hughes films *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Weird Science* (1985).

Finally, Chapter 8 examines two important shifts with regard to the nerd stereotype that also occurred during the Reagan Era: the explosion of Asian nerd representations (such as Data from *The Goonies* [1985]) and the eventual erasure of female nerd characters. Paradoxically, both the inclusion of Asian nerds and the exclusion of female nerds operate in support of white male hegemony. The increased representation of comical young male Asian nerds, I argue, counters the supposed threats to white Americans from hostile corporate takeovers from Japan and Asian American whiz kids outperforming white students. The decreased representation of female nerds not only reflects the overall anti-feminist backlash that typified the Reagan Era and the pressure on women to retreat from academia and the workplace for the home, but also

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how the personal computer—now associated with nerds and big business—was being marked (and marketed) as the province of young men. The film *WarGames* (1983) highlights this gendering of computing, marking the young male hero as a computer nerd and his young female companion as a peripheral, token love interest. And interestingly, the emasculation of the wimpy white male nerd, the inclusion of the Asian nerd, and the exclusion of the female nerd are all found in one of the most emblematic of nerd performance texts: the quirky and problematic teen sex film *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984).

The concluding chapter of the dissertation's Coda section briefly touches upon the nerd stereotype after the 80s as well as the future of the nerd stereotype, pointing towards potential new work on the subject. While the 90s and the early 00s may have witnessed the supposed "rise of the nerd," these decades also saw the nerd stereotype transformed into a self-proclaimed nerd identity. Moreover, that identity also served—and in many ways still serves—as a complex site where race and gender are still being contested and accommodated: black nerds and female nerds, in many respects, are still navigating their inclusion into both identity and stereotype. Also, while the nerd became chic for its immediate cultural moment, it would be remiss of us to assume that some of the most biased aspects of the nerd stereotype merely disappeared overnight. After all, as stereotypes are as resilient and adaptable as viruses, it might be better to assume that these stereotypes were (and are) still in operation, albeit subtly, expressing themselves in outlets that demand further examination. After all, if the presidency of Barack Obama, that markedly intellectual, pro-science, pro-technology, pro-feminist black president of the late 2000s/early 2010s was indeed a sort of "golden age" for those claiming a nerd identity, what might the presidency of Donald Trump portend?

PART I: 1945 - 1957

Chapter 1: Proto-Nerd Discourses and White Masculinity in Post-War American Culture

The Nerd Stereotype: An Origin Story

The stereotypical nerd figure did not magically or instantaneously appear out of thin air in post-WWII American culture, but this period—approximately from 1945 to 1957—serves as a highly useful starting point for examining the ideological foundations of the nerd stereotype. This is not to say that many of the cultural discourses that coalesced into the nerd stereotype cannot be traced further back through early nineteenth century youth culture, or American history more generally, or even the entire span of Western civilization.[1] Echoes of pre-nerd stereotypical traits and representations can be easily traced through such figures and events as Socrates with his hemlock, Galileo's rejection of heliocentrism, the many incarnations of *Faust*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, and Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane, to name but a few.[2] Even when focusing on American youth culture and its argot, which became prominent roughly in the 1920s—thanks to a boom in college enrollment and other factors—we find similar derogatory terms for the over-studious and their kin ("grind," "dudd," "mothball," etc.).[3] In many ways, there are a number of prevalent precedents for the archetypal 40s/50s nerd.

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[1] Many of the precursors to the nerd stereotype extend back to turn-of-the-century American culture, when, as Gail Bederman suggests, we see an important shift from Victorian "manliness" to the more contemporaneous "masculinity." The mental v. physical (weak nerd v. strong jock) binary also has strong roots in the Muscular Christianity (see the rise of sports in American culture and Teddy Roosevelt's *The Strenuous Life*) of this era as well. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[2] Many of these pre-nerd examples, either in a cursory or thorough fashion, receive mention in texts as far ranging as Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and Benjamin Nugent's *American Nerd: The Story of My People*.

[3] See Rosemarie Ostler's *Dewdroppers, Waldos, and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century* for various examples. A "dudd" (or "dud") is mentioned on page 31, a "grind" on page 32, and a "mothball" on page 88. Recall that a "greasy grind" has strong

So why begin with the late 40s and 50s? The simplest answer is that this period—as established in the introduction—is when the slang term "nerd" was first uttered in American youth culture. However, rather than focusing solely on etymology and slang, I would argue that there are more compelling connections to be made between the nerd stereotype and this particular time period. In this chapter, I explore these connections, namely those that link the core identity politics and functions of the nerd stereotype to the identity politics of post-war American culture. Accordingly, this chapter examines the origins of the white male nerd stereotype, dwelling not so much on "close readings" of the sparse nerd performances found in popular culture, *per se*, but rather taking a broad view of the various ideological threads of the period that were just starting to be woven together to fabricate the nerd stereotype. It is the confluence of various cultural discourses in the late 40s and 50s, I argue, that eventually coalesced into the nerd stereotype, including (but certainly not limited to) shifting popular perceptions of science, anti-intellectualism, conformity, youth culture, masculinity, gender, race, and sexuality. In short, to understand the core essence of the nerd stereotype—particularly how it is predisposed towards emasculated white male representation—it is necessary to examine the rather peculiar cultural climate of post-war America from which it developed.

Even more specifically, this chapter focuses on establishing what I feel is a vital linkage between the nerd stereotype and four other highly similar figures from the post-war era: the sissy, the mad scientist, the egghead, and the square. In many ways, the nerd stereotype originates as an amalgam of these four cultural constructs, absorbing much of their politics, forms, and functions. Not accidently, these four characterizations, like the

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implications of Jewishness. Rosemarie Ostler, *Dewdroppers, Waldos, and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

nerd stereotype, usually presuppose not only a white male personage, but also a corrupted

and failed white masculinity. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief look at one of

the most prominent examples of the nerd stereotype of the period: Archie Comics

character Dilton Doiley. Not only does Dilton represent one of the first major

stereotypical nerd characters, he also conspicuously performs a failed white masculinity

that combines the characteristics of the four characterizations examined in this chapter.

Nerds and Sissies: White Masculine Failure in Post-War America

After WWII came to a close, men were ushered back to the workplace and their

wives were "urged to return to a docile domesticity to placate their wounded men."[4]

Throughout the late 40s and 50s, men were taking on the role of middle-class corporate

breadwinner just as women were taking on the role of dutiful housewife—and if one did

not conform to these gender roles, there were severe social consequences. And so, as

social historian Elaine Tyler May points out, "As the cold war began, young postwar

Americans were homeward bound," establishing "a trend of early marriage and relatively

large families that lasted for more than two decades."[5] In *Homeward Bound: American*

Families in the Cold War Era, May demonstrates how this domestic revival is connected

to the paranoid and unstable culture of the Cold War, arguing that, through a sort of

domestic containment, Americans could find security in the home and the family. For the

middle-class white American male, this meant simultaneously fulfilling the roles of

breadwinner, dutiful husband, and nurturing (but not *too* nurturing) father. It is this latter

emphasis on fatherhood that deserves especial attention in terms of the nerd stereotype, as

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[4] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 162.

[5] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), 3-4.

it suggests one of the ways that the nerd took on the characteristics of a failed white male sexuality.

With the men overseas during the war, many on the home front came to the conclusion that juvenile delinquency, a pressing issue of the period, was attributable in large part to the absence of good father figures. As such, "Fatherhood became a new badge of masculinity and meaning for the postwar man," and his presence in the home became vital to the proper raising of both sons and daughters.[6] The importance of present fathers was confirmed by the social scientists of the day, such as Talcott Parsons, a Harvard sociologist, who posited in a 1947 essay the importance of father and mother in child development.[7] With regard to the son, Parsons argued that the father's presence was necessary to reorient the son's natural proclivity to rebel, particularly from the femininity of the mother. In brief, Parsons suggested that the problem with kids in those days could be traced to absent fathers and dominating mothers, and only through the traditional nuclear family and its concordant gender roles could children grow up psychologically sound. It fell to the father, then, to ensure that his son grew up to be appropriately masculine, lest his absence turn his son into either a delinquent or a sissy.[8]

Sadly, this conception of parenthood cast mothers in a terrible light, as they could now "be blamed for both gay sons and delinquent sons."[9] The mother-bashing associated with this "Momism" of the period begins during the war in the 40s with strident punditry

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[6] May, *Homeward Bound*, 146.

[7] Talcott Parsons, "Certain Primary Sources and Patterns of Aggression in the Social Structure of the Western World," in *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

[8] As Gail Bederman reports, the term "sissy" extends back to the 1890s when our more contemporaneous formation of masculinity (as opposed to the more Victorian "manliness") was forming. The term was coined "to denote behavior which had once appeared self-possessed and manly but now seemed overcivilized and effeminate." Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 17.

[9] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 165.

like Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) and extends well into the 50s.[10] Only the

consistently present father could save the day, keeping mother in check (so-called

smothering and hen-pecking was to be dealt with swiftly and seriously) and ensuring the

son grew up with a proper sense of his masculinity.[11]

While representative of highly repressive gender roles of the period,[12] this

emphasis on parenthood also drew upon other social stressors. Juvenile delinquents

(intimately associated with Beat hipsters), members of the working class, and black

communities all tapped into an undercurrent of anxiety regarding race, class, and the

overall issue of conformity, while also fueling fears related to criminality and the

growing gap of understanding between the adult and youth culture of the time.[13] The

young sissy, on the other hand, was configured as a weak, effeminate patsy that was an

easy target for both communism and, perhaps even worse, homosexuality.[14] Parents were

faced with the herculean task of ensuring that their children walked the impossibly fine

line of normality between the delinquent and the sissy, which in turn put insurmountable

pressure on American youth to walk that line lest they become failures in the eyes of their

parents and their nation as a whole.

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[10] See Philip Wylie, *A Generation of Vipers* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942); also see David Levy, *Maternal Overprotection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); and Edward Strecker, *Their Mother's Sons* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946).

[11] For more on the misogynistic Momism of the post-war period, see K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 124-45. For more on Momism and 50s fatherhood, see Robert L. Griswold's *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 185-218.

[12] Much of these cultural perceptions rely on the theory of sex-role identification that held sway from the 30s well into the 70s, when it was finally defied by the rise of feminism.

[13] For more on Beats, hipsters, and the culture of conformity, see below.

[14] For more information regarding the parental pressures to avoid raising juvenile delinquents and sissies, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988); and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Of all the various media touching upon this issue of proper childrearing and its effects on youth in the post-war period, it is perhaps the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* that most famously embodies this phenomenon.[15] Loosely based on the work of psychologist Robert Lindner, the film borrows its title from Linder's 1944 case study of criminal psychopathy and juvenile delinquency.[16] And like Parsons, Lindner, and the other anxiously prolific social scientists of the 40s and 50s, the film places particular reproach on fathers and mothers for both delinquency and sissyhood. In this fashion, the film also demonstrates how the sissy is a key component of the evolution of the nerd stereotype as a manifestation of failed white masculinity.

Troubled teenager Jim Stark (James Dean) is treading that fine line between delinquent and sissy, struggling against the empty middle-class conformity in which he is ensnared.[17] The clear source of this conflict is his ineffectual parents. Jim's father, Mr. Stark (Jim Backus)[18], "displays the artificial personality that one would associate with an

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[15] For more on the themes of masculinity, parenting, delinquency, sissies, and homosexuality in *Rebel Without a Cause*, see K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 154-9; David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 62-3; Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1983), 200-2; and Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 108-10.

[16] It is interesting to note that Mailer cites Lindner at length in "The White Negro," connecting the psychopath, the delinquent, and the hipster. See Mailer, "The White Negro," 6-7. For Lindner's essay, see Robert M. Lindner, *Rebel Without a Cause: The Story of a Criminal Psychopath* (New York: Other Press, 2003).

[17] *Rebel Without a Cause*, DVD, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

[18] Jim Backus is a particularly interesting casting choice in terms of his type, as he often played effete rich aristocratic, clownish characters. He is particularly famous for voicing the animated Mr. Magoo and later playing Thurston Howell III on *Gilligan's Island*. Regardless, the posh costume choices alone for Jim's father, mother, and grandmother (who doubles the feminine presence in the family unit) as they are coming from "the club" in the first police station sequence bespeaks a sort of detached, almost aristocratic effeteness. See *Rebel Without a Cause*, DVD, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

'organization man'."[19] He is ineffectual when his son needs crucial guidance, and furthermore is emasculated by his nagging, overbearing wife (as well as his own mother). To complete the feminization of Jim's hopeless, henpecked father, there is even a scene where he is wearing a frilly floral apron as he attempts to serve dinner to his wife—which he clumsily drops. Jim's parents, with their gender roles inverted, are the primary source of their son's troubles, forcing him to grapple with his dilemmas on his own throughout the movie. The same applies to Judy (Natalie Wood), except her overbearing authoritarian father and near-silent mother present the opposite problem, pushing her to associate with a gang of juvenile delinquents: leather boots, leather jackets, switchblades and all.

So Jim finds himself in the double-bind of performing his masculinity, split between fear of being seen as a chicken[20] and not wanting to resort to violence, between delinquent Buzz (Corey Allen), the leader of the gang, and sissy Plato (Sal Mineo), the antisocial, effeminate boy so desperate for a masculine role model, friend, and perhaps even lover.[21] Plato, as it so happens, has the worst possible parental situation of all: a father and mother who are both entirely absent and disconnected, leaving Plato with only his black nanny as guardian. This makes Plato the most desperate of characters, a sissy

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[19] K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 155.

[20] The Stark family had to move because Jim "messed [a] kid up" because he, as Jim says, "called me chicken." Then later, being called a chicken by Buzz and his cronies is what instigates a knife fight between Jim and the gang leader. The penultimate challenge to Jim's manhood is the "Chickie Run" with Buzz, which, as he says in his failed seeking-advice scene with his father before the accident, he finds "very dangerous," but "a matter of honor." See *Rebel Without a Cause*, DVD, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

[21] Despite the strict Production Codes of the day, Plato is clearly meant to be thought of in terms of homosexuality. After all, he does keep a picture of Allan Ladd in his school locker. See Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 108-10.

and, in Linder's terminology, a psychopath.[22] In many respects, Plato-as-sissy presages many traits of the nerd stereotype: antisocial, effeminate, and infantile. Certainly, in contrast to the hip gang that bullies him and roughs him up in the movie, Plato is a square.

By the end of the film, both Buzz and Plato, too extreme in their respective hypermasculine/hypomasculine positionalities, are dead, leaving Jim and Judy to build a new heterosexual nuclear family unit. It is especially telling that Jim eventually finds the perfect balance of masculinity at the end, not only through this heterosexual coupling, but also through his attempt to be a good father figure to Plato in the planetarium. He is, to use Judy's words, both "gentle" and "strong" simultaneously; he is brave for helping Plato, but he also has "soft lips."[23] And this improbable duality is found through proper husbandry and fatherhood.

While the sort of rebellious behaviors demonstrated by Jim—and to a greater degree, Buzz and his cronies—clearly capitalize on the era's anxieties associated with juvenile delinquency, it is perhaps Plato's status as sissy and psychopath (and hence homosexual) that makes him the most irredeemable and tragic character, a character so far gone that he must die before the film's conclusion. This reflects the particular notion that a little bit of male rebelliousness is relatively okay in strict moderation. On the other hand, any hint of effeminacy signals not only perversion in the child, but also a failure in the father, resulting in both of their masculinities being called into question. In short, the

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[22] Sadly, being a psychopath and a homosexual were essentially synonymous in this period. The fact that Plato is at the police station at the beginning of the film for shooting and killing puppies is a clear indication in the early exposition of the film that Plato is the most troubled and foregone of the Jim/Judy/Plato trio.

[23] *Rebel Without a Cause*, DVD, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

delinquent could be redeemed, but the sissy had to be erased.[24] And it is partially this

cultural perception that made terms like "sissy," "pantywaist," and "milquetoast"[25] so

incredibly powerful and damning in post-war America, whether they were bandied about

in the political sphere, the home, or the school playground. And in this fashion, the nerd

stereotype became relatively synonymous with such epithets, a similar manifestation of

effeminacy and emasculation.

The fear that American boys were turning into sissies like Plato took on

monumental importance in 40s and 50s culture, and clearly had a massive impact on

American youth and youth culture of the period. The anxiety over raising sissy children,

as one English anthropologist reported in an article entitled "Are We Staking Our Future

on a Crop of Sissies?" in *Better Homes and Gardens*, was "the overriding fear of every

American parent."[26] This anxiety over sissies manifested itself not just in the lives of

parents and children, but in the mass media as well, from prescriptive advice in *Parents*

Magazine and other such periodicals, in the abundance of sociological work on the

subject, in the popular parenting publications of Dr. Spock, as well as in popular

entertainments.[27] The pressing issue of raising manly sons began to manifest on stage, on

the new medium of television, and of course the silver screen.[28]

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[24] This redeemable delinquent "with a heart of gold" stock character (again, see Brando, Dean, etc.) is, unlike the sissy, a sort of masculine escape fantasy figure, which in part explains its popularity in the conformity obsessed 50s.

[25] Funnily enough, the term "milquetoast" comes from the funnies, namely the popular comic strip character Caspar Milquetoast, another interesting pre-nerd figure.

[26] Andrew Fontaine, "Are We Staking Our Future on a Crop of Sissies?," *Better Homes and Gardens*, December 1950, 156, quoted in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), 147. For more on mass media repudiation of the sissy, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), 146-9.

[27] May, *Homeward Bound*, 135-61.

[28] While I focus mainly on cinematic expressions in this section on sissies, these issues of masculinity/femininity, fatherhood, Momism, raising non-nerdy children, etc. also prominently appear on television, most especially on the "ideal father" family sitcoms that typified the 50s. Shows like *The*

Like in the aforementioned film *Rebel Without a Cause*, anxieties over gender and sexuality were implicitly and explicitly expressed through theatrical and cinematic representations. To that end, it is the 1953 play *Tea and Sympathy* and its subsequent 1956 film adaptation that, in Vito Russo's words, gave "the first serious examination of sissyhood,"[29] and surprisingly in a relatively sympathetic fashion. Importantly, the sissy character of the movie also exhibits various traits of the nerd stereotype.

The original play, written by Robert Anderson and directed by Molly Kazan's illustrious husband Elia, opened at the Barrymore Theatre in 1953, quickly becoming one of the most popular and controversial plays of the season. The action takes place at a dormitory house in a New England boy's school, where boards Tom Lee (John Kerr[30]), a shy and sensitive student on the cusp of his 18th birthday. Tom is hounded and bullied by many of his fellow students (and teachers) because he, like Plato, is an "off-horse" and not a "regular fellow" like the rest: they enjoy sports, roughhousing, and spying on breast-feeding women; Tom enjoys folk music and acting in the school play (in drag, no less).[31] Also similar to Plato is Tom's parental situation: early in the play Tom reveals

Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952-1966), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), and *My Three Sons* (1960-1965) all touch upon these very themes. Unsurprisingly, then, these series also dance around (and often portray) the nerd stereotype—I discuss one small nerd performance from such a television program in the next chapter. Another nerd performance of note is that of the character of Phillip from *The Donna Reed Show*. This awkward, ostracized, feminized young boy—complete with overbearing mother and absent father—is referred to by his peers as "weird" and a "creep who makes straight A's," which is "for girls." Nate Monaster and William Roberts, "The Report Card," *The Donna Reed Show*, season 1, episode 23, directed by Oscar Rudolph, aired February 25, 1959 (Orlando Park, IL: MPI Home Video, 2014), DVD. The nerdy Phillip appears again in the second season episode "All Mothers Worry" (season 2, episode 10), where we get to see even more of Philip's mother feminizing her son by not allowing him to play football, something that clearly all boys want to do, even nerds. Again, *Mr.* Adams is not-so-mysteriously absent. For a useful online episode guide to *The Donna Reed Show*, see epguides.com, http://epguides.com/DonnaReedShow/ (accessed July 14, 2105).

[29] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 108.

[30] John Kerr won the Tony for Best Featured Actor in a Play for this role in 1954, which perhaps speaks to how much his character's persecution as a sissy touched audiences and critics.

[31] Robert Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy* (New York: Samuel French, 1953).

that he doesn't ever see his mother because she and his father are divorced. Interestingly, Tom's father is a character throughout the play, but one so woefully out of touch with his son's plight. He spends little time with Tom during the play, and we are told early on that he sends Tom off to camps and boarding schools year-round.

The inciting incident of the plot is an accusation of homosexuality: Tom and a teacher went sunbathing and skinny-dipping, and were apparently overseen by others who reported it to the administration. The teacher is fired, and Tom is left in an impossible situation with his classmates, his housemaster, and his own father, all of whom are blinded by their own perceptions of masculinity. Facing persecution on all sides, Tom grows desperate enough to consider having sex with Ellie, the local tramp, to prove his masculinity to the others (and perhaps assuage his own self-doubts), but he doesn't go through with it. He then attempts to kill himself, but fails. Only at the very end when the sympathetic housemaster's wife Laura (Deborah Kerr) makes love to him, is the audience left with the sense that the boy's going to be all right.

Tea and Sympathy is problematic and conflicted throughout in terms of its treatment of homosexuality. David Savran argues that the play is a "confused work […] inveighing against homosexuality yet clearly revealing the glaring contradictions that inhere within a homophobic, masculinist ideology."[32] And while it is true that more might have been done in terms of homosexual politics and representations, the play at least mentions the issue directly, whereas the film does not. The movie version, directed

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[32] David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 88.

by Vincente Minnelli (adapted for the screen by the original playwright, Robert Anderson), was censored by the Production Office, as one might expect.[33]

Any direct reference to homosexuality is entirely left out of the film and must be inferred by the audience. Tom (played again by John Kerr) is no longer seen skinny-dipping with a teacher, but rather sewing with some of the housemasters' wives. This is apparently enough to get the rumor mill flying. The sunbathing teacher character is cut entirely, and the strong accusation near the end of the play that Laura's over-macho husband might be a homosexual is also excised. Among other changes is the moralizing and clunky epilogue, inserted by the Production Office primarily to chastise the adulterous Laura. But both play and film, sadly, although addressing the *accusation* of homosexuality, never preach any tolerance for the thing itself, and the ending does smack of the classic, offensive trope of the so-called cure for a gay man being the love of a good woman.[34] However, in terms of the nerd stereotype, it is telling how Tom is not actually persecuted for being gay, but for *performing* gay, for not being masculine enough for the hypermasculine culture in which he finds himself trapped, for being a sissy. He is clearly in love with Laura in both play and film: the stage directions of the play make this even more explicit, and the film even adds moments such as the gift of the flower seeds or

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[33] For more on the backstory of how the play was adapted into the film and the Production Office's involvement, see George F. Custen, "Strange Brew: Hollywood and the Fabrication of Homosexuality in *Tea and Sympathy*," in *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 116-38.

[34] For more on *Tea and Sympathy* and its complex relationship to homosexuality, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 112-5; David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 88; and K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 149-150.

joining Laura at the beach.[35] Russo even writes sometimes "people forget it is the story of a shy heterosexual."[36]

It is significant that the mistreatment that Tom endures as a sissy is based on the outward performance of his behaviors and hobbies more than his proclaimed or practiced sexuality, especially in the film version. The bullies mockingly call him "Grace" in the play—it is "Sister Boy" in the film—because they see his physical behaviors as effeminate: the way he supposedly walks, the fact that his hair is too long, etc. But it is especially the hobbies and activities that Tom engages in that, to his detractors, seem the most damning: in the film for example, he expresses an appreciation for gardening, playing plaintive folk music on his guitar (music that is referred to as "long-hair music"[37]), sewing, poetry, interior decorating, theatre, and so on. Like any contemporaneous geek, Tom is declared a sissy for engaging in and enjoying activities that the dominant culture has deemed feminizing. And like any contemporaneous dork, he is shy, soft-spoken and prefers to be alone or to take tea with Laura rather than play aggressive team games.[38] And despite the fact that Tom does play a sport, and is even a champion at it, that sport, tennis, is not deemed manly enough in comparison to football, mountain climbing, or baseball. Tom is even judged as playing tennis in an unmasculine way: his own father saying in the play that Tom "doesn't even play tennis like a regular

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[35] The stage directions read, "*(Tom shuts the hall door. He is deeply in love with this woman* [Laura]*, though he knows nothing can come of it. It is a sort of delayed puppy love. It is very touching and intense. They are easy with each other, casual, though he is always trying in thinly veiled ways to tell her he loves her.)*" Robert Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy* (New York: Samuel French, 1953), 11.

[36] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 112.

[37] Tom's roommate Al says this to Laura in both the play and the film versions, wondering why Tom has to listen to that sort of geeky, unpopular music. Robert Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy* (New York: Samuel French, 1953), 46.

[38] We never really find out if Tom is an over-achieving student or a lover of science, so he doesn't quite fit the full nerd stereotype, but the similarities are still astonishing.

fellow. No hard drives and cannon ball serves. He's a cut artist. He can put more damn twists on that ball."[39] Even the tennis balls he hits don not come off straight.

While similar to the sissy Plato in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Tom Lee also struggles (like *Rebel*'s Jim) to "prove his masculinity." In the end, he realizes that for the others to see him as masculine, he needs to prove his manhood through heterosexual intercourse, be it with Ellie or Laura. This conception of confirming masculinity via heteronormative sex is unfortunately nothing new, of course, but—significantly—it is also a common pursuit amidst representations of sissies, homosexuals, and nerds. In fact, the cultural configuring and conflation of sissies, homosexuals, and nerds as heterosexual failures in need of good sex with a good woman (yet incapable of it) is a foundational ideological tenet traced through all three representations.

Overall, both versions of *Tea and Sympathy* attempt to argue for a tolerance of the not-so-masculine male in an age where anxiety over raising a sissy son (or being a sissy son) was at an extreme. So how was a dutiful American father to prevent his son from turning into a sissy? Popular opinions varied, but many insisted that it was the father's duty to be a both a pal and an authority to his son, to periodically pluck him away from his mother and his mother's feminine spheres (namely the inside of the home and the school classroom, bastions of feminine influence) and to encourage him to take up physical and productive tasks.[40] Sports and the outdoors (often situated against the feminizing influence of education) took on a special significance for the father/son

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[39] Robert Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy* (New York: Samuel French, 1953), 31.
[40] See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), 148.

relationship[41] as did productive hobbies that they could share: barbequing together on the

weekends, playing ball on the lawn, trying out for the school team, or perhaps taking up

woodworking or coin collecting together.[42] The hobby boom of the 50s, while certainly

symptomatic of the burgeoning consumer culture of the day, was also bound up with

expressions of masculinity and femininity: just as with Tom Lee in *Tea and Sympathy*,

certain hobbies and interests confirmed one's masculinity, others confirmed masculine

failure. In this ascription of particular hobbies/interests as masculine or feminine, we see

a number of vital linkages with the geeky facet of the nerd stereotype.

Beyond a father's responsibility to teach his son which activities to engage in and

which to avoid, there was also the primary goal of teaching him good masculine

character, manly honor, and also "maturity," as a mother's feminizing influence would,

of course, keep the son trapped in an infantile state—a state that inevitably led to

sissyhood and homosexuality. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *The Hearts of Men*, "It is

difficult, in the wake of the sixties' youth rebellion, to appreciate the weight and authority

that one attached to the word 'maturity'" in the 1950s.[43] The discourse of

maturity/immaturity, like the discourse of conformity to which it is related, dominated

America during the post-war period, and was often employed to punish the immature

male and the disobedient female who failed at performing their sex roles properly. "In

psychiatric theory and in popular culture," Ehrenreich confirms, "the image of the

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[41] The important relationship of sports, the outdoors, and masculinity has a long history itself, as does the association with education, schooling, and the home with femininity. For turn-of-the century American work in this regard, see the aforementioned Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[42] For more on hobbies and the father/son relationship, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 178.

[43] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), 17.

irresponsible male blurred into the shadowy figure of the homosexual. Men who failed as breadwinners and husbands were 'immature,' while homosexuals were, in psychiatric judgment, 'aspirants to perpetual adolescence.'"[44] This ascription of immaturity resonates in a similar fashion with the nerd stereotype, which is not only usually associated with youth culture and predominantly portrayed as a teenager (as opposed to, say, the absent-minded long-hair professor type or the egghead, who are more often conceived as adults), but is seen as symptomatic with his (hetero)sexual failure and love for "childish things" like collecting toys or reading comic books.[45] Even the acne that eventually becomes part of the visual representation of the most extreme nerd stereotype bespeaks not only unattractiveness, but also youthful, prepubescent immaturity.

So to prevent their sons from becoming criminal delinquents or infantile sissies— or perhaps even nerds—American parents (most especially white middle-class parents) of the late 40s and 50s found themselves walking a fine line between sex roles and gendered behaviors, similar to the line walked by the impressionable children they were trying to mold. This strict policing of the hobbies, interests, and behaviors of American youth took many forms and intersected with other discourses, education and intelligence being two of the most important with regards to the nerd stereotype. Another related field of interest is that of science, and particularly the mounting anti-scientific sentiment that typified the

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[44] Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 24.
[45] There is the often-repeated phrase that nerds supposedly "live in their mother's basements," which I feel extends back to this 50s discourse of immaturity. This sort of nerd has no job and no home of his own, apparently, and hence is a failure as a male breadwinner. He is so immature because he still lives with his parents, which is a notion that relies on the near-psychotic push for home-ownership that also dominates this period. Also note that it is consistently his "mother's" basement, not his "father's," which indicates not only the further ascription of the nerd's descent into the domestic sphere, but the still misogynistic idea that it is the mother who has spoiled and feminized this nerd, letting him live in this theoretical basement. It is Momism all over again.

period. Not coincidently, just as the nerd/sissy was taking on the features of a failed white masculinity, so too was the characterization of the scientist.

Nerds and Mad Scientists: Science in Post-War America

In a way, a major contributing factor to the formation of the nerd stereotype occurred on August 6th, 1945, when the American public was ushered into the Atomic Age as the US dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima. This event was undoubtedly a major turning point for American culture in a number of respects, not the least in regard to America's perception of science and of scientists themselves.[46] Before the bomb, scientists were commonly depicted as harmless absent-minded professor types ("highbrows," "longhairs," etc.) or, more positively, rugged self-made men (always men, of course) that gave us wondrous (and practical) inventions: Thomas Edison being the prime exemplar.[47] After the bomb and throughout the late 40s and 50s, however, "anti-scientist sentiment in America reached a peak."[48] This transition is embodied by the fall from grace of Robert Oppenheimer, once the heroic genius and "Father of the A-bomb" in 1945, yet later a traitor stripped of his security clearance by the Atomic Energy

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[46] Studies of the historical significance of the atomic bomb are plentiful. By way of example, see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic* Age (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon, What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1976); Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974); James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar America, 1945-1985* (2nd ed.; Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1986); Morton Grodzins, Eugene Rabinotch, eds., *The Atomic Age: Scientists in National and World Affairs; Articles from the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 1945-1962* (New York: BasicBooks, 1963); Margot A. Henrikson, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[47] For American culture's perceptions of scientists throughout the twentieth century, see Marcel C. LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*: *Public Images of Science 1910-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

[48] Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 3.

Commission in 1954.[49] Marcel C. LaFollette writes that, "by the 1950s, events had proved that science was not automatically innocuous. Chemistry in World War I, pharmaceutical side effects, the atomic bomb, and many other scientific creations demonstrated once and for all that the stereotype of a personable but ineffectual scientist was simply wrong; neither writers nor readers found it credible any longer."[50]

Building on LaFollette's work on scientific stereotypes, Glen Scott Allen contends in his *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*

> that the portrayal of the scientist in American popular culture typically takes on of two forms: either that of a heroic figure with mastery over technology who utilizes that skill in the service of his community to achieve relatively limited goals of reform; or that of a villain whose arrogance is rooted in the intellect and who seeks, to the detriment of his community, some sort of totalizing revolution. The first type is an inventor who produces practical or at least material outcomes which serve the traditional goals of American progress; and the second is a theoretician whose work is abstract and with a value either unclear or threatening to the average citizen, as it implies a critique or even an overturning of that traditional idea of progress.
> I have labeled these two types the Master Mechanic and the Wicked Wizard.[51]

Allen's distinction between the technical Master Mechanic and the theoretical Wicked Wizard not only embodies the "pure vs. applied" binary in the scientific field, it also emphasizes the discourse of practicality: if a scientist's work leads to "practical" and "useful" discoveries and technologies—especially those that serve and support hegemonic institutions like the government, the military, or the world of business—then the scientist is to be revered.[52] If a scientist's work is not deemed to support the powers

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[49] For more on Oppenheimer's fall from grace, see not only Allen, but also Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Richard Rhodes*, The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Touchstone, 1986).
[50] Marcel C. LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*: *Public Images of Science 1910-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 109.
[51] Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*, 7-8.
[52] This "discourse of practicality" intersects not only with the pure vs. applied binary in the fields of science and engineering, but also with the unreflexive instrumentalism that fosters anti-intellectualism in a more

that be—or worse, actually questions, critiques, or denounces those powers—then the scientist is to be vilified. Here we see connections with the nerd stereotype, who is so often characterized not only as a lover of science, but, to borrow a phrase, a lover of science for science's sake. So while the nerd may not be a fully villainous figure like many manifestations of the Wicked Wizard, they do share this "obsession" with pure, theoretical science, marking them as dubious personages.

One of the most prominent examples of Allen's Wicked Wizard is the persistent image of the mad scientist, an image that interestingly found extensive treatment in the American cinema in the 50s, often called the "golden age" of the science fiction film.[53] These movies served as an attractive and important medium to embody and digest cultural anxieties regarding science, especially for young audiences.[54] Seminal (and much studied) films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Thing—from Another World*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Forbidden Planet* stand as a testament not only to the

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general sense. This discourse of practicality is further explored in chapter 3 (the second phase) in relation to the nerd stereotype.

[53] For various perspectives on the mad scientist trope, see David J. Skal, *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia!: Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Roslynn Haynes, "From Alchemy to Artificial Intelligence: Stereotypes of the Scientist in Western Literature," *Public Understanding of Science* 12.3 (2003): 243-53; Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); and Christopher P. Toumy, "The Moral Character of Mad Scientists: A Cultural Critique of Science," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 17 (1992): 411-37.

[54] For information on the 1950s science fiction film genre, see Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New York: Ungar, 1993); J. P. Telotte, Science Fiction Film (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 209-25; Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1983); Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and the 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999); Cyndy Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001); Jerome F. Shaprio, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (London: Routledge, 2002); Keith M. Booker *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001); Patrick Lucanio, *Them or Us: Archetypal Interpretations of Fifties Alien Invasion Films* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

genre, but to 50s America's uneasiness with these new atomically-powered "men of science." Strikingly, the mad scientist figure performed in many of these films also reveal the various cultural discourses at play in the formation of the nerd stereotype.

One especially vibrant cinematic example of the mad scientist figure is Dr. Carrington from the 1951 *The Thing—from Another World*. As Allen states, Dr. Carrington, played by Robert Cornthwaite, "is portrayed as arrogant, cold precise, unemotional: everything we've come to expect from a card-carrying 1950s egghead."[55] Throughout the film, Dr. Carrington exhibits the hubris typical of the mad scientist, not to mention the amorality and lack of emotion that constitute important discursive threads in the nerd stereotype. Here is a character that exemplifies the dangers of science taken too far; his tireless obsession with theoretical research making him a dangerous traitor to his community. In his quest for pure knowledge, Dr. Carrington aligns himself with the murderous alien and against the practical, masculine military men of action.

It is also interesting to note that Dr. Carrington is not only void of proper emotions, morals, and a communal sensibility, but he also lacks a "proper" appreciation for heteronormative sexuality. While our hero, the dashing Captain Patrick Hendry, flirts with Dr. Carrington's beautiful secretary Nikki throughout the film, our mad scientist instead marvels at the Thing's asexual means of reproduction. The Thing is a vegetative creature comprised of vegetable matter that reproduces through seedpods that feed on human blood. Dr. Carrington cannot help but nurture the pods with human plasma, lauding how the marauding alien is not "handicapped by emotional or sexual needs,"

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[55] Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*, 96.

thanks to its "neat and unconfused reproductive technique."[56] Here we see how too much knowledge perverts healthy heterosexual relations, a classic trait of the both the mad scientist and nerd stereotype.[57]

Another notable 50s mad scientist is Dr. Morbius from the 1957 science fiction classic *Forbidden Planet*. Played by Walter Pidgeon, Dr. Morbius exhibits many of the same denigrated characteristics as Dr. Carrington: he is isolated and anti-communal, demanding to be left alone on his planet with only his daughter (and his mechanical servant Robbie the Robot) to keep him company. He is cold, aloof, haughty, and distant from those of the military expedition who have come to this planet, preferring to artificially augment his already astronomical intelligence with alien (Krell) technology. In one telling scene, he uses a Krell device to showcase his massive intellect, and then allows the military leader and hero of the film, Commander Adams (Leslie Nielson) to test his own IQ: it barely registers, to which Dr. Morbius quips, "That's all right, Commander. Commanding officers don't need brains, just a good loud voice."[58]

Of course this hubris leads to Dr. Morbius's downfall. For all of his vaunted super-intelligence, the murderous alien monster is revealed to be his own Freudian Id made manifest (although invisible). In overlooking his own animal instincts, his own subconscious, his own humanity, Dr. Morbius makes the fatal error that leads to the mad scientist's downfall. His incredible and perverse intelligence is contrasted, just as with Dr. Carrington in *Thing*, with the masculine, decisive action of the military man,

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[56] *The Thing—from Another World*, DVD, directed by Christian Nyby (1951; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010).

[57] For more on *The Thing*, see Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1983), 126-36; and Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 95-100.

[58] *Forbidden Planet*, DVD, directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox (1956; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).

Commander Adams, who proves that common sense and willful instinct is better than scientific knowledge. As Allens states, it is Commander Adams's common sense that saves the day, "the sense that is common to the little guy, the non-elitist, non-overly educated, non-aristocratic, properly domesticated and sexually conformist Average Joe of the American middle class."[59]

In contrast to Commander Adams's sexual conformity—it is he, after all, who ultimately wins the affections of Morbius's daughter—once again we see how the mad scientist is lacking healthy, moral heteronormativity. Isolated on the planet with only his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis)—apparently his wife died many years before—there is something almost incestuous about their father/daughter relationship. After all, it is when the all-male crew, Commander Adams in particular, arrives on the planet and awakens her sexuality that Dr. Morbius's monster Id reawakens and begins to attack. Freudian analysis aside, the fact that Dr. Morbius acts as an impediment to the heterosexual awakening of his daughter and to her union with the strapping Commander reinforces the notion that too much intelligence is detrimental to heteronormativity.[60]

Besides being portrayed as contrary to healthy heterosexual reproduction and hence somewhat queer and/or effeminate, many of these 50s mad scientists are also consistently portrayed as vaguely aristocratic (elitist, snobby, and anti-democratic), foreign (often Russian-*esque*, for obvious reasons), and even vaguely ethnic (often

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[59] Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*, 107.
[60] For more on *Forbidden Planet*, see Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 53-7; and Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 102-10.

Jewish).[61] Dr. Carrington, for example, is short, thin, sports a goatee reminiscent of Lenin, and is seen wearing at one point a smoking jacket, at another a Russian-looking fur coat and hat. Much of the same can be said of Dr. Morbius. This notion of scientific knowledge/intelligence as a signifier of elitism and hubris was especially pronounced during this period, and also appears strongly in performances of the nerd stereotype.

Of the many characteristics associated with mad scientist performances of the 50s, the consistent portrayal of these cinematic characters as white men (played by white actors) may well be the most noteworthy, as it reinforces the connection between the white male figure and the nerd stereotype, not to mention science as the province of white men. This association of science with white men is, of course, not limited to the silver screen, but also had a tangible impact on the realities of the scientific field. "As reflected in which scientists wrote for the magazines and which were the subjects of magazine biographies and interviews," LaFollette writes, "the 'typical' American scientist was a white male."[62] She goes on to state that "This image mirrored the white male scientists' domination of mainstream science in the United States at this time."[63] This consistent association of scientific achievement (and obsession) with white men not only still lingers today; it demonstrates how the science-loving nerd is linked with white masculinity. So in many respects, the image of the villainous mad scientist of post-WWII science fiction films serves many of the same functions that would eventually be absorbed into the nerd stereotype: denigrating associations with knowledge and science that counter conformity

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[61] See, for example (although he is not "mad" *per se*), the character of Professor Barnhardt (a proxy for Einstein) from the 1951 science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Jewish stereotypes are addressed in the next chapter.
[62] Marcel C. LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*, 74.
[63] Ibid.

and heteronormativity, while simultaneously promoting the idea that the scientific

community was a gated community for white men.

Nerds and Eggheads: Anti-Intellectualism in Post-War America

In addition to the anxious animosity towards scientists—theoretical scientists

more specifically—there is also the well-known aversion towards "left wing"

intellectuals after the war, which is one facet of the Second Red Scare phenomenon for

which this period is now infamous. This pronounced discourse of anti-intellectualism in

40s/50s America has been discussed by many thinkers and historians, none perhaps so

famously as Richard Hofstadter in his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. As

communism was often crudely viewed as an idea, a sort of economic and political

philosophy that needed to be learned via the intellect (and often by thinkers who read and

thought too much), it is perhaps no surprise that intellectuals came under especial fire

under the auspices of McCarthyism, be it through HUAC hearings, the Hollywood

blacklist, the activities of Hoover's FBI, or tirades from the senator from Wisconsin

himself. As he is now often quoted, McCarthy and his supporters were on a witch-hunt

for "egg sucking phony liberals," and, as stated by one of his aides, they were out to show

how the State Department was "a veritable nest of Communists, fellow travelers,

homosexuals, effete Ivy League intellectuals and traitors."[64]

While much can be said (and has been said) about McCarthyism and the anti-

communist fervor of post-WWII America, a few simple points suffice regarding the

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[64] Quoted in Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York, Praeger, 1974). See also William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 108; David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 4-5; and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 170-71. McCarthy's aide is cited in David Chute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

eventual formation of the nerd stereotype. First, McCarthyism (and the Cold War more generally) promulgated the notion that your enemy, no longer easily definable as during the war, was now a potential traitor in your midst, perhaps even your neighbor, who looked and talked just like "one of us," and yet was secretly harboring dangerous thoughts and/or secreting away perilous atomic knowledge. Yes, even a white American male could be dangerously un-American, and thus increased the social pressure for white male Americans to behave conspicuously white, male, and American. If anything, the atmosphere of national paranoia created the need for vicious "self-regulation," the very sort of thing McCarthyism exemplifies in its extreme, and which also applies to the nerd stereotype.

Another important facet of this McCarthy-inspired anti-intellectualism was the rapid rise of the word "egghead," a slanderous term for a brainy person quite akin to "nerd." And perhaps no political figure best embodies the egghead than Adlai Stevenson, who lost the presidential elections in 1952 and 1956.[65] In fact, the term "egghead" (in reference to a smart individual) is commonly traced to a 1952 Stewart Alsop column attacking intellectuals who supported Adlai Stevenson.[66] And in a matter of four years, the term was popular enough to merit the cover of *Newsweek* in 1956.[67] As the American egghead is essentially synonymous with the American nerd, a close comparison is merited. For some time, the terms were used interchangeably, although it is telling that

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[65] For more information regarding Adlai Stevenson and his status as an "egghead," see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 226-7; Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York, Praeger, 1974), 108; and K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 88-96.

[66] Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 193. Lecklider's Chapter 7, 191-200, provides a useful overview of the Cold War egghead.

[67] *Newsweek*, October 8, 1956. See also the cover story itself, "Eggheads: Cracking the Enigma," 53-7. Lecklider also examines the cover itself: Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 198-99.

"egghead" eventually fell out of linguistic favor and "nerd" rose to such striking prominence.

In *Inventing the Egghead*, Aaron Lecklider suggests "four features" that "connect the egghead with Cold-War-era debates about American identity. First, the egghead was portrayed as anti-populist. Second, the egghead embodied a racialized, gendered identity. Third, the egghead was represented as queer, both sexually and vis-à-vis social norms. Fourth, the egghead was conceived as politically subversive."[68] I would argue that the nerd stereotype retained the former three features and allowed the politically subversive nature of the egghead to diminish in prominence over the course of its development. In other words, the nerd was viewed as just as elitist, white, male, and queer (in a general, non-heteronomative sense) as was the egghead, but the political dimension fell to the wayside over the years, which may in turn explain its longevity in American culture. One reason why the political dimension may have fallen away is that the egghead was consistently portrayed as an adult, whereas the nerd was consistently portrayed as a youth. During this time (before the student activists of the 60s), the American public tended to view youth, the so-called silent generation, as a tender crop to be carefully tended and molded, not pro-active agents for political action.[69]

With regard to the racial and gender embodiment of the egghead (and, eventually, that of the nerd) Leckleder writes, "There was no mistaking […] the sex of the egghead. There are very few instances in which the term 'egghead' was used to refer to women." He goes on to posit that

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[68] Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 196.

[69] One reason, I feel that the Student Movement of the late 60s so shocked American culture was that the previous generation of American youth were not as overtly political.

This exclusion effectively rendered female intelligence unrepresentable. Though women surely would not have enjoyed being subjected to the unsavory characterizations of the 1950s egghead, their exclusion from representations must be seen as replicating a deeply patriarchal narrative: Women were excluded from the critique of intelligence, thus denying them access to an important form of social empowerment. Male intelligence was represented as dangerous, but female intelligence was conceived as impossible.[70]

Lecklider also finds that this same dynamic of exclusion applies to race. "The whiteness of the egghead," he avers, "in visual depictions was metaphorical just as it was a racial classification: with eggheads depicted as white men, African Americans were again excluded. Just as with women, the egghead, though overwhelmingly negative as a category, still represented a whole investment in American hierarchies of race and gender."[71] And yet Lecklider also identifies an important racial paradox in the whiteness of the egghead: he was so white as to be "square" and bland, and yet he was also too supportive of black racial politics.[72] To his detractors, the egghead—specific to his time and place—was often a too-liberal intellectual with a soft spot for civil rights.

As for the queerness of the egghead, we see another important commonality with the nerd stereotype. Just as McCarthyism conflated "pinks, punks, and perverts," intelligence was often seen as a dangerously feminizing trait for white male eggheads, a trait that led to homosexuality. As Senator Kenneth Wherry stated, "You can't hardly separate homosexuals from subversives. […] A man of low morality is a menace in the government, whatever he is, and they are all tied up together."[73] This connection between intellect, homosexual effeminacy, and immorality is also seen in attacks on egghead

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[70] Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead*, 199-200.
[71] Ibid., 200.
[72] Ibid., 200-1.
[73] Senator Wherry is quoted in Max Lerner, "Scandal in the State Dept. VII – Sen. Wherry's Crusade," *The New York Post*, July 17, 1950, 2, 20; which is in turn quoted in David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 76, and again in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 170-1.

Adlai Stevenson. Quoting Michael Kimmel: "The candidate whom the *New York Daily News* called 'Adelaide' used 'tea cup words,' which he 'trilled' with his 'fruity' voice, and was supported by 'Harvard lace cuff liberals' and 'lace panty diplomats.'"[74] Just as we will eventually see with the nerd, the egghead was represented as a heterosexual failure through his associations with effeminacy and homosexuality.

In his explication of the egghead, Lecklider references an intriguing cultural artifact: a Broadway play entitled *The Egghead*, by famous director Elia Kazan's wife, Molly Kazan.[75] The play, which premiered in October of 1957, provides a portrayal of an egghead through the character of Hank Parson, originally played by Karl Malden.[76] Hank is portrayed as an egotistical professor, elitist and pig-headed. He is blinded by his over-wrought thinking on liberal politics and love of intellect, refusing to believe that one of his beloved African American students might be a dirty communist. Hank's "unintelligent" young wife Sally (Phyllis Love) is easily able to uncover the truth that her husband and even the FBI have failed to recognize: that Hank's black student Perry Hall (Lloyd Richards) is indeed a commie. Interestingly, she is able to do this precisely because she is *not* intelligent, instead using her instinct and womanly intuition. One character marvels: "How [Sally] maintained her intellectual innocence living with [Hank], I'll never know, but it's one of the most attractive things about her."[77] Sally's celebrated "intellectual innocence" throughout the play is both a condemnation of egghead intellectualism and a reminder to women that too much thinking renders them

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[74] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 171. Hofstader also cites these quotations: Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 227.

[75] It is an interesting coincidence that Elia Kazan testified before HUAC in 1952 during the Hollywood blacklist, essentially "naming names." For Lecklider's insights into Kazan's *The Egghead*, see Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 214-9.

[76] Molly Kazan, *The Egghead* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1958).

[77] Ibid., 27.

unattractive. Women are excluded from intellectual life while white male eggheads are attacked for their inclusion.

Also of note is the racial politics behind *The Egghead*. Hank's downfall comes primarily due to his "blind faith" in radical black politics. In certain respects, Hank is shown as an addlepated race traitor, realizing tragically too late that he was so overinvested in liberal antiracism that he unwittingly protected a subversive communist. In a paradoxical fashion, Hank is too white and intelligent, and therefore he becomes too liberal and pro-black.

Just as seen in *The Egghead* and certain oppositions to Adlai Stevenson, the egghead stereotype of the period was predominantly a political one, emphasizing how intellectualism leads to subversive politics, "left-wing" wrong footedness, and at its inevitable worst, communism. That said, it also carried with it significant gender, racial, and sexual politics as well, all of which seemingly are duplicated in more contemporaneous imaginings of the nerd stereotype, even if the egghead tended to be performed "older" than the nerd stereotype. Before further contextualizing some of the identity politics of the late 40s and 50s, it is useful to consider the period more broadly with regard to the themes of conformity and containment—particularly to see how the youthful nerd became so utterly un-hip.

Nerds and Squares: Conformists (and the Beats) in Post-War America

How the nerd stereotype became to be so square, so "uncool," is also deeply rooted in this post-war era, namely in the culture of conformity that dominated the nation. And much like the characterizations of the egghead, the mad scientist, and the sissy, the figure of the square was also embroiled in a racial and gendered discourse that

presupposed a white male subject, marking the square as another variation of nerd. This cultural discourse over conformity also served to configure the square/nerd as socially awkward, unpopular, and uptight in the burgeoning youth culture of the period.

The late 40s and the 50s were a time in which there was an intense social pressure to "fit in" and "toe the company line," to do as told, believe in the powers that be, and to conform to the social roles and conventions. This often manifested in the pronounced fiscal shifts that were occurring: economic growth was on the rise, productivity was increasing, and technology was becoming increasingly important to the business world. Interestingly, there was a dramatic rise in professional and technical occupations in post-war America as well: research and development (R&D) began to gain prominence, and jobs in science and engineering began to exhibit exponential growth. Corporate America (and its concordant dependence on mass consumerism) took deeper root, and "the nation's economy in 1956 crossed the line from an industrial to a 'post-industrial' state, with white-collar workers outnumbering blue-collar workers for the first time."[78] Notably, as science was being put to work for business more and more (making scientists more visible to the popular culture while further reinforcing how "good science" should be applied and practical [i.e. in the service of making money] and not pure and theoretical), much of the American workforce was conforming to the corporate hierarchy.[79]

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[78] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 114. For more on 50s formations of "post-industrialism" see the work of Daniel Bell, who among other things argued that the "knowledge revolution" of his day was causing serious changes to the nation's occupational structure. See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: BasicBooks, 1973).

[79] Also of note is how the recent invention of the computer became of interest to corporations, forecasting things to come. As Chafe writes, "By 1950 developers were ready to market computers to corporate customers, and twenty were sold in 1954. By the end of the decade, the number had increased to 2000."

Cultural critics of the time began to observe and offer varying critiques of the sociological and psychological effects of this corporate demand for conformity, as evidenced by important texts such as David Riesman's 1950 *The Lonely Crowd*, C. Wright Mills's 1953 *White Collar*, and William H. White's 1956 *The Organization Man*. This culture of conformity is linked to a number of cultural phenomena of the period, including the boom of suburban housing development, the sharp rise of consumerism, the growing popularity of the new medium of television, and the mass media of the time dubbing their youth (especially college students) the "silent generation." For good or ill, the image of "the man in the gray flannel suit" (always envisioned as a white man, of course), taken from the title of a 1955 Sloan Wilson novel, came to dominate the American cultural imagination.

Ironically, the rise of conformity was not uniform: as it further contributed to the anxiety and paranoia of the age, it also generated voices that opposed the trend in the larger discourse. Funnily enough, science fiction films such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954) are often viewed as capitalizing on this anxiety of over-conforming. While there was great pressure to conform, there was also a fear that it robbed you of your humanity, making you bland, lifeless, and zombie-like.[80] From another cinematic perspective, the 1953 film *The Wild Ones*, complete with a rebellious motorcycle-driving Marlon Brando (the mobility of motorcycle gangs became a counterpoint to the rooted suburbanite), also provided a marginal critique of

William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 114.

[80] I find it rather telling that in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, that what is most horrifying is how the aliens rob one of emotions. Copying your thoughts and memories and intelligence pales in comparison to the terror of losing one's emotions and ability to love, again confirming that old Western binary of emotion over reason.

conformity. The various counter-cultural movements that opposed the trend of conformity tended to find Americans that overconformed—middle class white men in particular—to be square, uncool, un-hip, socially lacking, and obsequious: in other words, nerdy. So in a way, many white American middle-class men of this period found themselves caught between two unsavory cultural extremes: the obsequious nerdy drone and the delinquent rebel without a cause.

One particularly telling counter to the rise of conformity—one that resonates in its opposition to the square/nerd stereotype—was the rebelliousness of the hipster Beats. This countercultural movement, exemplified by works such as Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's *Howl*, arose less by clear self-definition than by definition in opposition to the dominant culture.[81] As Norman Mailer states in his eclectic (and problematic) 1957 essay "The White Negro": "One is Hip or one is Square (the alternative which each new generation coming into American life is beginning to feel), one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed."[82] While many things can be said about the hipsters of the Beat Generation (and the later derivative "beatnik" stereotype promulgated by the mass

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[81] For more on the Beats, see Ann Charters, ed. *Beat Down to Your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?* (London: Penguin, 1991); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), 52-67; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 295-307; Catherine Nash, "'An Ephemeral Oddity'?: The Beat Generation and American Culture," *Working With English: Medieval and Modern Language, Literature, and Drama* 2:1 Literary Fads and Fashions (2006): 54-60; David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 41-103; Thomas Parkinson, ed., *A Casebook on the Beat* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961); Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday, 1977); and Ronald J. Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986).
[82] Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books), 3. Originally published in *Dissent*, 1957.

media[83]), it is worth examining hipsters with regard to the nerd stereotype, for in a

multitude of ways the hipster is situated antithetically to the nerd, who as we have noted

above, is the quintessence of square.[84] Of particular importance for our purposes, the

hipster notion of coolness deriving from blackness—and hence squareness deriving from

whiteness (or hyperwhiteness or lack of blackness)—much like the mad scientist and

egghead characterizations, further codifies the nerd stereotype as predominantly white

and male.

Of key importance to understanding the Beats are issues of style and cultural

representation. As David Savran argues, "For the Beats and their kin, the other rebel

males, a radical movement took shape in the United States for the first time that was

intent on producing not political or social change but *cultural* transformation."[85] Or as

William Burroughs describes it, their challenge to conformity was a "cultural protest

against conventional dress and behavior."[86] The hipster crowd, with their "beards,

sneakers, 'peasant' clothes," and other informal accouterments "offered a counterpoint to

suburban conventionality, while its fondness for marijuana and Eastern religion

suggested an openness to new modes of experience totally different from those parroted

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[83] It is of note that the hipster of the late 40s and early 50s was transformed by mass media and the popular culture in general into the ridiculous stereotype of the beatnik in the late 50s and early 60s. Again, as the Beat hipster represented (in certain respects) a challenge to a number of cultural hegemonies (while simultaneously reinforcing others), the popular culture by necessity had to turn this figure into a clown worthy of derision: hence the massive proliferation of beatnik representations in cartoons, movies, and TV shows in the 60s. This stereotyping process appears to occur with almost any counterculture figure, from hippies, to punks, to slackers, etc., regardless of the efficacy of their respective rebellions.
[84] The Beat hipster of the 50s is, in my opinion, a very different sort of identity than the more recent hipster identity/stereotype that arose in the 90s and the 00s. The latter hipster, I would argue, is a sort of supposedly "inauthentic" nerd.
[85] David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 57.
[86] Burroughs (1982), quoted in Ann Charter's foreword to *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*, ed. Charters (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1983), xii-xiii.

in the dominant culture as the only avenues to fulfillment."[87] In this respect, the nerd stereotype's appearance—jacked-up dress slacks, suspenders, dress shoes, white button-down shirt, pocket protector, and glasses—served to represent the sort of style more aligned with the conformist corporate drone, or, rather, the conformist student seeking teacher/parent approval. Here we see how the nerd stereotype takes on one of its major characteristics: obsequious deference to authority (apple-polisher, teacher's pet, brownnoser, follows the rules, too close to his/her parents, etc.)

Looking even deeper, we also see vital contrasts between various ideological binaries. The Beat hipster of the 50s is associated with hypersexuality, the nerd with asexuality;[88] the hipster pursues Eastern spirituality and drug use, the nerd Western empirical rationalism and a very un-hip sobriety; the hipster gains knowledge through travel and physical experience, the nerd through the stationary study of books and mental cogitation; the hipster speaks in slick jazz-inspired slang, the nerd in crisp technical jargon; the hipster is lackadaisical about work, the nerd over-efficient and studious, etc. In short, the hipster was the teacher's nightmare while the nerd was the teacher's pet. But of the many contrasts between hipster and nerd, perhaps none is more foundational than that of primitive rebel and over-civilized conformist, respectively. The nerd stereotype embodies civilization/culture (over nature), as evidenced by its associations with elitism, aristocracy, and rationalism, as opposed to the primitivism that is foundational to the Beats.

As previously mentioned, nowhere is the link between the hipster and primitivism more prominently and problematically analyzed than in Mailer's "The White Negro,"

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[87] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 142.
[88] Although it is interesting to note that both the nerd and the hipster are strongly linked with perhaps the most transgressive of sexualities in the 50s: homosexuality. See the next chapter for more.

where he posits that the Negro represents the model for the (always white) hipster, bringing "the cultural dowry" to be emulated.[89] Mailer tellingly writes

> Knowing in the cells of his existence that life is war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasure of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm.[90]

While Mailer's presumptuous linking of primitivism and blacks is troublesome to say the least, it does bespeak the linkage of the hipster with blackness and the square/nerd with whiteness.[91] It also makes clear that the act of appropriating blackness on the part of the hipsters was intended to be a radical act of rebellion, prefiguring the notion that to be a little black made you cool whereas to be too white is to be overly conformist, a square, and, eventually, a nerd.

Of course, the hipster represented an extreme minority—overall, most Americans did not express the rebellious spirit personified and promoted by the Beats. Rather, a majority of Americans found themselves trapped by the pressures of conformity, including most white American men. As Michael Kimmel argues, "In the 1950s American men strained against two negative poles—the overconformist, a faceless, self-

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[89] Mailer, *The White Negro*, 4.
[90] Ibid.
[91] For a racial critique of Mailer, see James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Delta, 1962), 217-30. For a rather scathing attack on the Beats for their primitivism and supposed anti-intellectualism, see Norman Podhoretz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," Partisan Review, 25, no. 2 (Spring 1958): 305-18. Podhoretz even writes, somewhat melodramatically, that the "suppressed cry" of the Beat writers is to "Kill the intellectuals who can talk coherently" and that "Being for or against what the Beat Generation stands for has to do with [...] being for or against intelligence itself" (page 318). See http://hgar-pub1.bu.edu/web/partisan-review/search-collection/detail/343750 for an online version of this issue of the *Partisan Review* (accessed July 4, 2015).

less nonentity, and the unpredictable, unreliable conformist."[92] Trying to find the impossible balance, the fine line between "the corporate clone and the outlaw rebel" came to represent "the two negative poles of American manhood."[93] And during this post-war period, negotiating one's masculinity shifted from primarily the public sphere to the private sphere, from the battlefront to the home front and the entire family unit. Importantly, it also shifted into the youth culture of the day, which also saw proper white masculinity as a goal to be achieved through strict behavioral adjustment, as a precarious balance between sissy/squares and juvenile delinquents. And nowhere were these gendered politics of youth culture played out more clearly than in Archie Comics.

A Post-War Nerd Stereotype: The Curious Case of Dilton Doiley

As the ideological bits and pieces of the sissy, the mad scientist, the egghead, and the square, were coming together to form the nerd stereotype, we also start to see the first few nerdy performances of that stereotype in its early, formative stages. Combining a disregard for theoretical/pure science, anti-intellectualism, the pressures to be cool in youth culture, the disdain for effeminacy, and other previously discussed characteristics specific to the late 40s and 50s, nerd characters began to appear—and not surprising, they began to appear predominately (although not exclusively, as we shall see in the next chapter) as straight, white, and male, albeit as obsequious, immature, heteronormative failures. One especially interesting and popular nerd character from this period that encapsulates these stereotypic traits is found in, unsurprisingly, the youth-oriented medium of early comic books: Dilton Doiley.

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[92] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 170.
[93] Ibid., 171.

In many respects, the character of Dilton from the Archie Comics franchise not only typifies the nerd stereotype past and present, but he also marks one of the first major tangible nerd images to arise in American popular culture during the post-war period, making him one of the most prominent nerd representations.[94] An early prototype for Dilton—Theodosius Tadpole—appeared in *Pep Comics* #27 in 1942, and eventually evolved throughout the mid to late 40s to become a regular, albeit minor character of the Archie universe by the late 40s/early 50s.[95] Dilton Doiley proper made his first appearance on February 16, 1948 in the Archie newspaper comic strip, and then in comic book form in *Pep Comics* #78 in 1950.[96] By roughly 1950, then, all the telltale nerd traits—including his failed white masculinity—were present in Dilton's image and behavior, and Dilton would appear in a number of stories in various comics from the Archie-verse throughout the 50s—and many decades after as well.

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[94] For basic "character bios" on Dilton, see the official Archie website, Archie Comic Publications, Inc., "Dilton Doiley," http://archiecomics.com/characters/dilton-doiley/ (accessed July 12, 2015); and Comic Vine, "Dilton Doiley," http://www.comicvine.com/dilton-doiley/4005-1737/ (accessed July 12, 2015). These bios are especially illuminating descriptions of both Dilton and the nerd stereotype. For example, the official Archie website character bio, posted in 2014, while viewed through the usual Archie rose-tinted glasses, is worth quoting in its entirety: "Dilton Doiley **Likes:** Physics, robotics, biology, chemistry and *all* of the sciences! **Dislikes:** Gym class, improper fractions, rejection[.] **1st Appearance:** Pep Comics #27, 1942 (Previously known as Theodosius Tadpole)[.] The brilliant Dilton Doiley is the smartest teenager in Riverdale, and could be the smartest person in town. Dilton can always be found studying a new subject or working on an invention in his lab. His hard work has won him many awards, but his inventions rarely seem to work properly. The flipside of his studious ways is the lack of romantic interests in Dilton's life. Even when he manages to ask a girl out, he usually bores her by discussing his theories rather than talking to his date during their time together! Due to his small stature, Dilton has asked Moose to accompany him on dates—just to raise him up for the end-of-the-night kiss! He is quick to help his friends using his intellect… though his inventions sometimes make even bigger messes. In the end, Dilton is a small genius with a big heart." Archie Comic Publications, Inc., "Dilton Doiley," http://archiecomics.com/characters/dilton-doiley/ (accessed July 12, 2015).
[95] Archie Comic Publications, Inc., "Dilton Doiley," http://archiecomics.com/characters/dilton-doiley/ (accessed July 12, 2015).
[96] Revolvy, "Dilton Doiley," https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Dilton%20Doiley&item_type=topic (accessed March 11, 2017); and Archie Comics Gems, "When was Dilton Doiley's first appearance?" https://web.archive.org/web/20110807125449/http://www.archiecomics.com/blog/gems/2001/02/when-was-dilton-doileys-first-appearance.html (accessed March 11, 2017).

As one small example take the story "Wiltin' Dilton," which appeared in the comic *Betty & Veronica* #38, originally published in March of 1958.[97] The premise of the short comic is simple: Dilton helps Betty and Veronica ("Archie's Girls," of course) with their math homework, giving them free time to watch the then-new household gadget—the television. At first, Dilton (or "Dilly," as Betty refers to him) is dismissive of the new-fangled, lowbrow device.[98] However, he gives it a try, and eventually gets sucked into some sort of intense crime/horror programming while the girls make candy in the kitchen. When Betty and Veronica accidently startle him, he leaps out the window and up a tree out of fright. He then gets startled again, this time by a harmless white cat in a pink ribbon, causing him to leap into Veronica's arms like a child (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). The final comedic twist of the brief story is that Dilton does not walk Betty home that night: it is *Betty* that walks *Dilton* home, for the sake of *his* safety, of course.[99]

In this story, Dilton is depicted as short and scrawny, shorter than both Betty and Veronica. He has coifed dark hair, a large red bow-tie/ascot, and, yes, round black horn-rimmed glasses. For the first few panels, his nose is up-turned, eyes closed as he

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[97] While 1958 places this particular issue a bit after my first phase of the nerd stereotype (1945-1957), I selected this particular story because it has been reprinted in Paul Castiglia's *Archie's Americana, Vol. 2: Best of the '50s*, and is therefore relatively available and accessible to the reader. Many of the older *Pep Comics* and *Archie Comics* from the 40s and 50s are difficult to find. See Paul Castiglia, ed., *Archie's Americana, Vol. 2: Best of the '50s* (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2011), 3.

[98] At first it may seem odd that the nerd Dilton would be dismissive of new technology (the television), as nerds today are so deeply imbricated in technophilia. However, the nerd obsession over electronics and tech, while present, was not as prominent a feature during this period, and would only come to the fore in nerd representations during the second phase of the nerd stereotype, as explored in a later chapter. Another interesting point is that, while television is so ubiquitous in our culture today, back in the 50s, many Americans—particularly intellectuals and cultural critics—were extremely critical and dismissive of television as an extremely base and lowbrow entertainment. So by dismissing the television set in this issue, Dilton is not so much manifesting a dislike of technology, but rather a sort of intellectual/aesthetic elitism: a nerd like himself is above such base and vulgar entertainments. If anything, this is a prime example of how, during this first phase of the nerd stereotype, there is a particular emphasis on the nerd being an elitist (anti-populist) snob, something very much in line with the mad scientist and egghead characterizations previously described and the pronounced anti-intellectualism of the time.

[99] Paul Castiglia, ed., *Archie's Americana, Vol. 2: Best of the '50s* (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2011), 160-63.

pontificates in cold scientific jargon, much like a mad scientist.[100] Not only does he excel

at science and math, he is highly intelligent and cultured, even possessing the hints of

hubris that come from an aristocratic sort of elitism, much like any egghead. And he

apparently enjoys doing homework (i.e. conforming to rules and doing what authority

tells him), marking him as a square. But as the narrative exemplifies, the primary

characteristic is Dilton's unmasculine cowardice, his feminization, his poor performance

of prescribed manhood, also marking him as a sissy. Taken together, he is a comic figure,

a patsy to be laughed at for his nerdy behavior. Not once, not from Dilton or either of the

ladies, is there any hint of potential romance or flirtation (which pretty much dominates

every other character in the Archie universe to a preposterous degree)—he is just a

neutered nerd who fails in performing his presupposed heterosexuality and his white

masculinity. Rather than this single comic being an isolated example, these stereotypical

nerd characteristics dominate nearly all of Dilton's appearances from his first appearance

forward.[101]

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[100] The jargon is ridiculous, but note the conjuring of *uber*-scientist, Einstein: "…So after multiplying the square root of the hypotenuse, we divide the difference between the side angles by the Einstein Method… And there's your answer!" Paul Castiglia, ed., *Archie's Americana, Vol. 2: Best of the '50s* (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2011), 160.

[101] A long examination of Dilton's character over time would likely prove a very fruitful study for the nerd stereotype—he is, after all, still with us today. Generally speaking, it is worth quickly noting that Dilton remained a minor tertiary character for much of the first and second phase of the nerd stereotype, but then in the 70s, started periodically receiving fuller treatment (just as the nerd stereotype began rising in cultural prominence, as explained in chapter 5). And briefly in 1989/1990—when the nerd stereotype had fully saturated American popular culture (see chapter 8 and the conclusion), he briefly received star treatment with his own magazine, *Dilton's Strange Science*. More recently, he has appeared as a minor character in the recent CW television series *Riverdale* (2017-) played by Major Curda, an American actor of Asian heritage, recapitulating the performance of the Asian nerd (see chapter 8). It seems as if a longitudinal study of Dilton Doiley's nerdy character would further reinforce many of the topics addressed in this work.

Dilton is not the only stereotype in the Archie canon, of course: one might say that stereotypes are the stock and trade of the Archie universe.[102] Archie himself is billed as "America's favorite/typical teenager," representing the ideal son of 50s America: middle-class, suburban, clever (but not too smart), and the object of affection of both the blonde "girl next door" type and the sultry (and snobby) brunette vixen. Yes, Archie gets both the "good" girl (Betty) and the "bad" girl (Veronica). The other characters showcase how well Archie is able to conform to the ideal center: unlike the upper-class jerk Reggie, Archie is middle-class and likable; unlike his lazy, clownish, anti-girl buddy Jughead, Archie is active and a girl-chaser; unlike the dumb jock Moose, Archie is clever and has common sense; and unlike the nerdy Dilton, Archie is not an educational, hyperintelligent overachiever *and* he gets the girl (or girls, as the case may be). "Archie steers down the middle of the road with just a hint of the impetuous smart aleck," writes Kimmel, "the all-American guy who stands out by fitting in."[103] And if Archie is the norm, Dilton is obviously one of the extremes.

The Archie Comics of the 40s and 50s, like many popular cultural artifacts of the period, give us a rather sanitized view of American life. In the midst of the comic book scare that eventually led to the Comic Code in 1954, it is particularly telling that the squeaky-clean Archie Comics not only survived but also thrived.[104] One reason they did

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[102] For more on the "sexual stereotypes" in the Archie universe, see Ronald Glasberg, "The Archie Code: A Study in Sexual Stereotyping as Reflective of a Basic Dilemma in American Society," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 25-32.

[103] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 166.

[104] For more on the history of comic books, the conservative moral panic that led to the Comic Code, and some general background of the medium, see Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009); Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey, *The Comic Book History of Comics* (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2012); Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The History of Comics:*

so was because, as Wright suggests in *Comic Book Nation*, "The Archie stories struck a commercially sensible middle ground by exploring elements of teen culture while always affirming conformity and respect for authority. Predicting the formula of family-oriented television sitcoms, Archie comic books dealt with problems so trivial and so completely resolvable that they gave an impression of unchanging suburban bliss."[105]

So Dilton Doiley in the late 40s and 50s may be considered as the prime, representative example of the early nerd stereotype in its first phase, one that has been made palatable for mass consumption.[106] Throughout his character's evolution, from his first appearance to his becoming a consistent member of Archie's gang, Dilton's intermittent appearances drew upon the same ideological stock as the nerdy characterizations of the sissy, the mad scientist, the egghead, and the square. And like these four characterizations, Dilton exemplified the nerd as a young white male who failed to perform his heteronormative white masculinity, fulfilling the heteronormative function of the nerd stereotype.

While the character of Dilton Doiley may be a representative stereotypical nerd performance from the first phase, it must be remembered that the nerd stereotype was still

History, Form, and Culture (New York: Continuum, 2009); Ron Goulart, *Great American Comic Books* (Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, 2001); and Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010). The "Bibliographic Essay" at the end of the Gabilliet is especially useful. For more on the Comics Code and the surrounding controversy, see Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1998); David Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); and Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

[105] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 72.

[106] Wright also writes: "The tone of the [Archie] series betrays the judgmental outlook of adult supervision. America's 'typical teenager' never uses teen slang, never fights, never smokes or drinks alcohol, always obeys his parents in the end, and betrays only the vaguest hint of his libido. In other words, he is typical only of the kind of teenager that most adults want to have around." Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 73.

in its infancy. Generally speaking, the nerd image was somewhat hard to find in this first phase of the stereotype, much like the slang word "nerd," which was only rarely used during this period—it, like most nascent youth slang, barely registers in the mass media. Nerd (or proto-nerd) characters like Dilton only crop up intermittently, surreptitiously, in the post-war period. They are not the protagonists of film and television, nor even the sidekicks or secondary characters. You catch a fleeting glimpse only rarely: the butt of a single-episode joke here, the one-shot victim of a bully there. That said, these were the pivotal formative years of the nerd stereotype, when it took on the look, the traits, and the politics that would define it for years to come. In short, by absorbing much of the ideological characteristics and politics of the late 40s and 50s from similar stereotypic figures—the sissy, the mad scientist, the egghead, and the square—the nerd stereotype took shape. And that shape was predominately straight, white, and male.

And yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, even in this conservative post-war American culture, not *all* nerd performances were straight white men, even if they continued to reinforce a rigid hegemonic white masculinity.

Chapter 2: The Nerd and Post-War Otherness: More Nerd Discourses in the Late 40s & 50s

The Marginalized "Other" in Post-War America

The subject of the previous chapter was primarily the straight white male, and how the fledgling nerd stereotype of the post-war era was predominantly performed as such in order to prescribe its heteronormative dynamic. However, even though the white male nerd stereotype far outnumbered other nerd performances, not all nerd performances were uniformly straight, white, and male—even in the conservative late 40s/50s. So while the previous chapter focused on the overall ideological foundation of the mainly white male nerd stereotype, this chapter will examine how marginalized groups—here loosely referred to as "Others" as juxtaposed against straight white protestant American men (i.e.: women, blacks, gays, etc.)—were strategically associated (or purposefully disassociated) to the white male nerd stereotype in the late 40s and 50s.

Notably, during this first phase and each subsequent phase of the nerd stereotype, each respective mode of "otherness" (that is, supposed cultural "types" juxtaposed against homogeneous representations of white, protestant, heterosexual males) has its own unique relationship to nerd discourse. Generally speaking, however, certain groups are "included" in the nerd stereotype (meriting popular representations as nerds) whereas others are "excluded" from the nerd stereotype. And as we shall see in subsequent chapters, who is included and excluded changes through time as a historically and culturally contingent phenomenon. That said, it is vitally important to understand the paradox at play: expressions of *both* inclusion *and* exclusion are disempowering and manifestations of stereotypic bias. In this way, the Other, whether included or excluded

from representation, suffers by the nerd stereotype through both the heteronormative dynamic as well as its exclusionary dynamic, the latter being that which prevents the marginalized Other from accessing the same power and privilege afforded the hegemonic white straight male.

Throughout the late 40s and the 50s, an array of discursive strategies were activated to exclude the Other from power and privilege, the nerd stereotype being a small and under-examined (yet effective) cultural manifestation among many. As previously mentioned, the nerd stereotype focused upon discourses of educational opportunity, scientific knowledge, and intellectual life—as well as who was to be allowed access to them. With these paradigms in mind, this chapter will examine four particular modes of "Otherness": (male) Jews, (white) women, (male) African-Americans, and (male) homosexuals.[1] These four identity categories are especially worthy of examination for one primary reason: these four identities were of extreme concern, for better or worse, to the American culture of the post-war era; they dominated the public imagination and therefore required emphatic containment via coercion and consent.[2] Accordingly, mediated narratives regarding these Others became vitally important to the overall ideological construction of the nerd stereotype itself in this formative period.

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[1] More work on this subject can and should be done. While I do not go into overlaps between the nerd stereotype and every possible marginalized Other here, hopefully this chapter will be suggestive of a framework for how such an investigation might begin.

[2] For more on coercion and consent in relation to the construction of hegemony, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed. and trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1971); and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85-126.

Jews and the Nerd Stereotype in Post-War America

From the very beginning, Jewish Americans were incorporated into the nerd stereotype so as to exclude them from educational and occupational opportunities. In fact, the incorporation runs so deep that one could argue that Jewish stereotypes of post-war America gave rise to the nerd stereotype, or perhaps that the nerd stereotype is primarily a Jewish stereotype stripped of its overt Jewishness and made applicable to all Americans. This chicken-or-egg argument aside, the connection between Jewishness and nerdiness was particularly strong in the late 40s and 50s, a period that was witnessing, perhaps not coincidently, a decline in anti-Semitism and the incorporation of the American Jew into whiteness. Whatever the precise relationship between these cultural constructs, much of the nerd stereotype clearly owes its form and function to long-standing offensive Jewish stereotypes involving hyperintelligence and perverse sexuality.[3]

The image of the Jewish male as the stereotypical Shylock—the money-obsessed economic man, cunning, deceitful—is one of the oldest and long-standing of stereotypic constructions.[4] Lacking physical power but possessing prodigious mental ability, the stereotypical Shylock shuns sports and play (and military duty) and instead turns his crafty mind to moneymaking, with its reliance on numbers and mathematics. His refusal to convert to Christianity and his strong familial ties are perceived by the anti-Semite as a sort of clannishness and sense of haughty superiority, which generally may be viewed as

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[3] For more information on the specific relationship between intelligence and Jews, see Sander L. Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

[4] The old stereotype of the Shylock is named, of course, for the Jewish character from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, likely written in the late 1590s. Of course, this stereotype also long pre-dated Shakespeare as well.

a variant of being elitist and asocial. Supposedly lacking good breeding and a healthy appearance, this Jewish male stereotype is visualized as unclean and unattractive, hunched over and, notably, greasy.[5] While still distinct, the nerd stereotype borrows many of the characteristics of the Shylock, most especially in the figure of the "greasy grind" which was popular during the late 40s and 50s. A greasy grind (or simply "grind") is a person who works too hard, most especially at hitting the books and studying—in other words, another type of nerd. More than just clever alliteration, the coupling of "greasy" with "grind" betrays a subtle yet strong connection between negative Jewish stereotypes like the Shylock and the nerd stereotype.

Similar to, if not consonant with, this Shylock stereotype is that of the Jew as a neurotic and sexual failure. Just as Shylock cloistered his daughter Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, preventing her from getting the conversion and the good Christian husband she was clearly aching for, the Jew is often characterized as barring "proper" heteronormativity.[6] In fact, there is a long history of confusing the Jewish practice of

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[5] For more on the Jewish Shylock stereotype from a sociological perspective, see *Jews in the Mind of America*, especially "Part One," which constitutes the thorough work of Charles Herbert Stember on public attitudes towards the Jew in America during this period. In particular, see the section "The Shylock Image" on pages 68-73. One facet of these older sociological studies and their surveys that is intriguing if not somewhat problematic is how intelligence is often listed under so-called positive characteristics without fully unpacking the meaning of that ascription or exploring the possibility that it might have negative connotations, which is particularly odd in an era in which there was a strong anti-intellectual discourse at work. Perhaps these highly educated social scientists, so intelligent themselves, allowed a bit of their own bias towards lauding intelligence to color their interpretations and conclusions. Charles Herbert Stember and Others, *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1966). For an examination of Jewish stereotypes and the Shylock image on the theatrical stage, see Ellen Schiff, *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). Also see Michael N. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), especially the chapter "Gilded Age Images: Shylock Resurrected," pages 78-112.

[6] My focus here is primarily on male Jewish stereotypes, although much applies to female Jews as well. That said, female Jews also have their own history of gender-specific stereotypes. For more on this topic, see the work of Riv-Ellen Prell, such as her chapter "Rage and Representation: Jewish Gender Stereotypes in American Culture," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Fay Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon, 1990), 248-68. For work more specific to Jewish women in the postwar period, see her "Cinderellas Who (Almost) Never Become Princesses: Subversive Representations

endogamous marriage with incest and inbreeding, which associates Jews with sexual

exclusivity, sexual perversion, and a lack of sufficient (heterosexual) intercourse. Tracing

the stereotypical "mad Jew" from the nineteenth century forward, Sander L. Gilman

argues that many, including experts in the medical establishment, perceived the Jews to

be especially prone to hysteria (a prominently feminine condition) and neurasthenia.[7] The

supposed reason behind this "degeneration" was "faulty breeding and was symptomized

by deviant sexuality."[8] Neurasthenia (a supposed depletion of nervous energy), it should

be noted, was widely attributed to the stresses of the urban life and over-civilization,

afflicting those who worked sedentary occupations. The metropolitan, cosmopolitan

Jewish desk-jockey, then, brought about his own perverse sexuality, one that was clearly

found lacking, much like that of the nerd stereotype. Building off this old image of the

Jew as a sexual failure and deviant, David Biale suggests that there arose "the myth of the

impotent American Jew" and "Jewish erotic neurosis" which American Jews playfully

repackaged and popularized as the stereotype of the "sexual schlemiel" in the late 60s and

70s.[9] This image of the sexual schlemiel, as we shall see in chapter 6, eventually becomes

a crucial construct in its own right with regards to the nerd stereotype.

  As the nation moved out of the war and into the 50s, the various stereotypic

constructs of the Jew tended, as they had in the past, to emphasize hyperintelligence,

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of Jewish Women in Postwar Popular Novels," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 123-38.

[7] Hysteria was actually once considered a medical condition attributable to anxious, irritable, emotional women—mainly women who did not behave the way men wanted them to, most especially in the nineteenth century. Neurasthenia is another very dubious diagnosis popular in the nineteenth century, a supposed lack of energy in the nervous system brought about by the pressures of modern urban life. Funnily enough, neurasthenia garnered the nickname "Americanitis."

[8] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 158. For more on the image of the mad Jew and its history, see Gilman's chapter "The Madness of Jews," pages 150-62.

[9] David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 205-6.

asocial behaviors, excessive scientific knowledge, and a lack of healthy virile

heteronormativity. Clearly, the general Jewish stereotype and the nascent nerd stereotype

were extremely similar. It should be noted, however, that the prevalence and ferocity of

overt Jewish stereotypes were in a steady and astonishing decline during the post-war

period, along with anti-Semitism on the whole.[10] It is possible as the virulence of the

Jewish stereotype waned, the waxing nerd stereotype absorbed those traits and images,

stripping them of their overtly Jewish content so as to mask prejudice towards Jews as

well as to widen the scope of application to gentiles who might act "too Jewish."[11] In this

fashion, the nerd stereotype functions as both a racial and ethnic project that celebrates

Jews who assimilate into whiteness, and punishes those who act overtly or stereotypically

Jewish, regardless of the religion they may practice.

Generally speaking, then, the post-war era saw the general decline of overt anti-

Semitism and a concordant (albeit limited) increase in the Jew's access to whiteness.[12]

From President Truman's Commission on Higher Education to the Committee of Civil

Rights to the popular 1947 Hollywood film *Gentleman's Agreement*, change was in the

air for Jewish Americans.[13] This process of melting-pot assimilation, it should be noted,

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[10] While there are likely many factors that fueled this decline in anti-Semitism in American culture after the war, the most pertinent may be the sympathetic humanization of Jews as the horrors of the Holocaust came to the general public's attention. For more information regarding anti-Semitism in America, especially its manifestations and mutations during the postwar period, see John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975); David A. Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 33-6; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150-74; and Harold E. Quinley and Charles Y. Glock, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Free Press, 1979).
[11] For more on the concept of performing or being "too Jewish," see Norman L. Kleebatt, ed., *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
[12] For a basic examination of the "whitening" of Jews in America, see Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999). Also see Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews" in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 171-99.
[13] *Gentleman's Agreement* was one of the first Hollywood films to address anti-Semitism directly, and a critical and commercial success that was widely praised for its message against prejudice towards Jews. It

involved not the multicultural impulse to celebrate difference of later years, but rather efforts to universalize the Jew into the same sense of conformity that typified the age. Part of this "whitening" process involved the erasure of Jewishness, a process exemplified in popular culture by a lack of overt Jewishness in mass media.[14] What is particularly intriguing is how hegemonic whiteness associates itself with intelligence, and in those cultural moments when a marginalized Other—in this particular case, American Jews—are permitted "almost but not quite white" status, their intelligence is both superficially lauded and yet curtailed as a threat to white intelligence.[15] Importantly, these cultural moments—and their paradoxical treatment of marginalized Others—are vividly expressed through the association or disassociation of the nerd stereotype, a stereotype which can be used to seemingly acknowledge their intelligence yet prevent them (via the exclusionary dynamic) from experiencing the privileges and powers availed to straight white protestant males.

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won the 1948 Best Picture Academy Award. Still, the movie problematically puts forward a universalist message, suggesting that Jews who can pass as gentile may gain qualified access to whiteness, but those who cannot pass are in a much more tenuous position. Interestingly enough, one of the Jewish characters from the film who cannot pass (or refuses to pass) is the minor character of Professor Fred Lieberman (Sam Jaffe), a highly intelligent and articulate professor and scientist. The most overtly Jewish character in the movie is very much performed as an Einstein-like nerd, a Jewish egghead and intellectual. For more on *Gentleman's Agreement*, see Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 31-40; Lester Friedman, "Celluloid Palimpsests: An Overview of Ethnicity and the American Film," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 11-38; and Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor, 1989).

[14] Perhaps one of the most vivid examples of this erasure of Jewishness in order to foster assimilation into near-whiteness is the early television show *The Goldbergs* (1949-1955). While the preceding radio program emphasized the Jewishness of Molly Goldberg and her family, the television show of the late 40s/50s consciously made the characters less overtly Jewish and more generically "American." For more on *The Goldbergs*, see Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 40-8; George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 39-75; Donald Weber, "The Jewish-American World of Gertrude Berg: *The Goldbergs* on Radio and Television, 1930-1950," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 85-99; Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got 'Berg-larized' in the Process)," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 45-67.

[15] As I will argue in Chapter 8, this same process takes place with Asian Americans in the 1980s.

Another intriguing if paradoxical observation regarding the Jewish nerd stereotype during this first phase is the paucity of overt Jewish nerd performances in the popular media during this period. One might assume, given how American Jews were at the forefront of national discourse of the time, that there would be a number of prominent Jewish nerds characters in the mass media. However, barring a few vaguely Jewish professors and mad-scientists from American cinema of the period, very few overtly Jewish nerd performances exist in this time. There are many possible reasons for this contradiction, but one of the most obvious is how, given the process of assimilation and whitening that was occurring at the time, meant a lack of *all* sorts of overt Jewish performances. It seems as if, during the initial stages of incorporating a marginalized Other into hegemonic whiteness, there is at first a conspicuous lack of performance representation, as if to wash away any sort of difference by remaining silent about that difference. However, as we shall see in chapter 6, after about a decade or two of little to no overt Jewish nerd performances, they become extremely popular and highly conspicuous.[16]

While American film and television were taking steps towards incorporating the Jew into white America by essentially overlooking or erasing Jewishness from their characters, the broader culture remained keenly aware of Jews in American life. And while there may not have been many prominent or popular overtly Jewish nerd performances in popular entertainments, the American culture remained particularly

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[16] Again, this exact phenomenon occurs again with Asian nerds just as they were being problematically incorporated into whiteness and American culture in the late 60s and 70s. Little to no Asian nerd characters arise in performance mediums during this time, despite the fact that the model minority stereotype was flourishing during this period. Yet a decade or two later, Asian nerd characters become highly conspicuous in the 80s. For more on this topic and Asian nerds, see chapter 8.

concerned about the hyperintelligent Jew and how they would fit into society, which in turn continued to foster the Jewish nerd stereotype.

In terms of employment, job discrimination began to subside for Jews after the war, but in certain professions and industries, job barriers remained.[17] Importantly, even with certain barriers coming down, the period saw Jews being channeled into certain types of jobs and positions, and not into others. Usually denied the top leadership and policy-making spots, Jews often found themselves in roles that stressed their intelligence, more often hired in "areas of research, actuarial, or creative slots where intellectual prowess rather than social pedigree served as the driving criterion."[18] According to the hegemonic (gentile) culture, to be a true leader of men in postindustrial corporate America required a very subjective (and Protestant) notion of "character" that Jews demonstrably lacked. So rather than being the top brass, Jewish men were much more likely to be thought of as professors, scientists, and intellectuals—professions that further linked them with the nerd stereotype.

While often associated with professors and scientists in the public imagination, actual Jewish professors and scientists, while prominent, usually never occupied the best of those positions, nor those administrative or managerial positions that oversaw them. Take the faculty hiring at the Ivy Leagues, for example: it took until 1951 for Lionel Trilling to become the first Jewish professor in the English department at Columbia, and until 1954 for Oscar Handlin to be the first Jew to be granted full professorship in

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[17] Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 155-6.
[18] Ibid., 156. Also see Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behavior in America and the Hidden Barriers That Affect You, Your Community, Your Future* (New York: David McKay Company, 1959), 265. Note that in Packard's chapter "The Special Status Problems of Jews," (pages 264-83), he also highlights the notion that "Jewish people are 'smart'" (page 275) as one of characteristics contributing to the undemocratic social, cultural, and economic barriers imposed on American Jews.

Harvard's history department.[19] Noting that "Jews have certainly supplied the country with more than their proportionate share of scientists, college professors, poets, composers, playwrights, novelists, psychiatrists, and other intellectual types," Slavin and Pradt argue that "You seldom find a Jew at the top of any organization, be it a bank, a large corporation, a university, or for that matter, country."[20] This phenomenon Slavin and Pradt refer to as the "Einstein Syndrome," which generally describes how Jews may be given lip service praise for their intelligence on the surface, but in reality a glass ceiling remains that prevents Jews from access to the best jobs and true power and equality.[21] In a way, it is a variation of the later Asian model minority stereotype, which is examined in chapter 8.[22]

If the perceived hyperintelligence of the Jews channeled them into certain occupational positions, simultaneously providing better employment while still excluding them from the top spots, the domain of education was no different. In fact, some of the most important changes and contestations regarding anti-Semitism during the post-war

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[19] Arthur Goren, *The American Jews* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1982), 83.
[20] Stephen L. Slavin and Mary A. Pradt, *The Einstein Syndrome: Corporate Anti-Semitism in America Today* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 154. While Slavin and Pradt are referring more specifically to their America of the early 80s, their perception extends back into the 40s and 50s.
[21] As explored in the previous chapter, the conflation of the Jew and the scientist into a sort of "Einstein stereotype" was not necessarily a glorifying endeavor, as science and scientists (like the Jewish Oppenheimer) occupied an uneasy place in American culture of the period.
[22] As with the occupational positions of scientist and professor, Jews also become predominantly associated with the image of the public intellectual during this period. Even today, our image of the typical American public intellectual stems back to the circle loosely referred to as the New York Intellectuals, a group of literary and social critics often associated with the journals *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* of the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Associated with such prominent thinkers as Edmund Wilson, Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, and Daniel Bell, this coterie of American public intellectuals was predominantly and conspicuously Jewish. For more on the New York Intellectuals, see Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Carole Kessner, ed., *The "Other" New York Jewish Intellectuals* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

period occurred in the field of education. One of the most prominent issues of the day—one with clear ties to the nerd stereotype—was that of collegiate admissions standards.

As Jerome Karabel explores in detail in his *The Chosen*, during the 20s and 30s, most of the prestigious colleges and universities in the country imposed quotas on the Jews in a variety of ways both subtle and blatant, barring many of them from important educational (and, subsequently, occupational) opportunities. During this time, writes Karabel, "in the context of a powerful national movement to restrict immigration," the definition of a student with "merit" worthy of a college education became "the ideal of the 'all-around man' of sturdy character, sound body, and proper social background. An undergraduate who devoted his time to his club or his sports team was the ideal. He who spent time at his desk was labeled not merely 'a grind' but 'a greasy grind.'"[23] Clearly the hyperintelligent Jewish greasy grind was not the ideal freshman, hence the need for highly subjective admission policies that prevented them from overrunning the schools.[24]

After WWII those quotas came under attack, but there still remained pernicious and covert anti-Semitism in many admissions policies, especially in the Ivy leagues, where Jewish nerd hyperintelligence was seen as a threat. Take, as one small example, the overall vision of the Harvard admissions policy as articulated by Wilbur J. Bender, the chairman of the Committee on Admission from 1952-1960.[25] Admitting that he

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[23] Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 4.
[24] Benjamin Nugent takes this view as well in his *American Nerd: The Story of My People* as well as his online article "The Rise of the Jewish Nerd," *Jewish Quarterly* no. 212 (Winter 2008), online at http://www.jewishquarterly.org/issuearchive/article3b26.html?articleid=465 (accessed July 29, 2015).
[25] For more on Bender, see Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 246-90; and Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 294, 546.

preferred "the boy with some athletic interests and abilities,"[26] Bender felt that the

popular perception that Harvard was a place for "the studious, the intellectual, the

esthete" was a dangerous one.[27] Bender worried that Harvard's public image was

imperiled by being associated with "the valedictorian, the obvious intellectual, the white-

faced grind."[28] In short, enrolling excessively intelligent students would be damaging for

Harvard.

Behind this worry of admitting too many nerdy students was an anti-Semitic and

homophobic impulse, often subtly veiled, sometimes explicit. Even before Bender took

the position as the dean of admission, he was concerned about Harvard's image as a

college replete with "pansies and poets and serious la-de-da types" instead of the much

preferable "virile, masculine, red-blooded he-men."[29] Not surprisingly, Bender also

lumped scientists (students and faculty) into his mix of prejudices, finding them

"withdrawn, scrawny, not personable, excessively intellectual."[30] Most vividly, noting

that Harvard unfortunately appeals to "intellectual, musical or esthetic individuals [...]

coming largely from metropolitan centers" where there happens to be "a high percentage

of Jewish boys,"[31] Bender admits to finding such students "interesting," but that most of

them are also "our most unattractive and undesirable ones, the effeminates, the precious

and affected, the unstable."[32]

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[26] "Comprehensive Formal Statement," 36, quoted in Karabel, *The Chosen*, 250. This and the following quotes from Bender come from Wilbur J. Bender, "A Comprehensive Formal Statement of Harvard College Admission Policy (Confidential)," 18 September 1952, Harvard University Archives.
[27] "Comprehensive Formal Statement," 13, quoted in Karabel, 250.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Wilbur J. Bender, "Speech to Class of '27," 3 May 1947, Harvard University Archives, 16, quoted in Karabel, 251.
[30] Henry Bragdon, "Conversation About Bill Bender, Mostly With E.T. Wilcox, But Sargent Kennedy Also Chiming In," 30 October 1971, Harvard University Archives, quoted in Karabel, 282.
[31] "Comprehensive Formal Statement," 8-9, quoted in Karabel, 251.
[32] "Comprehensive Formal Statement," 9, quoted in Karabel, 251.

The admissions policies under Bender's regime are one example of a lingering anti-Semitism in post-war American education, but they are emblematic of a widespread phenomenon.[33] Furthermore, these Jewish quotas stand as one small example of the continued perception of Jewish hyperintelligence in American culture of the late 40s and 50s, a perception that quite literally resulted in exclusionary practices by means of the exclusionary dynamic of the nerd/greasy grind stereotype. Even as American Jews were being granted near-white status and overtly nerdy Jewish characters seemingly dwindled in popular performance mediums, the image of the nerdy, hyperintelligent Jew remained in the cultural imagination, which in turn became ideological fodder for the broader nerd stereotype in the late 40s and 50s. Importantly, this characterization of the Jewish nerd, a seed planted in this first phase of the nerd stereotype, would grow to become highly visible through performance in many phases to come.

Women and the Nerd Stereotype in Post-War America

It may come as a bit of a surprise to contemporary readers, but there were a small but substantial number of female nerd representations (always white, however) in the late 40s and 50s. However, the inclusion of women in stereotypic nerd performances was far from empowering. Like their white male nerd counterparts, the female nerd stereotype reminded young women of the steep price for challenging heteronormativity, but in addition it also reminded them that being educated and intelligent was the province of men and men alone.

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[33] For more on post-war reactions to the academic quotas, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 158-60; and Carey McWilliams, *A Mask For Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1948), 113-41.

Popular culture offered a number of confusing and contradictory messages to women during the post-war period in America. On one hand, women were expected to fulfill their duties as wife and mother and remain in the home. Popular books such as the best-selling *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947) reminded women that true happiness was to be found in homemaking. Prominent psychiatrist Helen Deutsch urged that any woman who did not accept this "normal femininity" was a "masculinized" neurotic victim of subversive feminist thinking.[34] Throughout the country, the message for women was clear: stay home and make babies for the baby boom. So many women found themselves trapped at home where the feminine mystique dominated, which severely limited the engagement American women could have with the educational, occupational, and intellectual lives that are associated with the nerd stereotype.[35]

While on the whole educational opportunities and college attendance was increasing for women alongside occupational opportunities, many women found themselves caught in a trap of cultural pressures.[36] Sociologist Mirra Komarovsky, in her study of women students at Barnard College found that young girls were pushed to get good grades, and yet if they appeared *too* smart, they were taught that they would scare

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[34] Quoted in William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 124.

[35] For a solid general background on women and gender in post-war America, see Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Susan Hartmann, *The Homefront and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982); William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Political, and Economic Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugenia Kaledin, *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984); Glenna Matthews, *"Just a housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2005); and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 2008).

[36] For some educational statistics, see National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, "120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait," Thomas D. Snyder, ed., January 1993, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf (accessed July 18, 2015).

away a potential husband. Of these women, 40% admitted that, on dates with boys, they "played dumb" in order to appear more attractive.[37] Later in life, after most of these women took up their place in the home, many experienced intellectual frustration. One woman from Komarovsky's study stated that "the plunge from the strictly intellectual college life to the 24-hour-a-day domestic one is a terrible shock, and it is no wonder that we stagger through the first few years of childrearing wondering what our values are and struggling to find some compromise between our intellectual ambitions and the reality of everyday living."[38]

This pressure on women to not be "too smart" or "too educated" because it made them unfit wives and mothers was echoed in the popular media, as evidenced in a 1946 issue of *Newsweek* that claimed, "For the American girl books and babies don't mix," making it clear which alternative the writer thought American women should choose.[39] Even later, in 1957, the *Ladies Home Journal* contained an article entitled "Is College Education Wasted on Women?" in which observers noted that college was really only useful for women as a place to find a husband.[40] This conception of a woman getting her "MRS degree" proliferated in the popular culture of mid-century America. It was palatable, then, for a woman to be somewhat educated, as long as it in no way impinged on her reproductive capabilities and compulsory heteronormativity. In this way, both the male nerd and female nerd stereotype notably perform the same hegemonic dynamic, although the pressure to not be too smart seems much more pronounced for women.

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[37] For more on this study and the trope of "playing dumb," see Komarovsky's *Women in the Modern World*, especially pages 76-87. Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemmas* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1953).

[38] Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemmas* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1953), 106.

[39] Quoted in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 2008), 139.

[40] May, 139-40.

Although some women made occupational advances while the men were off at war in the early 40s (lower class women and black women usually had to work menial jobs regardless), that progress was halted upon the return of the soldiers and their subsequent flight to the suburbs. And yet, more women were joining the work force, especially middle-class women and mothers, albeit in positions that were underpaid and allowed for little advancement. For example, the growth of corporations fostered a rise of women in clerical positions (picture the stereotypical 50s secretary), but the emergent managerial class was predominantly male: as historian William Chafe put it, "there were virtually no 'organization women.'"[41] As long as women were inferiors in the workplace, their occupational growth was permitted, although severely limited.

As for the field of science, women were at a particular disadvantage in the late 40s and 50s. The percentage of science and engineering doctorate degrees awarded to women steadily decreased in this period, and in the mid-1950s, the proportion of those degrees bestowed on women stayed under 10%.[42] Also, the percentage of science articles written by women declined after the war, with women publishing less than one-tenth of the scientific journalism of the day. In her study of the popular representation of female scientists, LaFollette writes that "To quantify the magnitude of the imbalance, we calculate that, in this study at least, male scientists where fifteen times more visible— either as authors or biography subjects—than women scientists."[43] Overall, LaFollette concluded that "the perpetuation of an unattractive, negative stereotype, combined with the mass media's lack of attention to 'ordinary' women scientists and with the relatively

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[41] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 117.
[42] Marcel C. LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*: *Public Images of Science 1910-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 81-2.
[43] Ibid., 81.

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small number of female authors writing about science, implied that women were of little consequence in science."[44] While some of their male scientist counterparts were suffering from egghead accusations, female scientists were suffering from a much more extreme lack of opportunity and visibility. Science made the male quirky; it made the female unattractive and extreme, an outlier that eschewed the domesticity that was her inevitable destiny.[45]

The same lack of opportunity and visibility applied not only to women scientists, but women academics and public intellectuals as well. Roughly from 1940 to 1960, the percentage of women faculty members, already extremely low, dropped from 28% to 22%.[46] The problem was even more pronounced in the Ivy Leagues, many of which did not even see a tenured female professor until this period. For example, Marjorie Nicolson was the first woman to be tenured in English at Columbia in 1941, and astronomer Cecelia Payne-Gaposhkin became the first woman tenured at Harvard in 1956.[47] Whether viewed as scholars, academics, professors, or public intellectuals, American women were

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[44] LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*, 95.

[45] For more information regarding U.S. women in the scientific field during this time period and others, see not only LaFollette, but also Jonathan R. Cole, "Women in Science," in *Scientific Excellence: Origins and Assessment,* eds. Douglas N. Jackson and J. Philippe Rushton (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987); Jonathan R. Cole, *Fair Science: Women in the Scientific Community* (New York: Free Press, 1979); and Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles to 1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). For more on gender and science, also see Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[46] Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 766. Graham includes a useful table here, compiling a variety of useful statistics. Her cited sources are U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1976* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976); and *Projections of Education Statistics to 1984-85* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977); and estimates of the National Center for Education Studies.

[47] Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 767.

overwhelmingly excluded from the ivory tower and from any substantial public intellectual discourse.[48]

As suggested, one of the major contributing factors to this exclusion of women from scholarly fields was the dominant view that too much thinking, reading, studying, or scientific inquiry—all nerdy characteristics—made women unfit for motherhood and homemaking, and hence an unattractive mate for any potential suitors. So it should not be surprising that women who did pursue intellectual interests in the late 40s and 50s were frequently represented as stereotypical nerds.[49] And what more vindictive way to attack smart women (according to hegemonic straight males, anyway) than to render them unattractive and unfeminine?

As a small pop cultural example of how potential nerd status renders girls masculine and unattractive, consider the family sitcom *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), that emblematic bastion of idealized patriarchal nuclear family dynamics.[50] As this show—and others like it, such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), and *My Three Sons*

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[48] There are always exceptions of course, like professor, scientist, and public intellectual Margaret Mead, who was already an accomplished anthropologist and notable public figure by the 1940s. However, as LaFollette points out (see page 92), the popular media painted Mead as so exceptional as to be an exception of her gender, ironically making the profession of science *less* appealing to girls even when celebrating Mead's work. For an example of Mead's work as a public intellectual in which she critiques American masculinity, see Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: Morrow, 1942). For more on Mead herself and her public reputation, see Rae Goodell, *The Visible Scientists* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), and Nancy C. Lutkehaus, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[49] As suggested in the introductory chapter, it is another of the curious contradictions/paradoxes how nerdy behaviors masculinize female nerds, whereas male nerds are somehow feminized by the very same pursuits. In fact, generically speaking, during the post-war era (and perhaps still today) the image of the "good student" or "teacher's pet" among children was that of a girl, which likely contributed to two contradictory perceptions from the perspective of the male gaze: first, that learning was a feminizing activity ("only girls work hard at school"), and second, that excelling at *anything* should be the purview of boys only, so those girls who did do well had to be denigrated.

[50] For a useful online episode guide to *Father Knows Best*, see FatherKnowsBest.com, http://www.fatherknowsbest.com (accessed July 14, 2105).

(1960-1965)—often focused on the figure of the "ideal father" teaching his children how to behave properly (i.e. conform to strict gender norms, [see the chapter 1]), it is perhaps unsurprising a young nerd would appear on *Father Knows Best*.[51] Interestingly, the 1955 episode "Bud, the Ladykiller" (season 2, episode 12) gives a moderate amount of screen time to not only a nerd, but a girl nerd.[52] The story of the episode is a simple one: the son of ideal father Jim Anderson (Robert Young)—the young Bud (Billy Gray)—finds himself in a sticky situation yet again and relies on father and family to help him out. This time, a classmate named Dora Fenway (Susan Odin) has a blatant crush on Bud, much to Bud's disgust. Bud calls her "dumb Dora" and a "pest" when she calls him, trying to avoid a conversation with her.[53] Dora, of course, wears glasses and brings up the inevitable allusion to math and science when she demurely asks Bud if he had any trouble with his math equations.[54] Interestingly, very little about her physical appearance betrays her nerd status beyond the glasses (which Bud's little sister wants to try on), except perhaps for the fact that her dress (which Bud's older sister graciously tries to compliment) is a bit more flamboyant than those worn by the other ladies in the episode— a dress which Dora attests was made for her by her mother.

However, even though Dora is not necessarily painted as physically or stylistically unattractive, she is immediately rendered as unattractive nonetheless primarily due to her nerdy qualities. When asked if she is Bud's girlfriend, Bud reacts

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[51] For more on television in the 1950s, see Ella Taylor, *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Post War America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 17-41; and Mark Crispin Miller, "Prime Time: Deride and Conquer," in Todd Gitlin, ed., *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 183-228.

[52] Sumner Long and Dorothy Cooper, "Bud, the Ladykiller," *Father Knows Best*, season 2, episode 12, directed by William D. Russell, aired November 16, 1955 (Los Angeles, CA: Shout! Factory, 2008), DVD.

[53] Ibid.

[54] It is amazing to me how often, to confirm a mediated representation of the nerd stereotype, the first thing done with the exposition is to allude to science or math.

harshly, growling out, "Who said she's a girlfriend of mine? She isn't even a girl," to which his little sister innocently asks, "Is she a boy?"[55] Clearly, Dora's nerdy characteristics masculinize her, making her not just un-datable, but instantly repulsive.

While Bud's peers at school mock him because of Dora's infatuation, Bud's family takes a different approach regarding the shy, soft-spoken girl. When Dora comes to the Anderson home to—what else?—return a book to Bud, the whole family treats her like a proper houseguest except for Bud, who insults her and storms away. Due to Bud's rude outburst, dad has another one of his "little talks" with his son in order to teach him decency and how to act "like a man of honor."[56] In doing so, dad essentially manipulates Bud into asking Dora to the junior prom, much to Bud's begrudging chagrin.

When Bud eventually gets to see Dora at her home to ask her to the dance, he finds her with her butterfly collection, a classic nerd hobby. What's more, she tells him that she enjoys "etymology" (a big word that apparently stumps Bud) and rounds off a few fancy Latinate genuses and species.[57] Dora's association with science in this scene (and with math previously) emphasizes again how unattractive a date she would be, making it even more torturous for Bud to ask her to the prom. When he finally does, in her excitement, Dora gives him a kiss, that Bud reports back to the family, much to their dismay: clearly Dora has gone too far and Dad's plan has backfired (as his plans often do in the series). The Anderson family unit does a complete one-eighty and now needs to devise a way to get Dora to stop liking Bud. Dad's new plan is a psychological one, so he says, which involves finding a "substitute symbol" for her to dote on instead: another

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[55] "Bud, the Ladykiller," *Father Knows Best*.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Besides a few polysyllabic words, Dora also uses very crisp speech patterns and proper grammar throughout the episode, again signaling her status as a nerd.

boyfriend. Apparently, exhibiting manly honor is acceptable to a degree, but once the threat of their son seriously dating this girl rears its head, the relationship must be put to an end. By being the person taking the active initiative in pursuing Bud, and then initiating a kiss, Dora may not only be moving a bit too fast for the Andersons' tastes, but she also may be too aggressive, usurping the male's stereotypic role in the dating process.

At school, Bud uses guile to trick his buddies into thinking that Dora is a hot item, saying that "she's got a mind," and that she "knows every pitcher who threw a ball."[58] The boys are doubtful: how could a girl possibly know anything about baseball, a masculine pastime? When she passes by in the hallway, the boys test her, and much to their (and Bud's) surprise, she does indeed know Duke Snider's batting average. The boys are impressed, but none more so than a boy somewhat removed from the pack referred to as Horace, the clear nerd boy counterpart to Dora's nerd girl. While the others marvel at her baseball knowledge, Horace is instead more impressed with Dora's passion for etymology, rattling off his appreciation for her comprehension of the Linnaeus system of classification. As he does so, this short, dark-haired boy in horn-rimmed glasses and a bow tie receives bewildered looks from his classmates. Like Dora, Horace is portrayed as just plain odd.

By the end of the episode, the plan has worked: Dora releases Bud from his obligation to go to the junior prom, saying that she will be going with Horace instead—Horace, who apparently won a science medal for a research paper on Linnaeus and, as Dora describes, "is very intellectual, you know."[59] In a classic sitcom reversal, Bud is actually a bit sad to see her go, expressing a real desire to take her to the dance. But that

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[58] "Bud, the Ladykiller," *Father Knows Best*.
[59] Ibid.

said, the final twist of the episode and punch line of the entire plot is when Bud realizes, with horror, who his "substitute symbol" is: "that pipsqueak Horace!"[60]

While both Horace and Dora are meant to be chuckled at for being such oddballs throughout the show, the extended treatment of Dora in this episode demonstrates how associations with education, intellect, and science render a woman not only masculine and unattractive, but as essentially "un-dateable" (except to the rare other male nerd, perhaps).[61] And in an era with such pronounced pressure on women to marry young, where a woman's worth was measured primarily on the husband and home she tended, both pundits and pop culture warned against such intellectual associations for the fairer sex. For any nerdy women in the late 40s and 50s who might have wanted to buck this trend, the nascent nerd stereotype reminded them of the consequences for misperforming their gender.

African Americans and the Nerd Stereotype in Post-War America

The relationship between the nerd stereotype and the African American experience in the post-war period is decidedly different, albeit related to that of American white women and American Jews: women and Jews were, to varying degrees, assimilated into the nerd stereotype and often represented as nerds, whereas blacks were entirely

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[60] "Bud, the Ladykiller," *Father Knows Best*.

[61] As one might imagine, the gender politics of *Father Knows Best* continues in this vein throughout the series. In the sixth and final season, there are episodes that continue to teach young women the proper feminine way to behave. One rather disturbing example is "Kathy Becomes a Girl" (season 6, episode 9), where father and family essentially bully youngest daughter Kathy into giving up her tomboy ways, indoctrinating her into how to be girly and weak to entice boys—Judith Halberstam would have a field day with this one. Another example—and one very pertinent to the subject at hand—is "Betty's Career Problem" (season 6, episode 29), where older daughter Betty, a promising college student with career prospects, learns the oh-so-valuable lesson that a girl should never place a career before a husband. Competing for a job position with a young man who has always edged her out of top honors, Betty concedes the job to him in the end, realizing—while wearing a wedding dress for a fashion show no less— that her first and best career in the world is being a bride.

excluded both from stereotypical nerd representation and any sort of intellectuality that it may have represented.[62] If whiteness (and even "almost whiteness") is persistently constructed as intelligent and governed by reason, then according to the binary logic of racist, stereotypic thinking, blackness is associated with a lack of intelligence. In this fashion, the lack of popular black nerd performances in the late 40s and 50s (and onward through the 80s) can be interpreted as yet another, continuing manifestation of white America's fear of the intelligent, educated black person.[63] Instead, white America insisted on cultural performances—such as the performances of rock and roll musicians—that, in their minds, rendered blacks as stereotypically emotional, hypersexual, and unintelligent, further rendering them as antithetical to the nerd. In this fashion, the nerd stereotype performs its exclusionary dynamic primarily as a racial project to prevent associating blacks with intelligence.

Of course, in everyday life, there were many black individuals, young and old, male and female, that took pleasure in the life of the mind and the most basic nerd activities of rigorous study and reading, even in the late 40s/50s.[64] Douglas Daniels,

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[62] It should also be noted that educated, intellectual, and/or scientifically minded Native Americans and Hispanics were completely absent from thorough representation as well. Essentially, to be considered exceptionally smart, one had to be of a particular European decent—and even then many of the "newly white" ethnicities in the U.S. were associated with stupidity (see the stereotype of the Irish and the Polish, for example). And if an intelligent non-white individual came to the American public's attention, they represented, like the intelligent woman, an aberration as opposed to a trend. As for African American women more specifically, it is absolutely disturbing how infrequently they are represented as intelligent, let alone as possible nerds, even today. I would even argue that one of the first major films to prominently feature black female nerds just came out recently in 2016: *Hidden Figures*.

[63] The historic "danger" perceived by whites regarding an intellectual, educated "negro" has serious cultural roots, extending back to the days of slavery (slaves were not allowed to read) and Jim Crow. And any representations of intellectual blacks, nerdy or otherwise, would work directly against a white supremacist agenda. The educated black character Perry Hall from Molly Kazan's *The Egghead* (examined in chapter 1) is just one example of the stereotypical angry, politically radical, dangerous black intellectual. By the end of the play, he is revealed to be an insidious and manipulative black communist who connects the motive of his political betrayal to radical black politics and his racial oppression.

[64] Studiousness, intelligence, and the life of the mind is of course by no means a new dynamic within black life in the late 40s/50s. Even despite the institution of slavery in previous centuries—in which blacks were forbidden to educate themselves—they still did so. Then there are of course important intellectual figures

author of *Pioneer Urbanites* and a notable African American urban historian, reflecting

back on his own education in the 50s, relates: "I was the kind of student who was an

embarrassment to other students because I always did my homework, I always knew my

lessons, I worried about my studies, and I tried to be first."[65] Now a prominent

sociologist, William Russell Ellis, recalling how other black students had different values

during his days at Compton High in the post-war years, remembers:

> I learned in high school how to protect myself from some of the rougher aspects
> of life. I was weighing in at eighty-nine pounds. The potential of real pain kept
> me out of the urban male game. I didn't grin, so I wasn't in. I started bringing
> some attention to the school through my running track. That gave me some status,
> … but in the classroom there was always that standard tension that blacks have a
> monopoly on. If I pronounced the French words really well, or if the teacher paid
> attention to me, I'd have to pay verbal dues. And if I tried to fat-mouth back, I'd
> have to fight.[66]

And celebrated black writer Ishmael Reed relates: "Writing and reading were things I

enjoyed doing. I was a kind of loner. Nobody would choose me for their basketball

teams."[67] As William M. Banks states, "In schools where nonintellectual values held

sway, academically motivated black youths, like some of their white contemporaries,

frequently had to cope with the resentment of their peers."[68]

The post-war period also saw, thanks mainly to the brilliant and persistent legal

strategists of the NAACP, the slow but steady decline of racial barriers to education for

blacks in America, brought about partly by the GI Bill, which enabled thousands of

African American veterans to go to university, then partly by *Brown v. Board of*

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like Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, etc. What is of particular note here is how white
hegemonic culture has historically worked to erase such black intellectualism, and with a fervor inspired by
a deep fear of how threatening black intelligence is to white hegemony.
[65] Quoted in William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York:
W.W. Norton, 1996), 125. This and following quotations were all from interviews collected by Banks.
[66] Quoted in Banks, 126-7.
[67] Quoted in Banks, 127.
[68] Quoted in Banks, 126.

Education, which (in theory) desegregated public education. True, this was primarily a priority for the black middle-class as opposed to the black working class, but in general, black families had high hopes for the educational and occupational attainment of their children in the late 40s and early 50s, thanks mainly to HBCUs (white colleges and universities did not admit black students for much of this period).[69] Black undergraduate students, graduate students, scholars, and professionals were finally starting to appear with regularity and have a wide-spread impact: take, for example the 1947 publication of black scholar John Hope Franklin's academic text *From Slavery to Freedom: The Negro Experience in America*, which notably brought black scholarship to the attention of the mainstream.[70]

However, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the presence and increasing number of well-educated African Americans, nerd and non-nerd alike, educational opportunities were severely dampened by segregation and the clear fact that education was separate, but certainly not equal, especially in Southern schools, colleges, and universities.[71] Take as an example the dispersal of educational funding in 1945 Mississippi, where the state "spent 4 ½ times as much for each white student as for each black student."[72] Professional occupations available to educated blacks also remained greatly restricted.

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[69] See William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 118-43, for a general overview of black intellectual life in the post-war era. For more information on the black intelligentsia, also see Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

[70] Interestingly, the battle to desegregate educations in the U.S. began primarily with the issue of admitting black students to public graduate schools and professional schools back in the 30s, as black activists slowly began the legal battles to chip away at *Plessy v. Ferguson*. See Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980* (BasicBooks, 1983), 121-4.

[71] Also note the importance and overall treatment of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's) during this period.

[72] Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980* (BasicBooks, 1983), 121.

There was a need for Black teachers, social workers, doctors, and lawyers, of course, but this was mainly so they could serve their own segregated community. As Banks states,

> Other high-status careers remained essentially closed to blacks. Although the national economy was expanding and the labor market was becoming more diversified, discrimination limited the access of blacks to the merging occupations in scientific and technological fields. Forever conscious of their own need for financial security, intellectually ambitious blacks elected to pursue careers as teachers. A black mathematician could not count on being hired as a statistical analyst in private industry, but he or she could always get a job teaching mathematics at a black institution.[73]

This educational and occupational phenomenon speaks not only to the early paucity of notable black scientists, but also the lack of their wider representations. In her study of scientists who were the subject of biographies in the U.S. from 1910 to 1955, LaFollette found that "Only two biographies (1.6% of all the biographies of scientists) specifically identified a scientist as African-American; both of these articles appeared in the 1940s."[74] To the dominant white imagination, "black scientist" was almost a contradiction in terms. As for black intellectuals in a more general sense, Banks argues that many were engaging with integrationist thought and expression, but sadly "very little integration was occurring in the main institutions of American intellectual life," and overall, "African American intellectuals were nearly invisible to the wider public."[75]

So despite the fact that more and more young blacks were engaging in academic achievement, scientific fields, and intellectual pursuits from 1945 to 1957—and many of them suffering the same bullying by classmates as their white counterparts—the dominant white culture was essentially unaware of their existence. And on the rare

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[73] Banks, *Black Intellectuals*, 131-2.
[74] LaFollette, *Making Science Our Own*, 74. LaFollette also notes that there is only one biography of "an American scientist with an Asian surname," from 1915. It seems that the idea of a prominent Asian-American scientist, now a common connection in the American imagination, was essentially non-existent in the post-war era. See LaFollette, page 74, and her footnote 55 on page 215 for more on the biographical article.
[75] Banks, 134.

instances when such young intelligent blacks were noticed, they were seen as singular, extreme outliers. This obfuscation of black intelligence was likely a further extension of the white fear of the educated black person, but also a simple matter of experience: thanks to segregated schools, whites did not see on a day to day basis African Americans learning, studying, or even just exhibiting nerdy characteristics in a mixed social setting.

Then, when the U.S. Supreme Court ordered school desegregation with its landmark ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* in May of 1954, white Americans became very concerned with the education of black children: not necessarily with what they learned, but where they learned. Of the many reactions and ramifications of the *Brown* ruling and the desegregation of schools, one of the most prominent was how it stoked deep anxieties in many white Americans regarding their children and racial mixing.[76] Much of this anxiety lay in the fact that black boys and girls and white boys and girls would be in close proximity, particularly in a new "teenager-driven" environment that parents knew was obsessed with the relatively new fad of dating and going steady[77] without parental supervision.[78] As one newspaper editorial from Jackson, Mississippi bluntly stated the day after the *Brown* ruling was handed down, "White and Negro children in the same schools will lead to miscegenation. Miscegenation leads to

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[76] Another intriguing result of the desegregation of schools may be the controversial notion of "acting white." As Stuart Buck argues in his *Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation*, one possible result of desegregating schools was that, especially in the 60s, it inadvertently fostered the notion—particularly among black schoolchildren—that intelligent and academically successful black youths were essentially renouncing their blackness and trying to act white. According to Buck, the abuses suffered by black students at the hands of white teachers in segregated schools is at the root of misconceived notions that schooling (and being nerdy) is essentially white territory, a territory demarcated by the fear, abuse, intimidation and discouragement that these young black students were subject to, which turned school into a place of white terror. See Stuart Buck, *Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[77] "Dating, a ritual that first emerged in the 1920s, had become an integral part of the youth culture by the 1950s." May, *Homeward Bound*, 101.

[78] James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87-8.

mixed marriages and mixed marriages lead to mongrelization of the human race."[79] But perhaps President Eisenhower stated it even more clearly just before the Supreme Court's ruling when he said "All [Southern whites] are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in schools alongside some big overgrown Negroes."[80]

In many ways, the *Brown* ruling and the debates and backlash it inspired stoked many of the old black stereotypes in hegemonic white culture. What is of particular interest with regards to the nerd stereotype is how this racial discourse focused on 50s youth culture, placing young white schoolchildren in binary opposition to young black schoolchildren. In the minds of many white parents, their children (and their children's education) needed to be protected from degenerate black influence, an influence inflected by black stereotypes like the Buck, the Jezebel, and the juvenile delinquent.[81] Importantly, such stereotypes rely on the charges of primitivism, hypersexuality, aggression, and physical prowess, placing the black American in binary contrast to the nerd stereotype, which relies on opposing charges of overcivilization, hyposexuality, passivity, and mental prowess.[82]

Due to these deeply entrenched binary oppositions, we see how, in 1946, the NFL can welcome the first black players, and Jackie Robinson can break the color line in 1947—these sports are, after all, the realm of the physical. Yet when it comes to intellectual fields, we see much more reluctance in admitting, let alone celebrating, black

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[79] Editorial, "Bloodstains On White Marble Steps" *Daily News* (Jackson, Mississippi) May 18, 1954, quoted in Brown v. Board of Education*: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Waldo E. Martin Jr. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 204.
[80] Quoted in Patterson, 81.
[81] For more background on a few of these pernicious black stereotypes, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001); and Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 25-44.
[82] See the first chapter for more information.

persons. Take, for example the lack of acceptance—or even mass coverage—of black

professors "breaking the color line" during this period. As one example, take the

opposition to hiring black faculty at the University of Chicago in the late 40s voiced by

scholars Robert M. Hutchins and William Ogburn.[83] However, if there is one racially

charged cultural discourse from the post-war period that is of particular note regarding

the binary opposition of African American and nerd stereotypes, it is the popularity of a

particular form of "race music": rock and roll.

The rather sudden rise of rock and roll in the 50s tapped into a number of

important cultural conflicts occurring at the time, especially those involving perceptions

of blackness. Even when created (or covered, or even downright stolen) and performed

by white performers, rock and roll, like R&B, was considered "race music," the crass

product of base African American culture. And the real problem for many white adults

was that so many white teenagers enjoyed it. Mirroring the integration of the public

school system, many adults registered serious concerns at the amount of racial mixing

among teenagers at rock concerts and dances.

Some of the most extreme reactions against rock and roll, unsurprisingly, came

from Southern segregationists. Many of the White Citizens Councils that were formed to

oppose the integration of schools also actively protested against and even attacked rock

and roll and its black performers. One such White Citizens Council leader from Alabama

(and a member of the Ku Klux Klan) was quoted in a 1956 *Newsweek* article "White

Council vs. Rock and Roll" as saying that rock and roll and the other types of race music

were merely the "basic, heavy-beat music of the Negroes. It appeals to the base in man;

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[83] Meyer Weinberg, *A Chance to Learn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 288.

brings out animalism and vulgarity."[84] A White Citizens Council in New Orleans

circulated a notice that urged the public to "Help Save The Youth of America DON'T

BUY NEGRO RECORDS," stating that "The screaming, idiotic words, and savage music

of these records are undermining the morals of our white youth in America."[85] Clearly

much of the uproar over rock and roll relied on old racist stereotypes that associated both

stupidity and hypersexuality with African Americans—and one byproduct of these

associations was that it further situated blacks in opposition to the hyperintelligent and

hyposexual nerd stereotype.

Many critics of the day—mainly white adults—criticized the burgeoning musical

genre and its power over youth on the grounds that it promoted not only racial mixing but

also stimulated generational conflict, encouraged juvenile delinquency, fostered bad taste,

and endorsed rampant sexuality. As post-war parents emphasized their own roles in

child-rearing, control, and containment, a younger generation of "teenagers" (a new term

at the time)[86] began to emerge, the teenager becoming an unsettling new identity.[87] Often

anxious about this new and powerful youth culture, parents and cultural critics alike

noted that, with the new rock and roll music, "Teenism reached its climax, or its nadir,"

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[84] "White Council vs. Rock and Roll," *Newsweek*, April 23, 1956, 32, quoted in Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'N' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38. The leader, Asa Carter, was also featured in *The New York Times* on the same topic: See "Segregationist Wants Ban on Rock and Roll," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1956, 39. For more on this topic, see Altschuler, 37-9.

[85] "White Citizen's Council Notice," in Brown v. Board of Education*: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Waldo E. Martin Jr. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 222. It is noted that this picture of the notice is courtesy of Professor William Moore, College of Charleston.

[86] For more on how "adolescents" evolved into "teenagers," see Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

[87] For more information on the cultural implications of rock and roll and race music, also see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); and Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988).

as a means to defy their parents and resist adult authority.[88] Many adults were worried at

how quickly, thoroughly, and viscerally rock and roll dominated their children's lives,

and fretted over what effects the music—and therefore African Americans—might be

having on American youth.[89] In this way, rock and roll discourse situated itself as a

potential site of supposed teenage rebellion against the older generation. And as the nerd

stereotype emphasizes passivity and an obsequious deference to authority, this sort of

black inspired rebelliousness perceived in rock and roll stands as a stark contrast between

the two constructs.

One primary concern was that rock and roll represented the worst of low, popular

culture, and did not embody the intellectual, artistic, and mature aspirations of "better"

music, namely those genres that tried to represent themselves as high culture.[90] In short,

many proponents of high culture (especially those invested financially in its success)

argued that this form of black music was inherently vapid and promoted stupidity and a

lack of proper taste. During a Senate subcommittee hearing on the Smathers bill, for

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[88] Dwight Macdonald, "A Caste, a Culture, a Market—I," *New Yorker*, November 22, 1958, 57, quoted in Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'N' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99. The 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* (that features the popular rock and roll anthem "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets), capitalizes on this anxiety over juvenile delinquents, teenagers, and rock and roll, as well as the difficulties in educating young people. In particular, the scene where the students revolt against their teacher's old-fashioned jazz records seemed to embody the parental fear that their children, thanks to this new music, might become communists, delinquents, or just erupt into anarchy. There is also a particular irony here, considering that jazz music was once demonized as black music much in the same way that rock and roll was.

[89] For more on youth culture of the period, see Harrison Salisbury, *The Shook-Up Generation* (New York: Harper, 1958); Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

[90] This subtle form of elitism that debased rock and roll, argued on intellectual and aesthetic grounds, played an important role in the legal battles between ASCAP and BMI in the 50s, the Smathers bill, and the later payola scandals in the late 50s. Essentially, a line was being drawn between the "good" music that the adults preferred (symphonic, operatic, choral, Tin Pan Alley, musicals, etc.) and the "vulgar" forms (R&B, bebop, rock and roll, etc.) that had ensnared the hearts of minds of America's youth not through artistic quality, but through the manipulative business practices of indie producers and radio disc jockeys. For more on the conflict between ASCAP and BMI, the Smathers bill, and the payola scandal, see Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'N' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131-60.

example, Vance Packard—author of the 1957 bestseller *The Hidden Persuaders* and essentially the star witness against rock and roll—made it a point to emphasize how simple the style was to compose, pointing out that "Peggy Sue" only had nineteen short lines where the girl's name is repeated eighteen times, and that "Hound Dog" was essentially crudely made up on the spot right before recording.[91] Tastemakers could point to lyrics (or "leerics," as they like to call them) like Little Richard's "A-wop-bom-a-loo-mop-a-lomp-bom-bom" from "Tutti Frutti" (1955), and decry the utter lack of reason and intelligence in rock and roll.[92] And this perceived lack of taste and intelligence that the dominant culture associated with such race music was symptomatic with the overall dismissal of black intelligence. It also served to distance the nerd stereotype from both rock and roll and blackness.[93]

Another primary concern was that rock and roll, in a very un-nerdy fashion, was sexualizing teenagers, encouraging them to indulge in the pleasures of the body in a base manner imbricated with blackness. Despite the efforts of campaigns to clean up smutty music in the mid-50s and the squeaky clean (and white) iconography of Pat Boone and Dick Clark's highly sanitized *American Bandstand*, rock and roll (like other forms of "race music" such as R&B) was widely believed to promote sexuality in youth, pre-

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[91] Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 137.

[92] Apparently (at least according to Wikipedia) Elvis popularized the more familiar version of the lyric with his 1956 cover of the song, "A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-lop-bam-boom." I thought I would point out the subtle difference just in case it somehow changes the deeper meaning of the phrase. "Tutti Frutti (song)," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutti_Frutti_(song)#cite_note-20 (accessed July 24, 2015).

[93] It seems like for much of the early life of the nerd stereotype, nerds are marked as uncool by their lack of appreciation of popular music, much like the older "long-hair" stereotype. Interestingly, though, a small subgenre of music loosely known as either "geek rock" or "nerd rock" arose in later decades. For more on geek rock and the relationship of nerds to popular music, see Alex DiBlasi and Victoria Willis, eds., *Geek Rock: An Exploration of Music and Subculture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

marital sex, and teen pregnancy.[94] From the hegemonic white perspective, a black art

form such as rock and roll inherently reflected the hypersexuality of its creators, and

hence was a destructive force on white American youth. This sort of black hypersexuality

perceived in rock and roll also further opposed the nerd stereotype.

It is also worth pointing out the important relationship of music like rock and roll

and youth culture's appropriation of black forms. With the exceptional popularity of

black music and performers with many white youth in the 50s, we see one of the first

major examples of what is "cool." Similar to the Beats and Mailer's "White Negro"

youth culture begins at this time to divide things like music and movies into what is cool

or hip, and what is square.[95] For American youth, black or white, male or female, to

enjoy rock and roll usually made one "cooler," whereas if you listened to "uncool" music

(namely your parents' old-fashioned stuff), it put you squarely in nerd territory. A healthy

touch of (black-infused) rebellion against your parents' stifling conformity made you hip,

whereas your peer who over-conformed, who did everything their parents and their

teachers told them (like their homework), was a square. More and more, cultural products

like genres of music and movies and after-school activities would be used within

American youth culture to determine one's coolness factor, and it is important to note

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[94] From its roots with R&B "shouters" and the intense and loud electric guitar, rock and roll was intimately connected to the physical body; from bluesman Aaron "T-Bone" Walker's splits to Jerry Lee Lewis banging away at the piano, to even Elvis's infamous gyrating hips—it was clear that rock and roll was a decidedly physical music. What was worse, in the eyes of the moralizing adults, was that it often inspired screaming boys and girls to do the same. As *Ebony* magazine reported on the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" Fats Domino, when he performed, "pandemonium erupts. Teen-agers shriek and contort their bodies; their limbs jerk in spastic rhythms; their eyes roll." "King of Rock 'n' Roll: Fats Domino Hailed as New Idol of Teen-agers," *Ebony* 12, no. 4, February 1957, 26, quoted in Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 43.
[95] See chapter 1 for more on the Beats and Mailer's "White Negro."

that those cultural objects associated with blackness tended more towards coolness, whereas whiteness tended more towards squareness.[96]

Of course, these various reactions to the rise of "race music" like rock and roll are but one small manifestation of how white America has long denigrated black intellect, a phenomenon that sadly has a lengthy history in this nation. That said, the discourse surrounding rock and roll in the particular context of the late 40s and 50s suggests a specifically new, problematic relationship between race and youth culture, between what is "cool" and what is "nerdy." True, this discourse often relied on age-old fears of a black hypersexuality that was seen as primal, hyperemotional, and incapable of intelligence or reason. But it also fostered—for a certain segment of white youth, anyway—the notion that a bit of blackness made you rebellious and hip and sexually attractive, and that being too white (or hyperwhite) made you passive, uncool, and unattractive—namely, a nerd.[97] And problematic though this cultural construct may be, it only bolstered the dual notions that intelligence (in strict moderation) was for whites, and grossly inappropriate for blacks. So despite the fact that black men and women were fighting for better professional employment and taking advantage of better educational opportunities, even to the point of desegregating the American educational system, the larger cultural discourse of the white hegemony could not admit that blacks might, possibly, be nerds as well.

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[96] For two texts that examine the linkage between blackness and coolness—especially as manifested in the late 40s and 50s—see Lewis MacAdams, *The Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant-garde* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); and John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Ecco, 2004).
[97] For more on the notion of "hyperwhiteness" and its relationship to the nerd stereotype (as well as the nerd identity), see Mary Bucholtz, *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 139-63.

Gay Men and the Nerd Stereotype in Post-War America

If popular misconceptions regarding black sexuality as hyper-heterosexuality

served in part to exclude African Americans from popular nerd performance, one may

rightly surmise that misconceived correlations between homosexuals and failed

masculinity also influenced public imaginings of the nerd stereotype.[98] As two

configurations of a failed, feminized masculinity, the nerd stereotype and the gay male

stereotype share many key characteristics. And indeed, it is an interesting parallel that the

nerd stereotype was emerging in popular U.S. culture at approximately the same time that

homosexuality was increasingly permeating the broader cultural discourse. For although

the 40s and the 50s are rightly remembered as a decade of pronounced repression and

discrimination for queer individuals, it was also a time when homosexuality (and

sexuality more generally) became more visible to the American public. This greater

visibility in U.S. culture can be traced in part to the publication of the Kinsey Reports,

and (ironically) the slanderous gay-baiting of the McCarthyite-driven Lavender Scare

itself.[99] Suddenly, American people were talking about Gore Vidal's _The City and the_

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[98] Although there are many important similarities between the sissy stereotype that I address in chapter 1 and homosexuality more generally, I have made it a point to separate the two to better parse out the arguments. Part of the difficulty lies in the term "sissy," which has alternatively been used as a slander to deride effeminate males (quite often straight), and as a sort of in-group term in the gay community to describe a feminine gay male. In the first chapter, I use the term primarily to describe the former, namely looking at a straight male who is being accused of effeminacy and/or homosexuality. In this chapter, I attempt to look more specifically at homosexuality more directly. That said, the overlap between these two terms suggests that these should be looked at in tandem, so please refer to the first chapter for more related information on this subject.

[99] See K.A. Cuordileone, _Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War_ (London: Routledge, 2005), 71. For more on the public's reaction to the best-selling Kinsey Reports, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, _Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America_ (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 239-300. For more information on the Lavender Scare and how McCarthyites used hints of homosexuality for political gain, see Daniel Bell, ed., _The Radical Right: The New American Right, Expanded and Updated_ (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 119; Richard Hofstadter, _The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays_ (New York: Knopf, 1965); Richard Hofstadter, _Anti-Intellectualism in American Life_ (New York: Random House, 1962), 41; Michael Paul Rogin, _The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter_ (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967); and David K. Johnson, _The Lavender_

Pillar (1948), the burgeoning homophile movement (the Mattachine Society founded in 1950, ONE, Inc. in 1952, and the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955) and even Christine Jorgensen, the first well-known recipient of a sex-change operation.[100] They may have been whispering, but people were still talking about this "new" issue of homosexuality in America.[101] In turn, then, the overdetermined performance of hegemonic heterosexuality became an integral part of the culture, which also fostered the burgeoning nerd stereotype and its heteronormative dynamic.

One of the downsides of the increasing visibility of homosexuality was the hegemonic culture's need for sexual containment through the profoundly negative ascriptions of homosexual stereotypes in American popular culture. The dominant image of the gay male, for example, increasingly became that of "an oversexed, insatiable, preying sex-deviant."[102] This sort of homophobia was nothing new in American culture, of course, but it took on a new urgency and edge in the post-war period. To begin, whether real or imagined, the popular perception from various authorities of the day was that homosexuality was drastically on the rise, becoming an epidemic of disastrous,

Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[100] Even noted public intellectual Arthur Schlesinger Jr. weighed in on the topic, suggesting that the so-called rise of homosexuality and Jorgensen's operation were indications that this was "an age of sexual ambiguity" in which masculinity was—as it always seems to be—in crisis. See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Crisis of American Masculinity," *Esquire* (November 1958), 63-5; this article is also in his *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 237-46.

[101] For general information on the homophile movement and gay and lesbian politics during this period, see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of the Homosexual Minority, 1940-1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983); John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990); and Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[102] Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 70. Note too that lesbians were also subject to the same notoriety and discrimination, but the popular culture of the time was particularly obsessed with the image of the gay male. The reasons for this are many, of course, but it should also be pointed out that it also indicates an acute, anxious obsession with male sexuality and masculinity. As such, I will be focusing primarily on gay males here, although one could easily (and should) examine lesbian nerds during this period.

panic-inducing proportions. Furthermore, there was the growing belief that homosexuals were not just "accidents of nature"/biological aberrations, but men who had failed at performing their masculinity properly; that homosexuality was more the "fault" of nurture rather than nature. This new paradigm, fostered by psychologists like Abram Kardiner (who coined the phrase "flight from masculinity" as a cause for male homosexuality), Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, and Lionel Ovesey, found the cause for homosexuality in external sociological factors.[103] And although Kinsey's findings did not confirm any of this at all, his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) did portray an unexpectedly high rate of same-sex male attraction, as well as suggesting that homosexuals often seemed just like straight people, and often passed as such every day.[104] This emphasis on a failed masculinity hidden among seemingly average joes brought the nerd stereotype even more in line with the gay male stereotype.

Kinsey's work not only, as Cuordileone suggests, "raised the possibility that there were more male homosexuals than previously thought," but it also "may have unintentionally encouraged the idea that many outwardly heterosexual males could in fact be invisible or latent ('experimental') homosexuals, potentially en route to a homosexual life."[105] In fostering this misperception that negative sociological factors could turn one into a homosexual and that even your seemingly straight suburban neighbor might just be passing as straight, it is perhaps no wonder, then, how easily McCarthy and his cronies could link subversive communists with subversive homosexuals. This also fostered the

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[103] For a general overview of this sociological perception of homosexuality, see K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 145-52. Also see Abram Kardiner, *Sex and Morality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954); Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, *The Problem of Homosexuality in Modern Society* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963); and Lionel Ovesey, "The Homosexual Conflict: An Adaptational Analysis," *Psychiatry* 17 (August 1954): 243-50.

[104] Alfred C. Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1948), 650-1.

[105] Alfred C. Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, 151.

notion, discussed previously in chapter 1, that unless children grew up in a "proper"

environment, they might become sissies, which was seen as the inevitable gateway to

homosexuality. As such, regulating male behaviors to appear more masculine took on

special emphasis during this time period in order to avoid charges of homosexuality—a

phenomenon with clear resonances with the nerd stereotype, particularly in terms of

immorality and, most importantly, intelligence.

As panic rose in American popular culture regarding homosexuality, so did

homosexuality's association with neurosis, depravity, perversion, and immorality. For

example, McCarthy's witch-hunt coincided with the post-war "sex crime panic," a

national moral panic over sex crimes like rape and pedophilia. Although there was no

substantial evidence of a rise of such crimes, sensational stories abounded in the media,

many of which portrayed gay men as murderous sexual psychopaths and violent

pedophiles. One example of this phenomenon was the 1955 moral panic in Boise,

Idaho—commonly referred to as the "boys from Boise" scandal—where a witch-hunt for

child-molesting homosexuals created a national stir despite the fact that no children were

actually taken advantage of. Through such negative depictions in the popular media, the

figure of the homosexual—the gay man, in particular—took on pronounced associations

with criminality and immorality.[106]

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[106] For more information on the "sex crime panics" both before and after WWII, see Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 83-106; George Chauncey, "The Post-war Sex Crime Panic," in *True Stories from the American Past Vol. 1*, ed. William Graebner (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 160-78; Stephen Robertson, "Separating the Men from the Boys: Masculinity, Psychosexual Development, and Sex Crime in the United States, 1930s-1960s," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 56 (2001): 3-35; Daniel Hurewitz, "Goody-Goodies, Sissies, and Long-Hairs: The Dangerous Figures on 1930s Los Angeles Political Culture," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 1 (November 2006): 26-50; Barbara Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.," *Critical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (1994): 21-44; and Neil Miller, *Sex-Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002). For more on the "boys from Boise" scandal in particular, also see

Equated with communists and pedophiles, then, and seen as immoral and lacking in willpower, homosexuals were also curiously associated with intelligence. The mass media, particularly the popular scandal magazines of the day, drew strong connections between communists, homosexuals, and hyperintelligence, promoting a damaging and stereotypic view of the gay male, especially. Of the gay stereotype, Barbara Epstein writes that "Homosexuals, like Communists, were likely to be intelligent and intellectually or creatively oriented, they were likely to think of themselves as better than other people. They were likely to be found in some of the same places (Harvard, Greenwich Village, and the State Department)."[107] In part, this connection between homosexuality and intelligence was fostered by the supporters of McCarthy for political gain, namely to attack the left wing and the New Dealers. In their 1955 essay on the topic, Nathan Glazer and David Riesman drew attention to this linkage. "How powerful," write Glazer and Riesman, "is the political consequence of combining the image of the homosexual with the image of the intellectual—the State Department cooky-pusher Harvard-trained sissy thus becomes the focus of social hatred and the Jew becomes merely one variant of the intellectual sissy—actually less important than the eastern-educated snob!"[108] In this post-war period, the sissy, the Jew, the intellectual and the homosexual all became intimately intertwined with each other as well as the nerd stereotype, and not for noble reasons.

John Gerassi, *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); and Jen Schneider, "Queer Wordplay: Language and Laughter in the 'Boys of Boise' Morals Panic," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 4 (December 2008): 466-87.
[107] Barbara Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.," *Critical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (1994), 33.
[108] David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes," in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell (New York: Anchor Books, 1955), 119, quoted in K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 69. Interestingly, Riesman and Glazer also note on the same page, albeit debatably, that "homosexuality becomes a much more feared enemy than the Negro" in this period.

The image of the gay male as evil, seductive, aristocratic, psychopathic, and even violently murderous that arose in the late 40s add 50s, unlike the much older stereotype of the hyperfeminine fairy, also attributed to him a cold, calculating, and amoral intelligence, further linking homosexuality with the nerd.[109] One of the most intriguing cinematic portrayals of this stereotype comes from none other than famed director Alfred Hitchcock. While many of Hitchcock's films were able, despite the Production codes, to covertly touch upon homosexuality—examples include such movies as *North by Northwest* and *Strangers on a Train*—the 1948 film *Rope* serves as an especially pertinent example of the amoral homosexual male as intellectual.[110] And in *Rope*, we find a peculiar but pertinent type of stereotypical nerd: the elitist gay intellectual aesthete.

In the movie, it is never overtly stated that the roommates and old prep school chums Philip (Farley Granger) and Brandon (John Dall) are gay lovers, but the relationship is understood nonetheless. The film begins with the pair murdering their friend David, placing his body inside a chest, and then throwing a little party to celebrate their crime. As if this were not devious enough, they have invited David's friend Kenneth, David's fiancée Janet, as well as David's parents, although only his father, Mr. Kentley, and aunt, Mrs. Atwater, are actually able to attend. The murderous duo also decides, on a playful whim, to serve the food for the party on the very chest in which David's corpse is stashed. They are aristocratic, cold, ruthless, calculating, and utterly amoral, especially the character of Brandon, the forceful leader of the pair, whereas

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[109] It may seem odd today, connecting immorality and the sociopath with the nerd stereotype, which is so often performed as goofy and benign. But such was the anti-intellectualism of this period that "evil" and "intelligence" often went hand in hand, as also demonstrated by the mad scientist characterization discussed in chapter 1 and, as briefly mentioned in chapter 8, yellow peril. One could argue that the number of evil variations of the nerd stereotype from this first phase betray just how strong the anti-intellectualism was at the time.

[110] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 94.

Philip tends more towards the enraptured sycophant caught up in Brandon's seduction.[111] Shortly after the murder, Philip tells Brandon that he is terrified by him, but confesses that this terrifying trait is "part of your charm, I suppose."[112] Then they indulge in a bit of champagne (see Figure 2 in the Appendix).

What is key to the film is the motivation for their murder, or rather, the lack thereof. These young, handsome, well-educated gay men, believing that they are intellectually and morally superior to "the ordinary man" (betraying the sort of elitist intelligence attributed to the nerd stereotype) conclude that they are therefore justified in killing whomever they please, treating murder like an "an art."[113] Philip and Brandon have learned this particular philosophy from their brilliant prep school housemaster, Rupert Cadell (James Stewart), who has also been invited to attend the party.[114] Through Rupert's intellectual cogitations—he reasons that "murder is a crime for the masses, a privilege for the elite," and even makes a learned reference to Nietzsche—Philip and Brandon come to the most unnatural and ghastly conclusions.[115]

If the murderous pair's unnatural education in philosophy and hyperintelligence has robbed them of their humanity and led them to be depraved homosexuals and psychopaths, the average intelligence—even stupidity—of the other characters, in contrast, make them all the more normal. As Kristin L. Matthews confirms, "Kenneth calls himself 'stupid' and claims 'I'm not very smart'; Mr. Kentley is referred to as 'dull';

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[111] While it is somewhat debatable just how much the film was influenced by the much-publicized Leopold and Loeb murder from 1924, many American audience members likely drew the comparison in 1947. The film is based on the British play of the same title by Patrick Hamilton, which was first produced on the West End in 1929.

[112] *Rope*, Blu-ray Disc, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1948; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2013).

[113] Ibid.

[114] It is interesting to note the anxious association with homosexuality with boys' prep schools during this period, which is subtle here in *Rope*, and more blatant in *Tea and Sympathy*.

[115] *Rope*.

Janet calls herself a 'dumb girl'; Mrs. Atwater states that she used to read when she was a

girl but no longer does so."[116] To be of an average, humble intelligence is to be situated

in the vital center, as it were, whereas the intelligence represented by Brandon, Philip,

and even Rupert is dangerously extreme.[117]

At the end of the film Rupert cottons on and confronts the pair. Before he alerts

the authorities, he gives an only semi-convincing speech to condemn their actions and

excuse himself from culpability.[118] While perhaps a bit tacked on and moralizing, the

speech is rather revealing:

> Brandon, Brandon, until this very moment, this world and the people in it have
> always been dark and incomprehensible to me, and I've tried to clear my way
> with logic and superior intellect. […] But you've given my words a meaning that
> I never dreamed of. And you've tried to twist them into a cold logical excuse for
> your ugly murder. […] There must have been something deep inside you from the
> very start that let you do this thing. […] I mean that tonight you've made me
> ashamed of every concept I've ever had of superior or inferior beings, and I thank
> you for that shame.[119]

The speech is easily read as both an indictment of "superior intellect" gone too far and, as

D. A. Miller posits, "an attempt to quarantine the pandemic of homosexual

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[116] Kristin L. Matthews, "Reading, Guidance, and Cold War Consensus in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43, no. 4 (2010): 747.

[117] It could be argued that Mrs. Atwater personifies the other extreme, of being too dull and unintelligent. She is painted as a bit of a clown and fool for comedic purposes in the film, unable to recall the names of movies and musicals she has seen, and a dabbler in the very unscientific field of astrology. She is often the butt of Brandon's and even Rupert's jokes, which highlights the contrast. When she says she no longer reads, for example, Brandon cruelly quips to her "We all do strange things in our childhood." Even with regards to the cinematography, the way Rupert and Mrs. Atwater are seated next to one another on the sofa and framed by the camera during the scene where Rupert pontificates his philosophy places them in further disparity. At the very least, though, Mrs. Atwater especially helps to underscore the hyperintelligence of Rupert, Brandon, and Philip.

[118] For an astute reading of how James Stewart's iconography (that of an intelligent and charming, albeit tortured man wrestling with the crisis of his masculinity through masochism) contributes to *Rope*, see Amy Lawrence, "American Shame: *Rope*, James Stewart, and the Postwar Crisis in American Masculinity," in *Hitchcock's America*, ed. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55-76.

[119] *Rope*.

signification."[120] The intelligence and ideas that Cadell imparted on the pair may have

been the real murder weapon, more so than the actual rope itself, but it is also that dirty

unspoken something "deep inside" of Brandon that makes him an amoral monster. As

Donald Spoto rightly suggests of the film, "The possibility of sterile bookishness leading

to depravity is not, therefore, merely *Rope*'s subtext; it is the major concern."[121]

Overall, the film plays upon the well-established tropes of anti-intellectualism and

aristocratic elitism, but by further connecting them with the insidious lack of morality and

the figure of the homosexual male, *Rope* constructs, or rather relies upon, a particularly

pernicious stereotype.[122] Disturbing characters like Brandon and Philip, and even Rupert

to a degree, had, according to Russo, "their roots in the same anti-intellectualism and

mistrust of difference that had characterized the shaping of Hollywood's image of the

normal American man."[123] And while these Hollywood characters are only one small

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[120] D. A. Miller, Anal *Rope*, in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 126.

[121] Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of his Motion Pictures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 170.

[122] For more on *Rope*, Hitchcock, homosexuality, and other pertinent topics, see the previously cited works by Kristin L. Matthews, "Reading, Guidance, and Cold War Consensus in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43, no. 4 (2010): 738-60; Amy Lawrence, "American Shame: *Rope*, James Stewart, and the Postwar Crisis in American Masculinity," in *Hitchcock's America*, ed. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55-76; D. A. Miller, Anal *Rope*, in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 119-41; and Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of his Motion Pictures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 165-72; as well as Paula Marantz Cohen, "Hitchcock's Revised American Vision: *The Wrong Man* and *Vertigo*," in *Hitchcock's America*, ed. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155-72; Robert J. Corber, "Hitchcock's Washington: Spectatorship, Ideology, and the 'Homosexual Menace' in *Strangers on a Train*," in *Hitchcock's America*, ed. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99-121; Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Robert G. Goulet, "Life with(out) Father: The Ideological Masculine in *Rope* and Other Hitchcock Films," in *Hitchcock's Rereleased Films: From Rope to Vertigo*, ed. Walter Raubicheck and Walter Srebnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 240-52; Thomas Hemmeter, "Twisted Writing: *Rope* as an Experimental Film," in *Hitchcock's Rereleased Films: From Rope to Vertigo*, ed. Walter Raubicheck and Walter Srebnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 253-66; Thomas M. Leitch, "It's the Cold War, Stupid: An Obvious History of the Political Hitchcock," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1999): 3-15; and Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967).

[123] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 94-6.

variation on the nerd stereotype, the gay stereotype they do represent contributed to the larger discourse of the post-war era the notion that there was a sinister linkage between intelligence and perversion. And given both its heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics, this linkage may well be one of the most crucial pillars of the nerd stereotype.

Some Final Thoughts on the Nerd in Post-War America

In both this and the previous chapter, a number of related cultural discourses from post-war American culture have been examined in order to establish the multifaceted ideological foundation of, and influences on, the nerd stereotype. In many ways, the period extending from 1945 to 1957 marks the first, formative phase of the stereotype, where not only all of the ideological threads were being interwoven, but together with them also the visual image of the nerd and the very term "nerd" as well. Before this period, forerunners of the nerd did exist: there have long been people who love to read, fans of various entertainments, intellectuals, or hard-working students who excel at their studies. However, this rather exceptional period in American history saw a number of vitally important discourses that made the nerd into something unique, discourses that included: an anxious debasement of theoretical or "pure" science; a politically charged and extreme anti-intellectualism that shunned critical thinking and social critique; the rise of desegregated public schools and college attendance; the advancement of the research university; a shift into a postindustrial, highly corporatized economy; a pronounced cultural emphasis on conformity and domestic containment; the various familial relationships encompassed in the so-called nuclear family; the ascendance of youth culture; and peculiar institutional and cultural constructs to exclude women, Jews, blacks, and homosexuals from power as well as white men who did not perform their white

masculinity properly. It is this historical era and its cultural discourses to which the nerd stereotype primarily owes its purpose, politics, and parameters.

This ideological makeup of the nerd is perhaps best understood in light of other stereotypes of the day. The nerd is much like the mad scientist, the left-leaning intellectual, and the square: a little too queer and Jewish for comfort. Importantly, the nerd is essentially the son of the egghead, the latter being the older more political father figure, the former being the white male son he was doomed to fail at bringing up properly. The nerd is not cool or hip like the rebellious Beats, the rock and roll playing blacks, or even the redeemable juvenile delinquent with a heart of gold. No, the male nerd is rather an irredeemable sissy, someone that is too intelligent, too obsequious, too elitist, and frankly too white—so much so that they misperform their masculinity, or in the case of the female nerd, their femininity.

And so in the constant hegemonic struggle to consolidate power, in the war over *who* gets to be "smart," *how* "smart" they get to be, and *what* they get to be "smart" about, the nerd stereotype came into being.

Part II: 1957 - 1969

Chapter 3: Nerds in Space! (and on Computers!): Science, Technology, and Intelligence in the Late 50s & 60s

Calling All Nerds: Sputnik and American Brainpower

If the dropping of the bomb in 1945 roughly initiates the phase when the cultural threads of the nerd stereotype proliferated and compounded, then perhaps the launch of *Sputnik I* in 1957 roughly marks the transition into the second phase: 1957-1969. On October 4th, 1957, the Soviets successfully launched the *Sputnik I* satellite into outer space, much to the dismay of the American public. Not only did the launch capture the imagination of the American people, it also was an important first step towards the Cold War space race and all that it entailed, including cultural shifts in the perception of science, education, and intelligence. Accordingly, the nerd stereotype undergoes subtle, yet crucial shifts as well.

The most important change that occurs for the stereotype, generally speaking, is that nerdy characters begin to shift to the fore in American mass media. Usually relegated to the background in the late 40s and 50s (like Dilton Doiley and Dora, they are generally more "one-shot" or tertiary characters receiving minimal treatment), nerds start becoming somewhat more prominent but also somewhat more plentiful in various performances. During the second phase, we begin to see a few supporting (secondary) nerd characters, nerd sidekicks, and even the occasional nerd protagonist—the most famous of these likely being Jerry Lewis's Professor Kelp from *The Nutty Professor* (1963), who is examined in the next chapter. On one hand, I would argue that this slight increase in representation—some of which even attempted to be "positive"—reflects a slight redemption of intelligence in American culture during this post-McCarthy period (although, of course, anti-intellectualism remains the dominant mode in U.S. culture). Yet

on the other hand, I would also argue that these performance representations of nerds still betrayed the same deep-seated anxieties in the American public that had been established in the first phase, albeit in slightly adjusted ways. Intelligence may have become a somewhat more laudable quality in the late 50s/60s than it had been in the previous phase of the nerd stereotype, but who was allowed to possess this intelligence? How were these hyperintelligent nerds to be put to work for existing hegemonic systems? And how might white men, for example, "reconcile" the new need for intelligence with charges of failed masculinity? So despite subtle changes in the performance of the nerd stereotype that adapted it to its immediate cultural moment, the hegemonic and exclusionary dynamics remained. Still, those subtle changes reflect important cultural trends, reinforcing those dynamics in new ways, as well as adding new variations on the nerd stereotype.

Accordingly, two major trends dominate the second phase of the nerd stereotype. The first trend is how certain types of nerds were rendered "tolerable" if they and their intelligence were found to be "useful" or "practical." As long as nerds were working in service to the pre-existing hegemony, did not upset the status quo, and remained in a supportive secondary/sidekick role, they would be tolerated. While this trend quite often applies to nerds of any phase, as we shall see, it took on particular significance during the late 50s and 60s. The second, related trend is how intelligence, now desperately needed, was problematically "reconciled" with white masculinity. While the nerd was still considered to be a sort of failed masculinity, new models were needed alongside the nerd to allow for the possibility of a new type of masculine intelligence. These two cultural trends in turn subtly influenced the various performances of the nerd stereotype throughout American popular culture in the late 50s/60s. The first trend—that of the

useful, tolerable nerd—is the subject of this chapter, whereas the highly problematic attempts to reconcile intelligence with white masculinity are explored in the next chapter.

As previously examined, the stereotypical nerd in the first phase was usually construed as a sexual, gender failure, an intolerable and potentially dangerous figure. Now in the second phase, it seems that certain nerds (still sexual, gender failures) would be tolerated by the society at large if their brainpower was pressed into useful service for the greater good. Two broad fields of science-related discourses exemplify this sort of tolerable nerd during the late 50s/60s: the exploration of outer space and the burgeoning field of computing. This chapter focuses on these two science-related subjects, subjects that stereotypical nerds tend to adore (associations, I argue, that were greatly fostered during the period in question.) Specifically, this era cultivates imagery around two important nerdy personas: the first being what I loosely refer to as "the NASA nerd," and the second the nerdy computer programmer. Both the NASA nerd and the nerdy computer programmer, as we shall see, help to further reveal anxieties in the American public with regards to the possession of hyperintelligence, while also revealing how hyperintelligence is continuously perceived as a feminizing threat to white masculinity.

Intelligence Redeemed or Refuted?: The Quiz Show Scandals

Before examining the nerd stereotype and its associations with the subjects of space and computers, a deeper understanding of how intelligence was partially, yet problematically redeemed during the late 50s/60s is needed. After all, just because a man was put on the moon does not mean that anti-intellectualism had been fully rooted out of the culture. Rather, I would argue, this pendulum swing out of the pronounced anti-intellectualism of the McCarthy era and towards the "best and the brightest" of the JFK

era was primarily a shift in the discourse of practicality.[1] In short, as intelligence and

scientific know-how shifted from being highly suspect to highly useful (especially in the

terms of nationalism and capitalism), performing braininess experienced a slight recovery

in the broader culture. Paradoxically, the cultural process of making intelligence

"practical," as Richard Hofstadter suggests, is an inherently anti-intellectual

phenomenon—the process glorifies intelligence, true, but primarily when it is in service

to power (most especially capitalist power).[2] So on the surface we find that intelligence is

somewhat redeemed, yet beneath the surface, much anti-intellectual sentiment persists

through the guise of supposed "practicality."[3] Therefore, even though a certain type of

intelligence is partially redeemed in this era, the nerd stereotype persists, tempered

slightly by the fact that nerds had become useful and practical.

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[1] There are many cultural indicators of this brief recuperation of intelligence in American culture, some of which will be touched upon throughout this chapter and the next. However, the most poignant indication that McCarthy era anti-intellectualism was in a state of decline in the late 50s and early 60s was likely the 1962 publication of Hofstader's Pulitzer Prize winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Very much a polemic against anti-intellectualism, especially the anti-intellectualism of the previous decade, the fact that this book could be published and become so popular in the early 60s attests to the general recuperation of intelligence in American culture.

[2] As Edward Said reminds us, intellectuals by definition should not cater to power, but rather speak truth to power. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[3] While I feel the "discourse of practicality" is an exceptionally important concept with regard to nerds, I must admit that I am not fully pleased with the phrase "discourse of practicality" to identify the phenomenon. Essentially, the notion of something being "practical" is highly suspect in the first place, so I have some misgivings in using the very word that obfuscates itself to define the concept. After all, it is the charge that something is "impractical" that is the dubious cover for this form of discourse. That said, it is the most pertinent and relevant term, I feel, for capturing the overall discourse and making it more readily identifiable. As for what I mean by "discourse of practicality," which might also go by the name "unreflexive instrumentalism," is how, in a number of cultural fields, those things that accrue the most cultural and economic capital will always trump those that seemingly accrue less. In simpler terms, it is the commonly held notion that unless something makes you rich or famous, then why bother pursuing it? Why learn or study something (math? philosophy?) if it is not going to get you a "good job"? Why bother to become an artist if you likely will never become famous and will likely starve your whole life? Why pursue theory over practice? Theoretical science over profitable engineering? A nebulous, but highly pervasive discourse, the discourse of practicality is deeply imbricated not only in the construction of hegemony, but also in the nerd stereotype, for it implies that the nerd's hyperintelligence is inherently impractical, whereas the proper heteronormativity that the nerd lacks is highly practical. Yet, as this chapter argues, when the nerd's hyperintelligence becomes practical (can make a lot of money, serves hegemony, serves nationalism, serves corporate capitalism, etc.), the degradation of nerds loosens slightly, but not entirely.

One of the primary causes of this shift in intellect was of course the space race. For a brief time, from 1957 to 1969 (from *Sputnik* to the *Apollo 11* moon landing), the space race served to promote both science and engineering in the American imagination. Especially during the fervor over the Mercury missions, "the public possessed an apparently insatiable appetite for information about space science and technology."[4] Magazines, newspapers, and especially television journalists were suddenly playing the role of science teachers, explaining to the American public the scientific principles behind space travel.[5] As such, many Americans became slightly more appreciative of the eggheady nerds of the previous decade, hoping they would help to win the space race as well as explain the science behind it all.

However, it is important to reflect upon this particular cultural discourse within its political context. True, the post-*Sputnik* years saw a greater appreciation for high achievement in education and science and engineering, but this was not solely for the appreciation of science and knowledge for its own sake, but instead for highly nationalistic reasons. As stated by the authors of *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury*, "Public furor [for the first American manned satellite program] was inspired primarily not by the promise of extending aeronautics and missilery into astronautics, but rather by the nationalistic fervor and punctured pride caused by the obviously spectacular Soviet achievements."[6] In short, this science of space, even in its most theoretical

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[4] Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 94.

[5] Americans were so captivated by all thing space related that admen were able to successfully market Tang, the space drink of choice, to the American people.

[6] Loyd S. Swenson, Jr., James M. Grimwood, and Charles C. Alexander, *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury* (Washington, DC: NASA History Office, 1998), 109.

manifestations, had a highly "practical" purpose: to best the Soviets and recoup American pride.

Of the many ways that the space race impacted American culture with regards to the perception of intelligence, changes in education are perhaps the most revealing. After all, one of the strongest indicators that America's relationship with intelligence had improved since the McCarthy era took place in American schools. While still wrestling with (or against) desegregating the public school system—an action often undertaken under the banner of democratic and egalitarian principles—many American educators were also wrestling with the problem of what students should be learning and how much the federal government should meddle in the curriculum. Before *Sputnik* and during the post-war period (that first formative phase of the nerd stereotype), the American education system was dominated primarily by "life adjustment education," a pedagogical approach that was posited and promoted by Charles A. Prossner in the mid-40s that quickly received the full support of the U.S. Office of Education. In brief, this pedagogical approach rejected traditional academic studies and "mere knowledge" with more practical and "functional" objectives, like health and vocation. Less emphasis was placed on "bookish" learning (i.e. reading, science, and mathematics) whereas Home Economics courses taught young girls how to cook and Shop classes taught boys the manual labor skills that they would surely need for their "proper" place in life. Generally speaking, science and books were unfashionable in the post-war era, most conspicuously and strangely in American public schools. No wonder young nerds of all types were seen as particularly out of place during the late 40s and 50s.[7]

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[7] For some basic information on public education practices in the post-war era, life adjustment education, and the immediate impact of *Sputnik*, see Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education,*

Then the Soviets launched *Sputnik*, which initiated a sudden shift in American education policy and approach. "Sputnik," writes education historian Diane Ravitch, "came to be a symbol of the consequences of indifference to high standards. In popular parlance, Sputnik had happened not because of what the Russians had done but because of what American schools had failed to do."[8] The American public demanded a federal response to *Sputnik*, and in 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which supplied grants, fellowships, and loans to foster the study of math, science, and foreign languages as well as fund school construction and equipment. For a brief time in the early 60s, an optimistic approach towards education saw an emphasis on raising academic standards for gifted students as well as a renewal of emphasis on science, math, and literacy.[9] Teaching science and math class to American youth became a priority, as did making it more accessible to students.[10] However, what had primarily changed was the discourse of practicality: before, "life adjustment education" was thought the best and most practical pedagogical approach for making useful citizens, and then in the 60s, science and math became the most practical ways to best the Russians. So while this new learning environment served, in part, to make young nerds who excelled at their studies and in science somewhat more laudable and acceptable in the broader culture, it also trapped them in a discourse of practicality that undermined any intellectual achievements.

1945-1980 (BasicBooks, 1983); Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961); Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education, The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980* (New York: Harper Row, 1988); and Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton, eds., *School: The Story of American Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
[8] Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (BasicBooks, 1983), 229.
[9] It is perhaps no historical coincidence that British sociologist and politician Michael Young published his satirical essay *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958, coining the term "meritocracy."
[10] I think my personal favorite pop culture indicator of this renewed interest in teaching math and science has to be the old Disney educational featurette *Donald in Mathmagic Land*, which was originally released in 1959. In this popular featurette, Donald Duck learns that math can be fun, and is no longer just for eggheads anymore.

To better understand how discursive notions of practicality dilute this seeming appreciation for intelligence in the American culture of the late 50s and 60s, it is fruitful to examine the overall cultural performance of the "quiz show scandal" that occurred in the late 50s. Not only does the quiz show scandal encapsulate the promises and problems of the general shift towards intelligence in American culture at this critical historical juncture, it also recapitulates much of the identity politics of the nerd stereotype, especially with regards to white masculinity. More specifically, the quiz show scandal also introduces an important new variation of the nerd stereotype: the tolerable nerd, almost always rendered white and male, who is tolerable because he is practical.

In the mid-1950s, as "white middle-class family" comedies like *Father Knows Best* rose to prominence, another TV genre was also set to come to the fore, although its success would be short-lived. Starting with the triumph of *The $64,000 Question* in 1955, and then its many imitators that followed over the next couple of television seasons, TV quiz shows experienced a very sudden and meteoric rise in popularity, enthralling the American public's imagination. But the rapid ascendance of the quiz show genre was immediately curtailed in the wake of the quiz show scandal, when it became known that many of the programs were rigged. No figure from the quiz shows and their subsequent fallout become more famous than Charles Van Doren, who seemed to embody, in both his TV and celebrity performance, a potential cultural shift towards intellectual appreciation.[11] However, was it truly Van Doren's intelligence that enraptured the American public, or the other, more "practical" factors?

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[11] For information regarding the quiz show scandal, see Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978); Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s T.V. Quiz Scandal—A D.A.'s Account* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Meyer Weinberg, *TV in America: The Morality of Hard*

On the 1956/1957 season of the popular quiz show *Twenty-one*, Charles Van Doren appeared on over fifteen telecasts and achieved a sort of unprecedented folk hero status. His memorable preliminary bouts with then-reigning champ Herbert Stempel, in particular, made especially compelling television viewing. These two young men first faced one another on November 28, 1956, and played three exciting games, each ending in a tie. As the format of the show dictated, the two contestants were placed in separate isolation booths and forced to answer extremely difficult questions. Both Van Doren and Stempel demonstrated exceptional knowledge of a wide range of topics. Finally, on December 5, Van Doren bested Stempel—or as it would be revealed later, Stempel took a dive. Regardless, from that moment, Van Doren was an American celebrity.[12]

Kent Anderson, author of *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals*, writes that "Charles Van Doren was the most talked-about young man to arrive on the American cultural scene since Elvis Presley, with whom he was frequently compared as a better example for American youth to idolize."[13] An instructor at Columbia and from a family with a long and impressive aristocratic intellectual tradition, Van Doren received around two thousand letters of fan mail per week, many of them praising him for promoting education and studying, and some—an estimated five hundred or so—included marriage proposals. Van Doren's popularity earned a cover story with *Time*, in which the magazine reported "Just by being himself, he has enabled a

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Cash (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962); and Richard S. Tedlow, "Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandals of the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn, 1976), 483-95.

[12] Kent Anderson includes a transcript for this episode in his book, pages 58-69. The episode is also posted on YouTube; see "Twenty One – stemple – Van Doren Episode," YouTube video, 29:33, from the show *Twenty One* televised by NBC Studios on December 5, 1956, posted by Stephen Potter, December 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMkL4LKb8AU (accessed August 4, 2015).

[13] Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 70.

giveaway show, the crassest of low-brow entertainment, to whip up a doting mass audience for a new kind of TV idol—of all things, an egghead."[14]

Did Van Doren's sudden and stellar popularity mean the end of anti-intellectualism and the ultimate triumph of the egghead, a sort of nerd renaissance?[15] Not quite. But his brief celebrity status does suggest, as Anderson puts it, that "the word *intellectual* had lost much of its opprobrium," and intelligence, generally speaking, was partially recuperated.[16] So to a degree, anti-intellectualism, while still present in American culture, may have lost a bit of its bite, and it is likely no accident that the quiz shows, with their emphasis on knowledge, spanned this period of transition, a consequence of the declining anti-intellectual sentiment in the broader culture.

Besides seemingly promoting intelligence and education, the quiz shows also tapped into other important cultural tropes, namely the ever-optimistic American Dream, as well as the capitalist-driven materialism fostered by an exploding consumer culture, both of which are intimately tied to the discourse of practicality.[17] After all, the notion of making money, let alone *easy* money playing a game (even if it was a gamble) with little to lose may well be perceived as the most "practical" of all endeavors, not to mention the fame and flattery associated with being on television. With this in mind, was it really the love of learning that the American people admired in Van Doren, or his financial success? As *Commonweal* suggested during the height of the quiz show craze, "Americans have always venerated the fact, and the quiz show has merely underlined this

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[14] Lester Bernstein, "The Wizard of Quiz," *Time*, February 11, 1957, 11, 44-6, 49-50, quoted in Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 70.
[15] Charles Van Doren's fifteen minutes of fame is somewhat similar to that of Ken Jennings, the big winner of *Jeopardy!* in 2004.
[16] Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 40.
[17] In many ways, the American Dream is built upon the discourse of practicality. Both, of course, are also highly dubious imaginings as well.

aspect of our culture. Further, these facts are materially useful: they earn money […] In the American tradition, they are respected for this material value, not in any sense as knowledge for the sake of knowledge."[18] Not only does the emphasis on fact and encyclopedic knowledge form only one type of intelligence—namely the kind not directly associated with the critical public intellectual—it is very telling that even so-called "trivial" knowledge is alchemically transmuted from worthless to highly practical when it suddenly demonstrates the ability to earn a substantial amount of cash.

Also, it cannot be denied that Charles Van Doren was bright, energetic, youthful, handsome, and exceptionally charming. In this respect, he did not fulfill the image of the nerd stereotype. In fact, it was one reason why the crafty producers of *Twenty-One* selected him as the man to dethrone Stempel, whom one of the producers contemptuously referred to as a "high strung human Univac" (comparing him to a computer, as we shall examine below).[19] And as Anderson posits, "The contrast between the two collegians was striking: Van Doren, the tall, handsome, young Ivy Leaguer with the engaging smile and manner versus the stout Jewish student from CCNY."[20] And note that this stout and swarthy student was not only Jewish, but also wore the telltale nerd glasses on the television program: Van Doren did not. In this mediated, manipulated public performance, it was Stempel who played the true role of the nerd stereotype.[21] The dashing Van Doren achieved celebrity status, whereas Stempel was, much to his own dismay, duly forgotten and shunted aside. In a fashion, one could argue that Stempel

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[18] "The American Dream," *Commonweal*, February 22, 1957, 523, 525, quoted in Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 71.
[19] Anderson, 56.
[20] Ibid.
[21] If anything, Van Doren-as-icon is much closer to the playboy stereotype than that of the nerd stereotype: charming, famous, cultured, moneyed (or so people assumed, despite his instructor's salary), and at the time of the show, a bachelor (even though he was already engaged at that point and married shortly thereafter). For a more extensive treatment of the playboy stereotype, see the next chapter.

embodies the "off-putting" nerd of the first phase of the nerd stereotype, and Van Doren the possibility of a tolerable nerd of the second phase, and primarily because he came across as a dapper masculine man.[22]

In the end, thanks in part to Stempel's crusade of vengeance and validation (after taking a dive as instructed, Stempel later grew resentful and demanded retribution), the rigging of the game shows became apparent to the American public in late 1958, and then faced legal action before the Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight in late 1959. During the hearing on November 2, 1959, "the quiz-show scandal reached its apex as the personal symbol of the quizzes made one of the decade's more memorable confessions," and that symbol was Charles Van Doren, who up to that moment had perjured himself in saying that he did not receive any assistance with the questions.[23] During his confession, Van Doren admitted his personal complicity as well as his original hope that by appearing on *Twenty-One*, he might be "doing a great service to the intellectual life, to teachers, and to education in general, by increasing public respect for the work of the mind through my appearances. In fact, I think I have done a great disservice to all of them."[24] In the end, Van Doren lost his teaching position at Columbia as well as his guest

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[22] Despite a few "dramatic liberties," the 1994 Robert Redford film *Quiz Show* does highlight the contrast between Stempel and Van Doren rather well, who were played by John Turturro and Ralph Fiennes, respectively.

[23] Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 141-2.

[24] Quoted in Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s T.V. Quiz Scandal—A D.A.'s Account* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 248. Also see *Investigation of Television Quiz Shows*, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives, 86th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), 624. For an accessible online version of Van Doren's public confession, see "'The Truth Is the Only Thing with Which a Man Can Live': Quiz Show Contestant Charles Van Doren Publically Confesses to Deceiving His Television Audience," History Matters, American Social History Productions, Inc., http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6566/ (accessed August 7, 2015).

spot on the *Today Show*, and sequestered himself into obscurity. The nerdy Stempel was essentially forgotten all together.[25]

Surprisingly, for the most part, the average American citizen was sympathetic or indifferent to Van Doren's cheating, many saying they would have done the same thing in his position.[26] Even the perception of the intellectual as amoral seemed to be on the decline, but again, this was likely because the average American citizen does not mind a little intelligence nor a little moral relativism if the endgame is fame and fortune, those two pillars of the discourse of practicality. In fact, many social critics of the quiz show scandal were more taken aback by the *lack* of moral outrage from the American public than the actual rigging of the game shows themselves. And try as they might, certain intellectuals, educators, and journalists could not turn the scandal to their advantage and attack what they viewed as the banality of television programming and the inherent dangers of corporate broadcasting. The American people wanted to keep adoring Van Doren: the unanswerable question, then, is whether this continued adoration was out of deference for his intelligence or whether it was out of a sympathetic understanding that fame and fortune, at any price, is simply the American way—one of the most practical discourses of all.

In most respects, the quiz show scandal (taken as public performance) changed rather little, be it the practices of the television industry or the overall cultural discourse over knowledge and power. But the fact that Charles Van Doren was not publically

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[25] Charles Van Doren eventually broke his silence on the quiz show scandal in an article he wrote for the *New Yorker* decades later in 2008. See Charles Van Doren, "All the Answers," *New Yorker*, July 28, 2008, online at http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/07/28/all-the-answers?printable=true (accessed August 7, 2015).
[26] Richard S. Tedlow, "Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandals of the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn, 1976), 491.

drawn and quartered by the Subcommittee (as a certain *other* committee might have done less than a decade previous) suggests that important shifts in the American perception of brainpower were indeed beginning to occur in the late 50s. On one hand, Van Doren's iconography suggests that, at least superficially, intelligence, education, and science were starting to be appreciated by Americans in a way that greatly contrasted previous years—which in turn helps to explain the increasing number of stereotypical nerd characters in a number of performance mediums. On the other hand, this newfound appreciation for American brainpower recapitulated much of the same biased identity politics of the nerd stereotype, just in slightly newer packaging. Extending well beyond the discourse of the quiz show scandal, Van Doren, despite his fall from glory, represented the new type of "permissible" intelligent white masculinity, whereas the nerdy, Jewish Stempel represented the failure of such white masculinity—both a figurative and literal loser.

As illustrated by the quiz show scandal, the notion that hyperintelligence implies failed white masculinity is still recapitulated throughout American culture of the late 50s and 60s. Even considering the nerdy fields of the space program and computing—fields where one might expect to see an unadulterated appreciation for intelligence—nerd characters found themselves, as before, subject to a prescriptive white male heterosexual hegemony. One of the primary ways this subjugation of intelligence to white male hegemony manifested was the relegation of the nerd to the background, to the subservient position under his/her hegemonic (masculine) male superiors. The tolerable nerd of the late 50s/60s was a useful, practical nerd, a nerd who knew their place, a nerd who did not challenge white male hegemony. This tolerable nerd characterization, in slightly different ways, permeated both the field of corporate computing and the space race, and in both,

the nerd was expected to play second fiddle to the more hegemonic white male.[27] In terms of the mediated narratives and images surrounding the space race, we see the heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype in action—particularly by contrasting the NASA nerd with his opposite, the hero astronaut.[28] While the space race promoted science, education, and an appreciation of intelligence in the general American public, it is telling that the NASA nerd, tolerated because they were practical and necessary, was essentially nameless and generic, whereas the heroic astronauts became the public face of the space program.

The Space Race and the NASA Nerd

If the NASA nerd was a type of nerd tolerated because their intelligence served the "practical" space race objective of beating the Soviets, it is important to understand the complex and contradictory relationships the American public had with space travel itself, even before it came into existence. After all, the fantastic notion of traveling through outer space was well in place before the launch of *Sputnik* led to the Cold War space race that would dominate the cultural landscape of the country throughout the 60s. Before *Sputnik*, the American public already held a great fascination with space travel, conditioned in part by enthralling tales of science fiction and fantasy that extend back for many decades.[29] However, the burning drive to actually venture into space was lacking,

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[27] In a way, this phenomenon of the tolerable nerd being allowed a modicum of power, yet not being allowed to take the top spot reserved for those who properly perform hegemonic white masculinity recapitulates the "Einstein Syndrome" of Jewish nerds discussed in chapter 2.

[28] It should also be pointed out that while the NASA nerd is often rendered as white and male just like the broader nerd stereotype, in reality, many real-life NASA nerds that contributed to the space program were not white, nor male. The recent film *Hidden Figures* (2016), for example, brought attention to black female NASA nerds Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson.

[29] The great pull that science fiction and fantasy has had on the American imagination regarding space travel obviously has a much longer history, extending back to Isaac Asimov, to Buck Rogers, to *Amazing Stories*, to H. G. Wells, to Jules Verne and beyond, many of which notably remain "nerd favorites" today.

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along with the vision to do so—not to mention how appropriating the necessary funds

was unimaginable to politicians in the mid-50s.[30] Eisenhower's early policy for space

exploration was much more reserved and practical, deemphasizing manned space travel

and focusing more on satellites and scientific advancements.[31] Certain space travel

advocates with more grandiose visions, including notable scientist Wernher von Braun

(and potential real-life NASA nerd), argued for a much more ambitious and overall

romantic vision. Interestingly, "Eisenhower's alternative space program placed a great

deal more emphasis upon space science than upon engineering feats" or, more simply,

pure theoretically-driven science than practical, applied technologies.[32]

However, as mentioned previously, after *Sputnik* the public pressure to surpass

the engineering feats of the Soviets became too great for Eisenhower's more balanced

alternative approach.[33] Try as the Eisenhower administration might, they could not

downplay the importance of *Sputnik* in the eyes of the American people, and vocal

supporters of manned missions to outer space seized their opportunity. Critics of the

president's policy also seized their chance as well, including Senate Majority Leader

Lyndon B. Johnson, who stood before the Democratic Conference on January 7, 1958

and warned "Control of space means control of the world, far more certainly, for more

totally than any control that has ever or could ever be achieved by weapons, or troops of

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[30] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 53.
[31] Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge: Eisenhower's Response to the Soviet Satellite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[32] McCurdy, 60.
[33] For a useful interpretation of how Sputnik impacted American perceptions of scientists and engineers, see Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics and Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 135-48.

occupation."[34] Eisenhower's science advisor James Killian perhaps observed most astutely when he said "Sputnik I created a crises of confidence that swept the county like a windblown forest fire. Overnight there developed a widespread fear that the country lay at the mercy of the Russian military machine and that our government and its military arm had abruptly lost the power to defend the homeland itself, much less to maintain U.S. prestige and leadership in the international arena."[35] Rather suddenly, America found itself in need of a few good nerds.

Eisenhower could no longer resist the inevitable. In 1958, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and, despite not wanting to get embroiled in a space race with the Soviets, Eisenhower approved Project Mercury, which was to briefly put an astronaut in orbit around the earth. Many felt this was not ambitious enough. So in a very short amount of time, one encompassing a change in presidential administrations, the entire U.S. approach to space exploration altered radically. The newly elected Kennedy dismantled the Eisenhower space policy in early 1961 and famously established the goal of putting an American on the moon. NASA's budget under Eisenhower in 1960, $524 million, increased tenfold to $5.3 billion by 1965.[36] Money alone, however, would not put a man on the moon: an exceptional amount of brainpower was needed as well. And with this massive space race build up underway, a large number of nerdy scientists and

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[34] Statement of Democratic Leader Lyndon B. Johnson to the Meeting of the Democratic Conference on 7 January 1958, statements of LBJ collection, box 23, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin Texas, 3-4, quoted in McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 74-5.
[35] James R. Killian, *Sputnik, Scientists, and Eisenhower* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 7, quoted in McCurdy, 76-7.
[36] McCurdy, 77.

engineers were pressed into service. And in this fashion, the image of the NASA nerd was born (see Figure 3 in the Appendix).

In many ways, the figure of the 60s NASA nerd—a term I use rather loosely to represent a type of stereotypical nerd that is associated with science and technology related to outer space and space travel—extends back into the 50s, before NASA was even formed.[37] During the first phase of the nerd stereotype, a rocket scientist (or any brilliant scientist for that matter) would commonly be portrayed as "villainous," a variation on the mad scientist characterization examined in chapter 1. As we move into the 60s, however, that (mad) scientist is frequently seen in the guise of the benign and more supportive NASA nerd.[38] While this redemptive transformation of scientists reflects the aforementioned shift towards intellectual appreciation, it also binds the NASA nerd into the discourse of practicality. As long as the nerd's brainpower was put to practical use, the NASA nerd, a supportive sidekick, was tolerated. Furthermore, just as the mad scientist of the 50s was often juxtaposed with the military man of action, the NASA nerd was considered less masculine—and less noteworthy—than the heroic astronaut. The (white male) NASA nerd was performed as a subordinated masculinity, placing him in a

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[37] While I focus on the NASA nerd here as person who actually works in some capacity for NASA, and how the public image of such real-life individuals was treated in the mass media, it is also possible to consider any fan of NASA and space travel, any avid "space booster" more generally construed, as a NASA nerd as well. Also, while I feel there is a distinction between a NASA nerd and, say, a science fiction fan, there is also quite a bit of nebulous overlap between the two. However, as the focus here is the popular treatment of such people in public performance and how these performances fostered the nerd stereotype of the period, these distinctions are best left to be explored at another time.

[38] The popular performance that I feel best sums up the shift from mad scientist to tolerable NASA nerd— and the slight recuperation of scientific intelligence of this era—is the character Dr. Zachary Smith from the CBS science fiction television series *Lost in Space* (1965-1968). Dr. Smith actually begins the series as a more traditional mad scientist, the nefarious foreigner and saboteur-turned-accidental stowaway who originally meant to destroy the Robinson family and their spaceship. Eventually over the seasons, he evolves into an incompetent egotistical lazy clown and sometimes compatriot, a source of kooky comic relief and to many, a fan favorite. For more on *Lost in Space*, see Jon Abbott, *Irwin Allen Television Productions, 1964-1970: A Critical History of* Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Lost in Space*, *The Time Tunnel *and* Land of the Giants (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

subservient role to the manly astronaut hero. Importantly, the difference between how these two figures were characterized was dependent upon how they seemingly passed or failed to subscribe to societal strictures of white masculine heteronormativity.

Performances of the NASA nerd mirrors much of what was actually taking place in everyday life in the space program. Take, for example, German rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, one of the most recognizable early advocates for U.S. space travel. Throughout the 50s, von Braun worked hard to convince the American people that going into space was not merely science fiction, but something that could actually be achieved.[39] Through such public venues as *Collier's* magazine (1952/1953) and even a 1955 Disney television series, von Braun became a well-recognized scientist in American popular culture.[40] And his later work at NASA, including his work on the Saturn V launch vehicle, made him one of the most important contributors to the American space program as well as one of the most recognizable.

Yet von Braun, much like Van Buren, was no celebrity hero. After all, von Braun, brought over to America with other German scientists as part of Operation Paperclip, was an ex-Nazi who had helped make the V-2 rocket. Yet, because America needed his intelligence and expertise, any past affiliations with the Nazi party were tolerated, making him a popular representation of a tolerable NASA nerd, even if it was more his past than his intelligence that gave Americans pause. If anything, von Braun (much like Van Buren) seemed to confirm the stereotypical notion that nerdy intelligence is morally dubious, and that men of intellect may be tolerated if they are put to practical use, but remain unworthy of being respected as truly moral American heroes and leaders. As Glen

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[39] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 29-53.
[40] Ibid., 35-43.

Scott Allen writes, "however willing we were to use von Braun's skills, and despite the willingness of the Disney people to put him on TV, too many people were uncomfortable with his past for him to become NASA's pitchman."[41]

Of course, von Braun was not the only brilliant scientist or engineer to work for NASA that might have served as "pitchman."[42] Even looking at just the highly pivotal and iconic Project Mercury in the late 50s and 60s that first put an American into space, any number of exceptional scientists and engineers might serve as iconic NASA nerds— Hugh Dryden, Bob Gilruth, Max Faget, Walt Williams, Chris Craft, just to name a few of the most prominent.[43] Even in the early 60s, when rocket science was at its most hip with the general public, it was not these scientists that became valorized, but rather the astronauts of Project Mercury.[44]

At a press conference in Washington, D.C. on April 9, 1959, the American public was introduced to Cooper, Glenn, Grissom, Schirra, Shepard, and Slayton, who were the seven men selected to be America's nominees for the first humans in space. And despite the original wishes of NASA headquarters, the fame of these men grew to astronomical proportions. The official Project Mercury history says the following regarding this first important unveiling of the Mercury Seven:

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[41] Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics and Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 148.

[42] There are too many brilliant scientists and engineers to list as potential pitchmen for NASA, but three important figures from the 1958 Explorer 1 launch include von Braun, William Pickering (who was the head of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory), and scientist James Van Allen (who discovered the radiation belt around the earth that now bears his name.) These men did receive a bit of press and popularity for their achievement, but importantly, this was before astronauts existed.

[43] Perhaps the most iconic and famous of all NASA nerds, who not only worked for NASA but went on to be a popular proponent for space science is the famous nerd icon Carl Sagan, perhaps best-known for the 1980 television series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage.*

[44] For more on the advertising-influenced marketing of the astronauts, see Michael L. Smith, "Selling the Moon: The U.S. Manned Space Program and the Triumph of Commodity Scientism," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980,* ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 175-209.

These personable pilots were introduced in civilian dress; many people in their audience forgot that they were volunteer test subjects and military officers. Their public comments did not class them with any elite intelligentsia. Rather they were a contingent of mature Americans, average in build and visage, family men all, college-educated as engineers, possessing excellent health, and professionally committed to flying advanced aircraft.[45]

The Mercury Seven, who "seemed almost random samples of average American manhood," became the famous public face of NASA and the heroes of the American public.[46] NASA needed that positive spin to inspire trust for such a dangerous endeavor—rockets did have a tendency to explode, after all. But the fearless courage of the astronauts countered that danger, exuding the confidence necessary to get the space program quite literally off the ground.[47]

In many ways, the masculine escapist figure of the cool-as-a-cucumber, unafraid-of-death cowboy image, which was starting to decline in popularity by the early 60s (except, perhaps, for the protagonists of the spaghetti westerns of the period), was supplanted by the image of the astronaut. And like the cowboy, the astronaut was represented as an ideal that contrasted with the nerdy effete intellectual/scientist image.[48] After all, many young American children who grew up in the 50s and the 60s —young boys, most conspicuously—dreamed of growing up to be astronauts and cowboys, those models of traditional white masculinity. Just as the public image of the Mercury Seven astronaut (and those that followed) was crafted to inspire calm, cool confidence for the space program, that "aura of competence" likely helped many (white middle class male)

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[45] Loyd S. Swenson, Jr., James M. Grimwood, and Charles C. Alexander, *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury* (Washington, DC: NASA History Office, 1998), 160.
[46] Ibid.
[47] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 88-93.
[48] One of the last great films from the heyday of Westerns was the 1962 John Ford classic *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, which stands as an interesting turning point for the "cowboy vs. nerd antithesis," especially regarding the characters Stoddard and Doniphon and the iconic actors who played them, James Stewart and John Wayne, respectively.

Americans cope with the massive anxiety-inducing cultural shifts occurring throughout the 60s, most notably the Civil Rights Movement. As McCurdy states, "the Mercury Seven were presented by the press as the personification of the clean-cut, all-American boys whose mythical lives popularized family-oriented television programs during the 1950s and 1960s. They were portrayed as brave, God-fearing, patriotic individuals with loving wives and children."[49] Purposefully, hypervisibility was given to these iconic white, masculine, heterosexual, Protestant men, whereas many of the NASA nerds making space travel actually happen remained invisible or unrecognized, the "unsung heroes" of the space program.[50] As communications scholar Harlen Makeson writes, after this stunning debut of the Mercury Seven in 1959, "the symbol of the American space program was no longer a former Nazi rocket engineer, but rather a group of clean-cut supermen."[51]

Shortly after the initial press conference introducing the Mercury Seven, *Life* magazine purchased the exclusive rights to their life stories and ran these biography pieces in twenty-eight issues from 1959 to 1963.[52] And *Life*, like the rest of the American mass media, worked hard to ensure that the public image was as squeaky clean as possible, ensuring that the general public saw them, as Tom Wolfe would summarize

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[49] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 90.

[50] It should also be stated that the fact that so many of these NASA nerds toil away behind the scenes whereas the astronauts were very much performed as the public face of the space program is not an uncommon phenomenon. After all, it is the movie star the public remembers and idolizes, not the screenwriter, nor the army of technicians and crew and other artists that make the film. In many respects, this is how public performance of celebrity operates: it is the "attractive" hypervisible figure that garners the aura of celebrity. My argument here is that it is the iconography of the astronauts (most especially their white masculinity) that allowed them to become national heroes, whereas the intelligent NASA nerd was placed in a subordinated, supportive role. Interestingly, recent scholarship has been working to uncover many of these invisible NASA nerds. Funnily enough, two such works, Billy Watkins' *Apollo Moon Missions: The Unsung Heroes* and Rick Houston and Milt Heflin's *Go, Flight! The Unsung Heroes of Mission Control, 1965-1992* even use the phrase "unsung heroes" to describe these NASA nerds.

[51] Harlen Makemson, *Media, NASA, and America's Quest for the Moon* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 47.

[52] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 90.

about twenty years later in *The Right Stuff*, as "seven patriotic God-fearing small-town

Protestant family men with excellent backing on the home front."[53] Of course that was a

bit of a stretch, as many of the Mercury Seven were more of the hard drinking, swearing,

"fighter jock" types that Wolfe promotes in his book. One of the astronauts was separated

from his wife, one divorced, and yet another had a rather checkered childhood, but all of

this was excised from the public image.[54]

Any challenge offered by actual reality could not tarnish the heroic iconography

of the astronaut, which was a very traditional sort of white masculine escapist fantasy

based on the conservative racial and gender politics of the previous post-war era: the

brave breadwinner husband of the nuclear family, very Christian, very Middle-American,

and very heteronormative man of action. It is no wonder that Alan Shepard and John

Glenn are still household names today whereas even the most important scientists that

made Project Mercury possible are essentially unknown to popular American culture,

like, for one example, the previously mentioned Max Faget (the mechanical engineer

primarily responsible for designing the Mercury capsule).[55] Even when the appreciation

of science, technology, and education was at a height in American culture, the NASA

nerd simply could not compete for public appeal with shining stars like the traditionally

masculine Mercury Seven.[56]

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[53] Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 141.
[54] Allen, *Master Mechanics and Wicked Wizards*, 159.
[55] The few NASA nerds that actually received some airtime were, of course, primarily white and male. The contributions to the space program made by women and non-white persons was especially buried and overlooked—only very recently has concerted effort gone into the recovery of these Other NASA nerds. For more on this matter, see Nathalia Holt, *Rise of the Rocket Girls: The Women Who Propelled Us, From Missiles to the Moon to Mars* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016); and Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016).
[56] This disconnect from representing NASA nerds was exacerbated in the early years by the complex relationship NASA held with the mass media. During the Mercury missions, for example, reporters and

The Mercury astronauts were heavily marketed as rare (only seven), comforting masculine cowboys of a traditional sort. They stood in contrast to the relatively nameless cadre of NASA nerds, the scientists and engineers that, at best, served as minor commentators and talking heads on television and radio programs about the launches. A solid popular performance example of this phenomenon can be traced in the reportage of Walter Cronkite, the notable television journalist who had taken an early and personal interest in the space program. Cronkite, who became almost as deeply associated with the major space missions as the astronauts themselves in the eyes of the American public, not only reported the launch of John Glenn in the *Friendship 7* in 1962, but would also go on to lead the CBS reporting of the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. Even as far back as the late 50s on current affairs programs such as *The 20th Century*, Cronkite provided viewers with information on rocket developments and interviews with space officials and technicians.[57] And yet, even given Cronkite's obvious enthusiasm, these interviews and peeks into the science of space travel are all inherently structured as supporting material, sometimes even mere filler, for the main event: the launch itself. And during the coverage of the launches, it was of course the astronauts who inevitably took center stage.[58]

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cameras were not allowed near the control room, and they had to rely on Shorty Powers, the astronaut's spokesman, to relay to them what was happening during the missions. Even during important early missions, reporters had limited access, and therefore did not see many of the NASA nerds in action, further decreasing their visibility.

[57] Makemson, *Media, NASA, and America's Quest for the Moon*, 78.

[58] For some insights and examples of Cronkite's space race reporting, see Harlen Makemson, *Media, NASA, and America's Quest for the Moon* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Walter Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); William E. Burrows, *The Infinite Journey: Eyewitness Accounts of NASA and the Age of Space* (New York: Discovery Books, 2000); and Alfred Robert Hogan, "Televising the Space Age: A Descriptive Chronology of CBS News Special Coverage of Space Exploration from 1957 to 2003" (master's thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2005) accessed September 9, 2017, http://www.cbsretirees.com/ARTICLES/PDFs/race4space.pdf. For a solid documentary with some decent clips of appropriate footage, also see *Man on the Moon with Walter Cronkite* (CBS Broadcasting, 2003), DVD (Timeless Media Group, 2012).

As it was seemingly represented in radio, print, and especially television

journalism, the main job of these NASA nerds was apparently to serve the celebrity

astronauts and provide them with the necessary technology to accomplish their

missions.[59] These scientists were not portrayed necessarily in the same pointedly

derogatory fashion as the nerds of the previous post-war era—they were, after all, needed

and "practical" for the moment—but in reality they did often hold an uneasy, often

conflicted relationship with the astronauts. Although any tension was downplayed in the

media, there was often conflict and resentment between the "fighter jock" astronauts and

the NASA scientists (whom the astronauts derogatorily referred to as "white smocks,"

"reflector heads," "eggheads," and "brainiacs").[60] In any case, the image of the NASA

nerd scientist became something of a model for the kind of "brainiac" that the rest of

America wanted (or would tolerate) in the 60s: a subservient engineer that would follow

orders, mind his superiors, quickly and efficiently provide useful gadgetry for low cost,

and keep any theories or grumblings to himself.[61]

In a multitude of ways, the journalistic coverage of the space race in the late

50s/60s sums up the complex relationship between intelligence and the broader American

culture. True, intelligence and science are seemingly celebrated in much of the reporting

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[59] This trope of a nerd's duty being to provide useful tech to his superiors is further explored in the next chapter.

[60] See Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* as well as Allen, *Master Mechanics and Wicked Wizards*, 164.

[61] As the media did not thoroughly report any of the contentions between scientists, engineers, and astronauts, this likely did not play much into the broader culture's perception of the NASA nerd/astronaut relationship. Still, it is an interesting connection to make, as Wolfe does with *The Right Stuff*. Interestingly, in an article by Edwin Diamond taking the journalists covering the Apollo 11 mission to task for getting so caught up in the excitement that they left their critical, journalistic integrity aside, this very issue is addressed. Arguing that journalists had egregiously overlooked and underreported "the growing dissatisfaction of scientists within NASA over the dominance of the engineers and what scientists considered undue emphasis on public relations," Diamond not only identifies a journalistic oversight, but also an anti-intellectualism that impacted the inner workings of NASA. (13) How much of this contentious relationship was known or inferred by the broader American public is hard to tell. Edwin Diamond, "The dark side of the moonshot coverage," *Columbia Journalism Review* (Fall 1969): 10-6.

that occurred, capitalizing on America's fascination with outer space and the space race during that time. However, the very nature of the reporting also reinscribes hegemonic white masculinity through the hypervisible archetypal figure of the heroic astronaut, that clean-cut specimen of white male virtue, and the secondary, tolerable NASA nerd, who lacks the masculine characteristics embodied so boldly by the astronaut. In this fashion, the nerd stereotype, despite its superficial appreciation, continues to perform its heteronormative function, both in the real world Cold War space race as well as in the performances it inspired. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon was also occurring within the new field of computing, where another nerd figure—the computer programmer— experienced a similar association with both practicality and gender misperformance.

Books, "Electronic Brains," and the Rise of the "Computer Boys"

One of the most important characteristics that the nerd stereotype acquired in its second phase is its relationship to computers. In brief, the new figure of the computer programmer that arose primarily in the late 50s and 60s—both in everyday life and popular performance—would, by the late 70s/early 80s, eventually come to be one of the most definitive facets of the nerd stereotype. As such, it is necessary to explicate some of the key connections between the history of computing and popular American conceptions of computing, namely to trace how the stereotypical view of the computer programmer arose, and how it became associated with the nerd stereotype.

First, however, it is important to highlight that during the first post-war phase, very few portrayals of nerds emphasized their passionate use of computers in an authentic way. Sure, there was the usual mad scientist throwing pointless levers and turning cardboard dials, be it in their laboratory or aboard a fanciful spaceship of some sort, but

such gadgetry (even robots and other such devices) were never really stressed as computers in and of themselves. Often, computers were portrayed just as vague technological props with a highly romantic and optimistic bent. Much more was made of the fields of nuclear physics (atomic power and radiation) and chemistry (all of those test tubes and flasks) in the public imagination and media than the burgeoning, yet-to-be-named field of the computer science, and the nerd of the 40s and the 50s reflected those associations.

In most respects, the post-war nerd image relied mainly on the *other* mode of knowledge transference: books. The intelligent individual as bibliophile obviously predates the intelligent individual as computerphile by a millennium or so, but it is of particular note that the nerd stereotype did not arise historically from the advent of computers but actually predates the computer, which only later was incorporated as one of the stereotype's most dominant characteristics. It would be inaccurate, then, to assume that nerds are merely "people who like computers." If we remember that books (and writing) are also a form of technology, it would be more useful and accurate to say that nerds are technophiles. It would be even more accurate to say that nerds are really epistemophiles—that what nerds supposedly love in both books *and* computers is that they are technological mediums of knowledge creation and knowledge storage.

Even in the late 50s and after *Sputnik*, many of the portrayals of the nerd stereotype in American media make much more of the association with books rather than computers. Take, for one small example, *The Twilight Zone* episode "Time Enough at Last" (season 1, episode 8), which aired November 20, 1959. Beleaguered bank clerk Henry Bemis (Burgess Meredith) cannot find the time and peace he needs to indulge in

his obsession: reading. As Rod Sterling's narration states, Henry Bemis is "a bookish little man whose passion is the printed page," and his physical appearance and deportment carry the telltale signs of the nerd: small in stature, physically withdrawn, disheveled hair and clothes, and of course the all-important thick coke-bottle glasses, the ultimate symbol of the bibliophile and *ergo* the nerd.[62]

Henry Bemis tries to read *David Copperfield* at work, but gets in trouble with his boss, who states that Henry is sadly not "an organization man who functions within an organization."[63] Instead, the bank president points out with great disdain that "You, Mr. Bemis are a *reader*."[64] Clearly the nerdy Bemis does not fit into the corporate ideal of middle-class respectability nor of the successful breadwinner. Things are even worse at home where his abusive wife Helen Bemis (Jacqueline deWit) absolutely refuses to let him read anything, snatching newspapers away from him and even marring and tearing up Henry's book of poetry. Helen towers over Henry, exceptionally vicious and stern as she brutally emasculates him, leaving him whimpering impotently on the floor. As if his love of reading (and particularly of reading poetry) was not emasculating enough, Henry is completely kowtowed by his domineering hen-pecking wife in his own home (in which any children are notably absent). As both breadwinner and family man, Henry is depicted as a failure primarily because he is a nerd who loves to read.

Interestingly, however, Henry Bemis elicits the audience's sympathy throughout the episode. If this had been a decade earlier, perhaps, Henry may well have been merely an oddity to be ridiculed, but as this is the rather progressive *Twilight Zone* post-*Sputnik*,

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[62] Rod Serling and Lynn Venable, "Time Enough at Last," *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 8, directed by John Brahm, aired November 20, 1959 (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 2010), DVD.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

Henry becomes almost a tragic figure. While trying to sneak in some reading inside the bank vault in the basement at his work, Henry is spared when an H-bomb decimates the area. Finding he is alone in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, Henry nearly goes mad because of the solitude. But right before he commits suicide, he finds piles upon piles of books at the ruined public library. Jubilant, he lines up years upon years of reading material, which clearly gives him his sole reason to keep on living. But before he can even begin to indulge in his passion, his glasses, that recurring symbol of reading and nerdom, slip, fall, and shatter on the steps of the library. Only at this moment does Henry Bemis truly weep: not at the destruction of the world, nor the death of his wife, nor even his maddening loneliness, but rather at being deprived of the one thing that gives his life meaning: reading books. While a memorable twist, this ending, as well as Henry's dystopic plight, makes him a very sympathetic nerd, one with which the audience is clearly meant to identify, and one who suggests a difference from the less sympathetic nerds of earlier incarnations. And importantly, there is nary a mention of computers.

While computers may not have been a foundational aspect of the nerd stereotype in the 40s and the early 50s, that is not to say that computers did not exist at this time, nor that the American public was entirely ignorant of their existence. From the standpoint of popular American culture (i.e. the typical layperson not involved in the early field of computing), computers in the immediate post-war years were strange engineering oddities to be read about in the newspaper, quirky curios that were only of use to the most scientific of scientific fields and, primarily, the military. Computers had not yet affected, in a direct, tangible way, the day-to-day life of the average American, much of whose

understanding of computers came from romanticized tales of science fiction and fantasy, and, frankly, from optimistic journalism. But change was coming.

Take for example the important machine called the ENIAC, one of the front-runners for the dubious title of "first computer," which was unveiled to the public in 1946 at the University of Pennsylvania, creating a bit of a stir with imaginative reporters. The ENIAC, while an exceptionally important machine in the history of computing, was mainly a mathematical instrument to be used by a handful of privileged scientists and engineers. The UNIVAC, the commercial successor to the ENIAC, was completed and put to work in 1951, taking a crucial step towards turning the computer into a machine for the world of business. In a memorable publicity stunt in 1952, the UNIVAC was even put to work to predict, on television no less, the presidential election, rightly declaring a landslide win for Eisenhower over Stevenson—although the UNIVAC operators initially adjusted the prediction, thinking a landslide unrealistic. "The appearance of the UNIVAC on election night was a pivotal moment in computer history," write computer historians Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray.[65] "Before that date, while some people had heard about computers, very few had actually seen one; after it, the general public had been introduced to computers and had seen at least a mock-up of one."[66]

Thanks to the ENIAC, the UNIVAC, and others (like IBM's 701), computers had begun to be of quirky interest to the American public by the late 40s and early 50s, but they still did not have a realistic, palpable connection with the novel gadget, let alone

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[65] Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine,* 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 109.
[66] Ibid.

with the sort of people who worked on computers.[67] From a certain perspective, this

vague understanding is somewhat analogous to the American public's understanding of

rocket ships (and UFOs) in the 50s, well before any actual "rocket ship" was actually

built. After all, there were only two computers in use in the U.S. in 1950. That number

would, however, grow rapidly in the 50s and later, from those initial two to 240 in 1955,

then 5,400 in 1960, 25,00 in 1965, and eventually 75,000 by 1970.[68] But in the early 50s,

the image of the computer in the American imagination was essentially that of a massive

calculator, a "giant brain" or "mechanical brain" used to crunch numbers for a handful of

elite mathematicians.[69] In fact, the word "UNIVAC" momentarily meant "computer"

(like "Kleenex" means "facial tissue") to many Americans, as demonstrated by the

Twenty-One producer (quoted above), with his reference to Stempel as a human

UNIVAC. And while that simplistic image of the computer-as-glorified-calculator would

linger for decades, the actual computer would undergo an important change during the

50s, from mathematical instrument to electronic data-processing machine.[70] Thus, the

romanticized image of the novel computer gadget, more suited to the realm of science

fiction, shifted in the 50s to the image of the computer as a massive, monolithic

mainframe machine of business in the corporate world. And with that shift to the highly

practical world of business came a sharp jolt of reality—and a new type of nerd—that

would dominate the troubled world of computing in the 60s and well beyond.

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[67] For more on how the American public came to learn about computers, see James W. Cortada, *The Digital Hand: How Computers Changed the Work of American Manufacturing, Transportation, and Retail Industries* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 40-5.

[68] Nathan Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 28.

[69] The phrase "giant brain" or "mechanical brain" was popularized by the semi-popular book by Edmund Berkeley entitled *Giant Brains; or, Machines That Think* which was published in 1949. For more on this image, see Paul E. Ceruzzi, *Computing: A Concise History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 54.

[70] Campbell-Kelly and Aspray, *Computer*, 93.

Besides computers becoming more prevalent in American business, this

transitional period also marks the time when computers appeared on television regularly

thanks to the aforementioned space race, mainly on news programs giving insights and

behind the scenes looks into the work at NASA. Also of importance is that this was the

time when the academic field of computer science coalesced into being.[71] While

universities like Columbia, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology (MIT) have had strong ties with computing since at least the 40s

and have contributed vital advances in computer technologies, this early work was done

primarily in a laboratory rather than a classroom setting, and usually under military

auspices. It was not until the 60s that universities specifically began to enroll and

graduate full-fledged computer science students in significant numbers. For example,

MIT, a university with a long, rich history with computers, did not establish an

undergraduate major in computer science until 1969, and the graduate program had to

wait until a decade later.[72] In fact, Purdue and Stanford were among the first to establish

full computer science departments in the mid-60s. As such, not only were computers on

their way to becoming established as a permanent fixture in the American cultural

imagination (particularly as business machines), so were the rapidly growing cadre of

computer science students on university campuses, who certainly by the 70s would come

to be viewed as a quirky genus of nerdy student unto themselves. Recall from the

introduction that one of the etymological claims for originating the term "nerd" (or rather

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[71] For a bit of background on the emergence of computer science as an academic discipline, see Nathan Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 111-36; William Aspray, "Was Early Entry a Competitive Advantage?: US Universities That Entered Computing in the 1940s," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 22, no. 3 (2000): 42-87; and Michael Mahoney, "Computer Science: The Search for a Mathematical Theory," in *Science in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Krige and Dominique Pestre (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 617-34.
[72] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 120.

"nurd" in this case) comes from students from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. True or no, the claim does suggest that not only was the word "nerd" growing in usage in 60s, but also growing alongside these new computer science students.[73]

Taken together, the late 50s/early 60s represent the time when computers moved away from a little known, quirky "scientific fad" and towards becoming a permanent fixture in popular American culture, with all the attendant growing pains that accompanies such a change. Another way to describe the change is this: in the 40s and early 50s, people who tinkered with "electronic brains" were esoteric scientists, mathematicians, and engineers working for isolated universities and the military; by the 60s, they were becoming a known quantity, a strange new class of people all their own: nerdy computer specialists, or, to use the popular (gendered) lingo of the time, "computer boys." And in a way that mirrors the subordination of the NASA nerd, the nerdy computer programmer was also situated as a tolerable nerd—as long as they were useful and practical, and did not threaten the hegemonic status quo of the corporate (white masculine) world, these "computer boys" would be endured.

Desk Set *and the Nerdy Computer Programmer Stereotype*

The nerdy computer programmer variant of the nerd stereotype would, decades later, come to dominate the public's imagination regarding all things nerdy. It is therefore important to understand how these "computer boys" came to the attention of the American public, and the various connotations that went along with that increasing

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[73] For a useful glimpse into how college campuses in the 60s, like RPI's student body, bandied about the term "nerd," see Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 57-60. For a highly useful look at the male computer nerds of MIT (albeit of the 80s), also see Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

attention. Simply, from the beginning, as computers and their operators increasingly populated the world of corporate business, computer programming and operations were associated with asocial behaviors, femininity, and failed masculinity. But in the late 50s and early 60s, this was seen as a relatively tolerable situation: as long as these nerdy computer programmers proved practical, did their jobs, followed orders, and served the corporate hegemony with deference, they would be endured, perhaps even appreciated to a degree—a sentiment that we shall see shortly is even reflected in a popular film of the time. However, as the 60s progressed, the free-wheeling nerdy computer programmer seemingly proved more and more to upset that conservative corporate hegemony, to trouble the white masculine hierarchies of business and power. Throughout the 60s, then, the tolerable nerdy computer specialist became increasingly less tolerable as the stereotype of the nerdy computer programmer coalesced.

In the early days of computing (40s/50s), much like today, "computer specialists" could be roughly divided into hardware people and software people, those engineers who built the physical computer itself, and those who ran or "programmed" the computer. The early computer engineers were often treated like inventors: "practical" men who built things and were likely associated with the military in some fashion. In the eyes of the American public, these computer engineers—primarily white men—may have been a bit quirky, but these practical "Master Mechanics" were regarded mainly with deference, a sort of highly tolerable nerd.[74]

The nerdy computer programmer, however, was a much more dubious figure in the American imaginary from the very beginning. These early computer "coders" or "compilers" ("programming" would not become the dominant term until the mid-50s)

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[74] For more on Glen Scott Allen's conception of practical Master Mechanics, see chapter 1.

were viewed as a bit odd, a special breed of technical wizards. John Backus, the inventor

of the FORTRAN programming language, described programming in the 50s as "a black

art, a private and arcane matter," and many viewed the handful of programmers and their

mysterious craft as a small "priesthood," both enigmatic and troublesome.[75]

These nerdy computer programmers also took on an association with asocial

personalities as well. It is important to remember that in the early days of computing,

especially in the era of mainframes in the 50s and 60s, the typical "user" was not even

allowed to use the computer directly, working instead in the format of batch operations,

so that only a computer operator had access. This served to make the new "computer

boy" at work an odd duck, detached from the rest of the office, isolated with the "giant

brain" in a restricted, air conditioned room. Much of the perceived asocial or antisocial

behaviors of the computer programmer likely had their origins in this early divided

workplace format. These perceptions were compounded as these mainframe computers

began to appear throughout major corporations. In the corporate culture of the era, one

very much built upon highly social behaviors—populated by straight white masculine

Protestant men of "character" with a firm handshake—these nerdy computer

programmers hiding away in an isolated room certainly stuck out like a sore thumb.

Also important is how system software was supplied by the computer companies

themselves and how the customers had to develop their own applications programs. As

computer historian Paul E. Ceruzzi writes, in the early days of the corporatization of

computers, "More than one purchaser of an early computing system winced at the army

of systems analysts, programmers, and software specialists that had to be hired into the

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[75] John Backus, "Programming in America in the 1950s—Some Personal Impressions," in *A History of Computing in the Twentieth Century: A Collection of Essays with Introductory Essay and Indexes*, ed. N. Metropolis, J. Howlett, and Gian-Carlo Rota (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 126.

company to manage a machine that was supposed to eliminate clerical workers."[76] Direct interactions with computers for larger groups of people would not arise until minicomputers opened up new areas of applications in the late 60s. So generally speaking, many corporate managers began their working relationships with nerdy computer programmers with a bad taste in their mouths.

It is also of note that in the formative years of programming (to use the term anachronistically and retroactively) there was not only a strong association with dark magic and strange behavior, but both artistry and femininity as well.[77] The first coders for the ENIAC back in the mid-40s, considered by many historians of computing to be the first computer programmers, were all women—often referred to as "the ENIAC girls."[78] Rather than representing any sort of gender progressive thinking, however, the hiring of women to code the machine had more to do with the bias for hardware and engineering (applied engineering over pure science) which was "men's work," and what was then viewed as the simple and tedious task of coding the machine, which was essentially "glorified clerical work" fitting for women. This sort of gender bias had a dual effect: it initially gendered the work of programming as feminine, and it opened up early opportunities for important early female programmers, like Gertrude Blanche, Betty Holberton, and Grace Hopper.[79]

By the mid-50s, once people started to recognize the importance and complexity of programming, the perception of the work had shifted from mere clerical chores to

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[76] Paul E. Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 9.
[77] Brenda D. Frink, "Researcher reveals how 'Computer Geeks' replaced 'Computer Girls'," Gender News, The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University, June 1, 2011, http://gender.stanford.edu/news/2011/researcher-reveals-how-"computer-geeks"-replaced-"computergirls" (accessed August 12, 2015).
[78] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 35. See also W. Barkley Fritz, "The Women of Eniac," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 18, no. 3 (1996): 13-23.
[79] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 38.

demanding labor that emphasized both intelligence and creativity: programming as a

black art.[80] As Ensmenger writes, the "popular perception of computer programming as a

poorly understood, idiosyncratic process defined the discipline as it emerged in the

1950s, and continues to influence the culture and practice of programming even today."[81]

In short, during the formative years of software programming, the mysterious new field

took on all the connotations of intelligence, asocial behavior, artistry, and femininity that

would, for decades to come, mark it as a nerdy endeavor.

So while both computers and their nerdy programmers (the two go hand in hand

in their popular treatment) seemingly held a lot of potential promise for the corporate

world in the late 50s/early 60s, there was also a certain air of unease as well. This

conflicted sentiment over computers possibly being both good and bad can be seen in a

number of popular performances from this era. The "giant brain" version of the computer

had begun steadily appearing in American popular culture roughly during the mid-50s,

primarily in science fiction and fantasy short stories, movies, and the like.[82] One of the

earliest representations is the NOVAC, the fictional evil, murderous supercomputer of the

1954 low-budget movie *Gog*. Even the aforementioned *Forbidden Planet* in 1956 (see

chapter 1) emphasized the allure and the danger of the computer with both the benign

Robby the Robot and the intelligence-augmenting Krell supercomputer that winds up

being the engine that unleashes Dr. Morbius's id. In the 1957 film *The Invisible Boy*, the

virtuous Robby returns, pitted against another evil supercomputer bent on humanities

destruction. While many of these early films showcase the "thinking" supercomputer as a

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[80] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 40.
[81] Ibid., 47.
[82] Although one could easily argue that George Orwell was among the first to presage the importance of the new mainframe "supercomputer" (and its potential dangers) in his brilliant 1949 novel *1984*.

dangerous force, the threat posed within these films was relatively minimal. More often than not in these earlier "computer" films, there were also "good" robots like Robby to offset and finally help triumph over the evil supercomputer, projecting a relatively positive spin on the thinking machine in line with Isaac Asimov's optimistic, pro-human Laws of Robotics.[83] Many of the darker, more dystopic versions of the truly malevolent computer would tellingly not arise until later in the late 60s, such as HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).[84] Accordingly, these first steps of popularizing the computer in the broader culture of the late 50s/60s tended towards the fantastical and a certain romantic optimism for the novel new contraption, with only a hint of anxiety over how these machines might impact society. This sentiment regarding computers also seemed, to a degree, to apply to the nerdy programmers who operated them.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of the computer—and the nerdy computer programmer stereotype—in late 50s popular performance does not come from the realm of science fiction, but rather light-hearted romantic comedy, a genre move that suggests that the computer had finally arrived at its more permanent place in the broader American imagination. One of the popular Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn comedies, the film *Desk Set* (1957), serves as a telling marker of the American public's relatively optimistic (yet still anxious) understanding of computers just before the sentiments of the 60s would transition towards a more conflicted, problematic relationship. Furthermore, the film also encapsulates both the computer in corporate discourse as well as the nerdy

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[83] Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia!: Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005), 58-86. Also see, for example, Isaac Asimov, *Robot Visions* (New York, Penguin Books, 1990).
[84] Ibid., 87-114.

computer programmer stereotype.[85] As we shall see in the movie, as long as the computer

nerd supports the corporate hegemony—a "practical" endeavor—they are tolerated; if,

however, they seem to challenge that hegemony, they are subject to harsher stereotypic

treatment.

The film is set mainly at the mythical "Federal Broadcasting Network," where

Richard Sumner (Spencer Tracy) has been hired to install an "electronic brain" in the

network's Research Department.[86] Sumner is the brilliant but quirky inventor of the

cleverly named EMMARAC, and describes himself as a "methods engineer."[87] His

character is quickly established as a bit of an odd duck in the corporate setting, as well as

very absent-minded: he shows up to his meeting with President Azae (Nicholas Joy) a

day early having no idea what day it is, and he is consistently late throughout the movie.

He also loses things (like his tape measurer), and wears mismatched socks. Azae's

secretary refers to Sumner as "a character" when she calls to warn the Research

Department he is on his way down: "I don't know who he is. Some kind of nut I think. Or

somebody very important. Probably both."[88] Later his background credentials are

mentioned: he is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate from MIT where he received his "PhD in

Science," and during WWII he worked in Greenland on a top-secret project (we are left

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[85] The film *Desk Set* was based upon the play penned by William Marchant, *The Desk Set*, which opened on Broadway in late 1955 and ran for about 300 performances. It was eventually picked up by Twentieth Century Fox and adapted to the screen by Phoebe and Henry Ephron as another vehicle for the successful duo of Tracey and Hepburn. Directed by Walter Lang, the film was released in the U.S. in May of 1957, a few months before the launch of *Sputnik* and, as far as computers are concerned, at a crucial historical juncture since these new business machines were becoming more prevalent in the workplace. For the play version, see William Marchant, *The Desk Set* (New York: Samuel French, 1955). For some basic information on the play, see "Desk Set," Internet Broadway Database, http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2544 (accessed August 15, 2015).
[86] It is fun to note that the word "computer" is never used throughout the film, and the machine is consistently referred to as "the electronic brain." At that time, "computers" were the staff of people, usually women, who did the computing and the calculating.
[87] *Desk Set*, DVD, directed by Walter Lang (1957; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013).
[88] Ibid.

to connect the dots and figure out that he was likely working on computers for the military, as was common during the war).[89] It is also revealed that he is "one of the leading exponents of the electronic brain in this country, and the inventor and patent holder of an electronic brain machine called EMMARAC: the Electro-Magnetic Memory and Research Arithmetical Calculator."[90]

Besides being a brilliant, albeit absent-minded computer specialist, Sumner is also portrayed as a man who has no regard for social convention or sociability. He wanders into the Research Department without a word to "the Research girls," who clearly view him as a bit of a kook. Later, during a scene with the President of the network, the contrast between company man and computer specialist becomes stark, although within the playful confines of a comedy. When Sumner marvels at the President's massive office, President Azae quips that it is large to impress the sponsors, making it clear that a corporate man's job relies on schmoozing and impressing others with good people skills. The President then offers his other massive office to Sumner, who shrugs it off and declines, prompting the astonished President to remark, "You don't care whether you impress people or not, do you?"[91] The asocial Sumner, the computer specialist, is portrayed as relatively indifferent towards the highly valued "people skills" of the business world, which also gives his character a touch of humility. Later, it is noted that even though he is Phi Beta Kappa, he does not wear his key, which, it is stated, is likely either because he has lost it or is modest. This humility makes him an attractive character with whom the audience can identify; it also helps to counter any perception that Sumner,

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[89] *Desk Set.*
[90] Ibid. Also see the play: William Marchant, *The Desk Set* (New York: Samuel French, 1955), 27. Oddly enough, the name of the computer in the play version is spelled either as "Emmerac" or "Emmarac" throughout the script.
[91] *Desk Set.*

the brilliant inventor, might be an egotistical mad scientist. In brief, Sumner is a tolerable

nerd, a quirky, yet well-meaning guy who is there to support corporate authority. This

positive and sympathetic portrayal is further fostered by the fact that Spencer Tracy plays

the role, who more often than not played gruff-but-likable, down-to-earth characters.

While poking and prodding around the Research Department in order to see if his

computer will be useful there, Sumner comes across the indomitable Bunny Watson

(Katherine Hepburn), who runs the department with trademark grace and aplomb. Like

Sumner, Bunny is a bit quirky, but unlike the computer-oriented engineer, she is a book-

oriented researcher, a sort of versatile research librarian. While the book/computer

contrast serves to foil these two characters, it also serves to unite them: they are both

brilliant and loveable brainiacs.[92] Another characteristic that serves to bring these two

characters together is Bunny's astonishing memory: she is a bit of an "electronic brain"

herself. In their first extended scene together, they take lunch on the roof, another

awkward move on Sumner's part, but highly logical as he wishes to test Watson's

intelligence with "a personality questionnaire."[93] Of course, the brilliant Bunny leaves

Sumner flabbergasted by her exceptional ability in calculations, memory, logic, and

puzzles. Like Sumner, Bunny is also a tolerable nerd who works to support the world of

corporate business, although she is more of a book nerd like the aforementioned Henry

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[92] It should be noted that although it is somewhat unclear, the etymological roots of the term "brainiac" reveal that the word is most likely a portmanteau combining "brain" (or "electronic brain") and "ENIAC," although "maniac" might well be another possibility. It was likely popularized by the villain Brainiac of the Superman DC universe, who appears in the late 50s and is one of the earliest instances of the word's usage. See Evan Morris, "Brainiac," The Word Detective, http://www.word-detective.com/2007/07/brainiac/ (accessed August 15, 2015).
[93] *Desk Set*. These sorts of questionnaires were used to identify potential employees that might have a predisposition for programming: see below.

Bemis.[94] Overall, both characters are represented as brilliant and quirky, destined for one another, despite their minor differences.

As the plot moves forward, the "girls" of the Research Department worry that Sumner's computer will replace them and that they will lose their jobs. More than just a plot device, this threat becomes a theme that expresses some of the very real anxieties that were starting to arise in the late 50s and 60s as computers became more and more prominent in the corporate world. In the film, the "Research girls" make reference to the electronic brain down in payroll that Sumner also designed: "as soon as it was installed, half the department disappeared."[95] It should also be noted that this Research Department is run by and populated entirely by women; the corporate politics are also highly gendered: it is the jobs of these brilliant and capable women that are threatened by computerized automation, not those of the male management.[96]

Eventually, Christmas rolls around, and the Research Department attempts to forget the potential threat of losing their jobs. But that threat walks through the door in the character of Miss Warriner (Neva Patteron), an uptight young woman from Sumner's lab. She spills the beans, announcing that EMMARAC will be installed in the Research Department, and begins sizing up the place as if it were already her own, leaving Bunny

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[94] Bunny (and Miss Warriner) also stands as another example of a female nerd character, further exemplifying how stereotypical female nerd characters, while not as plentiful as their white male counterparts, existed in the earlier phases of the nerd stereotype.

[95] *Desk Set*.

[96] The theme of conflict between management and the computer programmer also resonates throughout the film, albeit in a highly romanticized fashion. After all, much of the plot focuses on the love triangle between Sumner, Watson, and the ambitious corporate manager Mike Cutler (Gig Young). Bunny Watson has been (sort of) involved with Cutler for a whopping seven years, something that greatly upsets Bunny's friend Peg (Joan Blondell), who feels that Bunny comes across too desperate and available and allows Cutler to take advantage of her. Cutler and Bunny are obviously not meant to be together; their worlds are entirely disparate, and his motives not entirely genuine. As for the performance of female nerds, it is worth noting that Bunny is aging and well past a "proper" marrying age, and Miss Warriner is seemingly a single working woman. In different ways, both are not quite performing their heteronormativity to the cultural standards of their day.

and the girls from Research crestfallen. While Sumner and Bunny exemplify quirky, tolerable nerds in the film, Miss Warriner represents the type of nerd *not* to be tolerated.

The character of Miss Warriner, while a smaller, one-dimensional role, is actually very telling with regard to the perception of the nerdy computer programmer during this period. After all, it is not Richard Sumner, the white male inventor and engineer of the computer, who is seen as the invasive villain of the piece, but Miss Warriner, the programmer and operator of the computer (not to mention an unmarried woman). In short, it is Miss Warriner who most thoroughly performs the stereotypical nerdy computer programmer. In many ways, Sumner and Warriner personify the aforementioned contrast between hardware and software during the late 50s and 60s: the former a quirky male inventor/engineer, the latter a female programmer or mere technician who potentially disrupts the corporate status quo.

Accordingly, while Bunny and the Research girls are hurt and upset by Sumner's seeming betrayal, they reserve their true contempt for the annoying Miss Warriner. She is always griping at the girls, who now have to help feed all of the information from their books into Warriner's computer. She yells at them for leaving the door open and letting out the air-conditioning (as previously mentioned, the old mainframes were installed in highly air-conditioned rooms to prevent them from overheating), for smoking, and for getting the dust from all of their disgusting old books near the machine. But as one expects, Miss Warriner gets her comeuppance when the girls refuse to help her with incoming research questions, which completely overwhelm her. In the end, Miss Warriner accidentally damages EMMARAC and loses her cool entirely, storming out of the room. This stuck-up clown can clearly never replace the clever girls of Research.

At the end of the film, all things resolve happily, of course. The girls who received their pink slips find out that they are not fired after all: it seems the computer in payroll accidently fired everyone in the building, including President Azae. Finally, Sumner reveals that EMMARAC was never there to replace the girls, but rather to help them with their research. He even suggests that they might have to hire more girls in the department: it seems that computers do not replace workers but rather create more employment opportunities. And with a mere hairpin from Bunny, Sumner is able to fix EMMARAC, which he uses (or tries to use) to confess his love for Bunny. Interestingly, Bunny playfully tells Sumner that she will not marry him because he will always love the computer more than her. He protests but then immediately contradicts himself when rushes off again to fix the computer. With a sense of happy resignation, Bunny seemingly accepts Sumner as he is, willing to play second fiddle to his beloved computer. Overall, the film not only wraps up the romantic plot with a tidy happy ending, it also portrays an exceptionally optimistic, ideal world where the computer and the computer specialist can happily merge with business and the corporate manager, just like a happy marriage.[97]

Taken all together, *Desk Set* portrays three different stereotypical nerds. The computer engineer Sumner and the research librarian Bunny serve as two prime examples of tolerable, practical nerds in service to the corporate world. The very fact that the two lead roles of a popular 50s Hollywood romantic comedy are a computer engineer and a

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[97] For more interpretations on *Desk Set*, see Nathan Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 137-40; Cheryl Knott Malone, "Imagining Information Retrieval in the Library: *Desk Set* in Historical Context," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 24, no. 3 (220): 14-22; Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 47-78; Tony Osborne, *"Greed Is Good" and Other Fables: Office Life in Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 117-21; and Steve Lohr, *Go To: The Story of the Math Majors, Bridge Players, Engineers, Chess Wizards, Maverick Scientists and Iconoclasts—The Programmers Who Created the Software Revolution* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001), 17-8.

research librarian bespeaks the new appreciation for intelligence that marks the second phase of the stereotype. Yet the presence of Miss Warriner, the unpleasant female computer programmer nerd, suggests that, even in this film from the late 50s, the negative associations of intelligence, asocial behavior, and gender misperformance were recognizable features of the nerdy computer programmer stereotype.

That said, overall *Desk Set* portrays the world of business computing in a rather rosy light, reflecting the view that in the late 50s, computers were still seen as novel gadgets full of promise by the broader public. However, as the character of Miss Warriner suggests, the real world, day-to-day operations of computing were a bit different and more contentious, and would only become more and more problematic throughout the 60s.[98] By further examining the nerdy figure of the computer programmer from the late 50s (the time of *Desk Set*) up to the late 60s and the "software crisis," one may trace the anxieties underpinning this particular nerd stereotype, anxieties that stem from the troublesome, competitive relationship between the nerdy computer programmer and the corporate manager.

Starting in the late 50s and early 60s, as computers became more and more ensconced in major American corporations and the larger world of business, a serious concern arose regarding this strange new breed of nerdy employee. Over time, the tone changed from romantic optimism to one of pessimism and "crisis."[99] More and more

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[98] It is no accident that the happy ending of the film blatantly allays the fear of being replaced by computers, a fear experienced by both the Research girls of the film and the larger American public in the late 50s. After all, the film was sponsored in part by the IBM Corporation, who had a vested interest in not only working in a bit of name recognition into the film (which it does), but also assuring the American public—and the corporate sector—that computers would only assist, not replace, the American worker.

[99] Funnily enough, from the late 50s onward, software, like masculinity, always seems to be in a state of "crisis." Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 25.

computers and those who programmed them were inducing more anxiety than awe.[100]

Much of the shift in tone can be attributed to the growing concerns over software and

programming stemming primarily from the business world. As software shifted from a

clerical afterthought to a critical factor in commercial computing, and with the number of

business computers on the rise, talented programmers were found to be in short supply. In

1956 at Wayne State University, during the first Conference on Training Personnel for

the Computing Machine Field, industry observers expressed concern for the pending

shortage of programmers.[101] Escalating from that moment forward, the "software gap"

became a pressing issue throughout the 60s, and how to recruit, train, and manage these

strange new computer programmers became a raising concern in the business world. And

while at first the main concern of the software gap was the general lack of computer

programmers, over the course of the 60s, it also took on the worried concern of what kind

of nerdy people these computer programmers were turning out to be.

   Much of the anxiety and disagreements over commercial software had to do with

rising costs of computers and computer personnel, the difficulty of finding capable

programmers at a time when the career had just came into existence, what skills

constituted a capable programmer, as well as the complex technical challenges involved

with software programming itself. But the anxieties also ran much deeper, stemming

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[100] Adding to the anxiety over software at this time, the popular press began reporting less on exciting new "giant brains" and more on software-related disasters, such as the Mariner I disaster in 1962, when NASA's probe to Venus failed supposedly due to a programming error. *The New York Times*, in their article, "For Want of Hyphen Venus Rocket Is Lost," reported that "the $18,500,000 failure" was due to "the omission of a hyphen in some mathematical data." Famous science fiction writer Arthur C. Clark would go on later to famously call it "the most expensive hyphen in history." Apocryphal or no, such popular press coverage did little to alleviate the concern over the growing software crisis, and also marked such failures as primarily fiscal disasters, the bane of any corporate endeavor. See Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine,* 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 180-1; Gladwin Hill, "For Want of Hyphen Venus Rocket is Lost," *New York Times*, July 27, 1962; and Arthur C. Clarke, *The Promise of Space* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 225.
[101] Ensmenger, 17.

from the perceived identity of the computer programmers. As Ensmenger articulates,

"What might on the surface appear to be disagreements about the particular technical

challenges associated with software development were in reality local disputes about

organizational power and authority, and […] about the peculiar character of the people

involved with software development."[102]

In short, the so-called software crisis of the 60s had much to do with the complex

and highly conflicted negotiation of power hierarchies in the business world. Suddenly

and seemingly out of nowhere, these "computer boys," (some of whom were "girls"),

showed up and disrupted the existing way that corporations did business.[103] In the early

50s, computers only threatened to replace clerical workers (no major loss to the powers

that be, since the clerical workers were mainly women who should be housewives

anyway), but by the early 60s, computer personnel seemed to be taking over the positions

of management and challenging the very hierarchy of corporate command—and that, of

course, constituted a " software crisis." Put simply, the nerdy computer programmer

began as a tolerable nerd because they were "practical" and desperately needed to operate

the computers that businesses wanted. But because these peculiar software nerds troubled

the corporate hierarchy, a so-called "crisis" arose on how these troublesome computer

geeks could be coerced into toeing the company line.

Accordingly, one of the first things to occur throughout the 60s was the partial

and problematic masculinization of the job of programming, making it a career primarily

for white men now that programming was starting to offer high salaries and access to

power. This process of re-gendering the job of programming as masculine became

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[102] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 11.
[103] Note the implied bias against youth and the younger generation implied by the term "boys."

institutionalized by the aptitude tests and psychological profiles that the industry used to

recruit at the time, tools which were biased towards men and masculine characteristics

and which effectively excluded women from the field.[104] Interestingly, the psychological

profiles suggested that the one really "striking characteristic" of these computer

programmers, both male and female, was "their disinterest in people."[105] Unlike the

sociable, other-directed organization men of the professional managerial class, the

computer programmer was essentially found to be asocial and not a team player, a

defining characteristic that served to pit him or her against the corporate hierarchy.

By the late 60s, the "software crisis" had reached a zenith, and much of that crisis

reflected not just the challenge that computers presented to corporate business models,

but also the problem of the very identities of the players involved. This new technology-

oriented class of supposedly feminized young white men (and persistent women), lacking

both people skills and a proper deference for authority, became more and more of a threat

to good business practices. Richard Brandon, for example, a prominent industry analyst,

warned that this new breed of computer folk did not integrate well into the corporate

world. In 1968, Brandon cautioned that the typical programmer was "excessively

independent," and "often egocentric, slightly neurotic, and he borders upon a limited

schizophrenia. The incidence of beards, sandals, and other symptoms of rugged

individualism or nonconformity are notably greater among this demographic group.

Stories about programmers and their attitudes and peculiarities are legion."[106] In a 1969

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[104] Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 51-82.
[105] Dallis Perry and William Cannon, "Vocational Interests of Computer Programmers," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 51, no. 1 (1967): 30, quoted in Ensmenger, 69.
[106] Richard Brandon, "The Problem in Perspective," in *Proceedings of the 1968 23rd ACM National Conference* (New York: ACM Press, 1968), 332-4, quoted in Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 69.

Fortune article entitled "Computers Can't Solve Everything," the writer suggests that "Computer people tend to be young, mobile, and quantitatively oriented, and look to their peers both for company and for approval […] Managers, on the other hand, are typically older and tend to regard computer people as mere technicians or as threats to their position and status."[107]

As Ensmenger argues, from the early 60s forward, "the stereotype of the scruffy, bearded, long-haired programmer, wearing (inappropriately) sandals and a T-shirt," came to dominate American popular culture: "He (always a he, at least in the stereotype) is usually curt, antisocial, and more concerned with maintaining the integrity of the 'system' than in being truly helpful to the end user."[108] In short, the nerdy computer programmer stereotype became that of a somewhat feminized young white male who, most definitively, did not respect elder corporate authority.[109] Contrasted with the clean-cut, clean shaven, shorthaired, manager wearing a suit and tie, the slovenly and rebellious computer boy was consistently found wanting. Interestingly, this conflict between young upstart programmer and elder traditional manager mirrored the very same generational conflict that has come to define American culture/counterculture by the late 60s, complete with reference to beards, sandals, and the controversial long hair.[110]

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[107] Thomas, Alexander, "Computers Can't Solve Everything," *Fortune* 80, no. 5 (1969): 169, quoted in Ensmenger, 22.

[108] Ensmenger, 2.

[109] While the nerdy computer programmer is one major type of stereotypical nerd, it is worth highlighting this subtle difference between the broader nerd stereotype and the more specific computer programmer stereotype—the nerd is generally construed as unctuously obsequious and overly deferential to authority, whereas the nerdy computer programmer is rendered as apathetic or disrespectful towards authority, if not downright rebellious. Again, such paradoxical discrepancies are not unfamiliar to the construction of stereotypes.

[110] This early stereotypical construction of the computer programmer would also eventually give rise to the important figure of the hacker, a source of much concern and discourse for decades to come.

By the late 60s, this scruffy computer programmer stereotype was firmly in place, and this, not coincidentally, was also a time when the so-called software crisis was at a peak. Just as these programmers began to take on pointedly negative connotations, the computers themselves had shifted in the public imagination from quirky mechanical brains to complex devices that promised utopia but actually threatened dangerous social upheaval. Accordingly, in the late 60s and beyond, many works of science fiction and fantasy began to represent the supercomputer as much more malevolent and disturbing (even totalitarian) than their earlier incarnations from the 50s.[111] The examples are too numerous to list completely, but a handful shall suffice: Jean Luc Godard's 1965 film *Alphaville*, featuring the supercomputer Alpha-60; D. F. Jones's novel *Colossus* in 1966; Frank Herbert's novel *Destination Void* also in 1966; Harlan Ellison's Hugo award-winning 1967 short story "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"; the *Star Trek* episode "The Return of the Archons" (season 1, episode 21), which aired in 1967; and perhaps mostly famously, the infamous computer HAL from Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[112] Overall, by the late 60s, mass media reflected the growing public concern over the potential downfalls and dangers of computers, as well as the curious folks who operated the devices.

In 1968, a conference sponsored by NATO was held in Germany entitled "Software Engineering," a provocative title that implied that programming needed to become a traditional, established, and respectable branch of engineering (as opposed to a

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[111] Part of this shift can also be attributed to the overall shift in tone in American cultural objects, especially films, from the idealistic 50s to the much more conflicted 60s, aided in part by the relaxation of the Production Codes.

[112] Dinello, *Technophobia!*, 87-114.

theoretical science or the haphazard work of rebellious proto-hackers).[113] This conference

has come to mark a major cultural shift in the way that programming was perceived. As

Campbell-Kelly and Aspray suggest, albeit somewhat problematically, this was roughly

the time when "Software writing started to make the transition from being a craft for a

long-haired programming priesthood to becoming a real engineering discipline. It was the

transformation from an art to a science."[114] Yet despite the best efforts of the conference

participants and their ilk, the "software crisis" continued,[115] as did the stereotype of the

rebellious young feminized white male computer programmer, which was inextricably

linked with the nerd stereotype itself.

Falling Back to Earth: American Brainpower in the Late 60s

As examined throughout this chapter, the late 50s/60s—especially the post-

Sputnik/JFK period—were a bit of a boon for the intellectually inclined. As evidenced

from nerd-related performances ranging from Charles van Doren's celebrity, television

coverage of the space race, and the Hollywood film *Desk Set*, intelligence and science

(and those who loved them) seemingly found a brief period of hope and respect. As long

as these intelligent nerds proved useful and practical, their quirky behaviors were

tolerated. While popular performances of these tolerable nerds generally placed them in a

secondary or supportive sidekick role, this was a distinctive step away from the marginal

and particularly unflattering performances of the highly anti-intellectual previous phase.

However, even within this handful of examples, a sort of anti-intellectualism

remains. Charles van Doren was appreciated more for his good looks and prize money

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[113] Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 105; Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, 24-5.
[114] Campbell-Kelly and Aspray, *Computer*, 181.
[115] Ensmenger, 24.

than his life of the mind; NASA would be beloved more for its masculine astronauts than its scientific advances; and the complex corporatization of computers eventually shifted from starry-eyed optimism to a crisis over software and the pesky programmers who threatened the corporate hierarchy. That said, the space race and the corporatization of computers especially mark an important evolutionary moment for the nerd stereotype in the 60s: both a love of outer space and computers becoming hallmarks of the nerd stereotype.

By the late 60s, the brief love affair America entertained with science, technology, education, and intelligence started to dissipate, evidenced not only by the aforementioned software crisis, but also the public's declining interest in the space race. In fact, before a man was even put on the moon, the public attitude had begun to swing back to its usual distrust of science. By the mid-60s, space expenditures started coming under concerted attack, and other social issues began to dominate the public imagination: the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War to name a few. By the late 60s and early 70s, public fascination with science and technology declined sharply, and for a number of possible reasons.[116] One potential reason may well be that the novelty had worn off after achieving the moon landing. Another is the rising of the counterculture with its decidedly anti-technological stance, with their call to ban the atomic bomb and dismantle the military-industrial complex.[117] Another powerful possibility is that many Americans watched on television, day after day, the failure of military science and technology during the Vietnam War, culminating in the Tet

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[116] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 98-101.
[117] Kurt Vonnegaut's 1969 *Slaughterhouse Five* encapsulates this sentiment nicely.

Offensive in 1968.[118] While America's love of space travel remained, albeit deflated in

the 70s, their overall appreciation of science and technology had declined sharply, except

in the hearts and minds of a few true believers, of course—those nerds who had

developed an insatiable appetite for all things science, tech, and outer space.[119]

The important trend of rendering certain nerds as tolerable explored in this

chapter clearly reflects both the loosening of anti-intellectual sentiment as well as the

radical transformations that took place in the technological landscape of the U.S. during

the late 50s/60s. But these broad changes were not the only transformations taking place

at the time—massive cultural shifts regarding race, gender, sexuality, and youth, after all,

have come to be seen as some of the most significant aspects of the 60s. In many

respects, traditional hegemonic white masculinity came under increasing pressure and

had to adapt to the times. As the nerd stereotype is intimately tied to such identity

politics, it too underwent subtle, yet vital adaptations.

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[118] This slow resurgence of anti-intellectualism in the late 60s would come to define the next, third phase of the nerd stereotype, and have an important impact on the nerd stereotype, all of which is covered in Part III.
[119] McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 101.

Chapter 4: Of Nerds and Playboys: Redeeming Intelligence for White Masculinity

Reconciling Intelligence and the White Male Nerd Stereotype

It is likely no surprise that in the specific historical context of the politically turbulent 60s, the nerd stereotype adapted in order to continue fulfilling its dual purpose of chastising white males who misperformed their masculinity and excluding the Other from the highest positions of power. In the previous chapter, it was argued that due mainly to a momentary (yet problematic) appreciation of intelligence in American culture in the late 50s/60s, two important trends dominate the second phase of the nerd stereotype: the trend of making nerds more "tolerable" if their work was deemed "practical" (i.e. deployed in service to hegemony), and the trend of making intelligence "redeemable" to white men concerned with their masculinity. This latter trend is the subject of this chapter, which examines the various cultural strategies that were deployed in an attempt to simultaneously overcome, to a degree, the feminizing effects of intelligence and to further demarcate that intelligence as the province of white males. In a general sense, American brainpower had to be marginally masculinized to make it more palatable to white American men.

This chapter will continue to explore this particular theme of redeeming intelligence for white masculinity in the late 50s/60s from primarily two perspectives. First, we will touch upon the various challenges to hegemonic white masculinity posed by the various political movements of the period, most especially the Civil Rights Movement, the burgeoning Women's Liberation Movement, and the Student Movement as well. Importantly, as the Civil Rights Movement gained more and more momentum,

intelligence was collapsed more and more into whiteness. As such, white female nerds—such as Zelda Gilroy (Sheila James) from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*—continued to proliferate, whereas black nerds remained conspicuously absent from popular performance. This sort of whitewashing of intelligence is, oddly enough, exemplified by the American conception of "Britishness"—in other words, Americans turned more to their stereotypical notions of the hyperwhite, intelligent Brit in the 60s as an outlet for their intellectual (and sexual) aspirations.

Finally, the chapter will give special attention to the archetypal masculine playboy, an exceptionally important "ideal male figure" in American culture between 1957 and 1969. Arguing that the playboy is essentially the antithesis of the nerd, particularly in terms of style and virility, I contend that while the former construct partially redeems intelligence, it only does so through the reinforcement of a promiscuous compulsory heteronormativity. Furthermore, the white male nerd stereotype, so often paired with the playboy in performance (as evidenced by the characters James Bond and Q), continues to demarcate the fine line between what constitutes too much intelligence and what constitutes just the right amount—namely that the right amount will get a white male laid, whereas too much will prevent that white male from "getting the girl." This emphasis on the heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype (i.e. nerds comically failing to get laid) will also be examined in detail through famous nerd performances in films such as *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961) and *The Nutty Professor* (1963). Overall, the chapter examines how, thanks to the slight recuperation of intelligence during the period, stereotypical nerd characters momentarily became somewhat more popular, and yet still enacted their heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics in support

of hegemonic white masculinity by further collapsing intelligence into whiteness and, to a degree, masculinity as well.

An Escape into (British) Whiteness: Identity Politics in the 60s

Identity politics dominated the domestic cultural discourse of America in the 60s, as blacks, women, and youth began to challenge the older white male hegemony with growing assertiveness as the decade progressed. While it is impossible to give each of the political and cultural movements its due here, it is necessary to at least touch upon a few of the important points in relation to the nerd stereotype, primarily because white masculine hegemony began to come under increasingly severe criticism from a number of marginalized groups. The nerd stereotype had to adapt to accommodate these cultural changes in order to retain its complex affiliation with intelligence, especially in terms of whiteness.[1]

As demonstrated by the growing Civil Rights Movement, frustration was understandably mounting for African Americans in the early 60s, evidenced by the sit-ins like the one in Greensboro and the Freedom Riders, which, it should be noted, were primarily instigated by young students involved in the Student Non-violent Co-coordinating Committee (SNCC). While often well-educated and intelligent young people (the four young blacks who started the Greensboro sit-in were freshmen at North Carolina A&T College), many of these politically active black students were not portrayed in the white mainstream media as possessing intelligence *per se*, but rather, for

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[1] See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189-210.

better or worse, defiant willpower. Just as in the 50s, the broader American culture had trouble picturing blacks living the life of the mind.[2]

So during this second phase of the nerd stereotype, we see much of the same exclusion from intellectual discourse, broadly construed, for black Americans that had dominated American culture for centuries.[3] If anything, due to the public prominence of intelligent and articulate civil rights leaders like MLK and Malcolm X, it seems that hegemonic whiteness needed to promote its own intelligence as being superior to these more visible black intellectuals, rather than accepting them into the fold.[4] Accordingly, we also see a continued promulgation of the black male as hypermasculine, hypersexual, and physically violent, which served to further distance the black male stereotype from the very white stereotype of the nerd. Taken altogether, then, the redemption of intelligence that typifies this period is very much a "white" sort of intelligence.

Alongside—and sometimes in collaboration with—the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s was the (re)emergence of Women's Liberation, which notably was mainly geared towards white middle-class women. In contrast to the sex-role ideals of the post-war period that insisted on housewifery, motherhood, and domesticity, there was a growing dissatisfaction among American women that suggested that there must be viable alternatives. This "problem that has no name" was famously articulated in Betty

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[2] See William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 146-76.

[3] And again, this applies doubly for black women, who seem especially ostracized from the mainstream (i.e. white) conception of intellectualism.

[4] It is important to recognize that the black intelligentsia certainly had its circles and brilliant thinkers, but here I am referring to the broad dissemination and circulation of black thought by major, white producing organizations.

Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, which helped many American women recognize that they were not alone in their dissatisfaction.[5]

Friedan's famous book is of particular note not only because it served as a clarion call for the eventual movement that would come to be called second wave feminism, but because much of Friedan's argument relies on the understanding of woman as an intelligent being. Her chapter "The Sex-Directed Educators" is an examination of how young women have essentially been brainwashed into prioritizing early marriage over their own education, and thereby excluding themselves from "involvement with the life of the mind."[6] Friedan includes testimony from various young women who remark that they used to love reading and science and intensive study, but learned to give it up.[7] "Don't be too enthusiastic about your work or anything," one college girl reports, "People who take things too seriously are more or less pitied or laughed at. […] An oddball."[8] Another young lady articulated that there was a danger in being "looked down upon as a total intellectual," and yet another stated, "If your husband is going to be an organization man, you can't be too educated."[9]

In fact, much of Friedan's argument is that due to the feminine mystique, women are deprived access to the life of the mind, and therefore much of the frustration that many women experience is in part intellectual frustration. On housewifery, Friedan writes:

> Surely there are many women in America who are happy at the moment as housewives, and some whose abilities are fully used in the housewife role. But happiness is not the same thing as the aliveness of being fully used. Nor is human

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[5] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 328-36.
[6] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 235.
[7] Ibid., 234.
[8] Ibid., 233.
[9] Ibid.

intelligence, human ability, a static thing. Housework, no matter how it is expanded to fill the time available, can hardly use the abilities of a woman of average or normal intelligence, much less the fifty per cent of the female population whose intelligence, in childhood, was above average.[10]

In short, when Friedan references "that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'," part of that "something more" is education, intelligence, and, frankly, the inalienable right to behave like a stereotypical nerd.[11]

The 50s stereotype of the unattractive, "oddball" female nerd who will never be able to marry still held sway well into the 60s, but in accordance with *The Feminine Mystique* and this growing recognition that women wanted access to brainpower as well, female nerd representation increased concurrently with male nerd representation.[12] This increase in white female nerd representation suggests two important points. First, that it is mainly the cultural capital of whiteness (and its conflation with intellect) more than womanhood that granted white women the entrée into mediated nerd imagery, something that black folk were totally denied. Second, the number of white female nerds likely increased in response to the rising cultural discourse regarding women and their intellectual frustration, which in turn was often represented as gender misperformance, but also garnered a degree of sympathetic purchase in the broader culture. In fact, one of the most popular stereotypical nerd performances—male or female—in the early 60s was

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[10] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 359.

[11] Ibid., 78.

[12] One can make an argument that the eponymous heroine from the 1959 film *Gidget*, played by Sandra Dee, starts off as a bit of a nerdy tomboy. In the short-lived TV series *Gidget* (1965-1966) starring Sally Field, however, it is more her friend Larue Wilson (Lynette Winter) that comes across as shy, awkward, and generally geeky.

the gender misperforming character of Zelda Gilroy (Sheila James) on the popular CBS television series *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963).[13]

One of the first major television programs to feature teenagers as the leads, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* primarily follows the romantic misadventures of titular Dobie Gillis (Dwayne Hickman), your stereotypical, clean-cut young white male teen trying to pick up girls—very much like Archie from the Archie Comics. And like Archie, Dobie has a slacker best friend, beatnik Maynard G. Krebs (Bob Denver), who, like Jughead, serves primarily to "normalize" our "All-American" male teen hero. Other character parallels abound: Reggie and rich antagonist Chatsworth Osborne, Jr. (Steve Franken), Betty/Veronica and blonde, money-obsessed Thalia Menninger (Tuesday Weld), etc. But one of the most interesting and popular characters was the unabashed female nerd Zelda Gilroy, who in many ways is the female equivalent to Dilton Doiley.[14]

Zelda first appears in the episode "Love is a Science," which aired October 13, 1959, where she becomes suddenly smitten with Dobie in science class due to, as she puts it, "propinquity"—their constant nearness (they are consistently sitting next to each other due to their last names and an alphabetical seating arrangement.)[15] While Dobie struggles with science class, Zelda is a true science nerd, so she helps her beloved Dobie with all his work—until she realizes she is being used. Still, from this moment on and for the rest of the series, Zelda would plot humorous ways to make the stubborn Dobie requite her affection. Like Dora from *Father Knows Best* (see chapter 2), the intelligent

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[13] For basic information on the series as well as popular musings, see "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis," IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052490/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt (accessed August 2, 2016); and "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Many_Loves_of_Dobie_Gillis (accessed August 2, 2016).

[14] For more on Dilton and the Archie gang, see chapter 1.

[15] Max Shulman and Kenneth L. Evans, "Love is a Science," *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Rod Amateau, aired October 13, 1959 (Los Angeles, CA: Shout! Factory, 2013), DVD.

Zelda misperforms her gender by aggressively going after the man. Unlike Dora, however, Zelda and her intellect actually garnered audience sympathy and support.

The character of Zelda was an immediate hit and grew in popularity, shifting from a one-off to a recurring, and then to a semi-regular character. She was even popular enough to warrant a spinoff pilot for consideration in the 62-63 season, although CBS passed on the show. Regardless, throughout *Dobie Gillis*, Zelda was portrayed as highly intelligent, scientifically minded, ambitious, and academically successful—which in turn rendered the young woman as comical and unattractive in the eyes of Dobie—which importantly was often portrayed more as a fault on Dobie's part than on Zelda's. Her unrelenting interest in Dobie usually annoyed him to no end, and was a source of much comedy in the series, but as most fans attested, they wanted the two to end up together.[16] As such, Zelda was a sympathetic fan favorite and, more often than not, was portrayed in a relatively positive fashion, usually getting the upper hand of Dobie in some way by the end of the episode.[17]

Not only does the somewhat sympathetic performance of the character of Zelda suggest a particular appreciation for intelligence and education during the early 60s in a general sense, the character also highlights, to a small degree, how that appreciation applied to young white women as well as young white men. In this way, one could argue that Zelda's popularity presaged many of the sentiments of *The Feminine Mystique*—namely that women wanted access to the life of the mind.

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[16] A reunion TV pilot in 1977 depicted Dobie and Zelda as married, as did a later 1988 TV movie reunion production.

[17] In an interesting twist, the talented actress who portrayed Zelda, Sheila Kuehl, was at the time a closeted lesbian. After retiring from acting, Kuehl went on to be an openly gay politician in the state of California. In a fascinating interview, she relates that one of the reasons her own pilot show was not picked up was because the CBS executives found the character of Zelda "too butch." For the interview with Shelia Kuehl, see "Sheila Kuehl," Archive of American Television, emmytvlegends.org, Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Foundation, http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/sheila-kuehl (accessed August 3, 2016).

While *The Feminine Mystique* was an important milestone, the Women's

Movement would take time to gather steam. By the late 60s—particularly evidenced by

the establishment of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966—women had

begun to achieve "an independence and autonomy that challenged some of the basic

assumptions of the dominant culture," although much of the "ultimate impact of the

Women's Movement would come later" in the 70s.[18] That said, with more women in the

workplace and more women demanding their equal rights, especially regarding access to

education and the life of the mind, women were beginning to make their voices heard in

the broader culture. Rather than being frightened into submission by the female nerd

stereotype, many women now seemingly wanted access to the freedom of intellectual

expression.

Similar to the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, the youth-

propelled Student Movement was also of special importance in the 60s, particularly

regarding the nerd stereotype.[19] Starting roughly with the Students for a Democratic

Society (SDS) in 1962, many American youth began rejecting the dominant culture

established by their parents. They critiqued the culture of conformity and careerism in the

U.S., they critiqued racial bigotry, and they critiqued the atomic bomb. In short, the

younger generation became political—or at least a notable portion did for the moment. Of

particular significance is that these "were the children of the baby boom," those who

benefitted most from "America's postwar economic growth and affluence," and had

sharply and decisively separated themselves from the deeply held political convictions of

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[18] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 335. For more on Women's Liberation in the late 60s/early 70s, see chapter 5.

[19] While the Student Movement (also often referred to as the Youth Movement) was perhaps not as formalized and singular as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement (it actually overlapped with them to a high degree), it clearly played a large part in the American cultural discourse of the 60s.

their parents.[20] This separation was not only political and ideological, but also spatial. With increasing regularity, older teenagers were spending their most formative years at a university, where, in their parent's eyes, they were transformed into someone they often no longer recognized. As Chafe summarizes, "In 1940, only 15 percent of young people from the ages 18 to 22 attended college. By 1965, that figure had mushroomed to 44 percent. By the end of the decade, more than 6 million students would be enrolled in college—four times as many as in the 1940s."[21]

However, as evidenced by the Free Speech Movement and the subsequent confrontations with the establishment on the Berkeley campus of the University of California in 1964 and 1965, the Student Movement, like the Civil Rights Movement, was becoming more adamant and radicalized. Throughout the late 60s, many young Americans, especially college students, became galvanized not only to protest the stultifying effects of the conservative institutionalization of the machine-like university, but also the military escalation of the Vietnam War.[22] Generally speaking, the rise of the Student Movement reflected and fostered not only a radical generation gap between youth and adults, it also fostered the cultural perception that coolness was reserved for youth culture, whereas being uncool was the providence of adults. Out of this radical political and cultural shift in much of American youth emerged the famous counterculture of the 60s and the image of the hippie, whose fashions and behaviors were specifically crafted antithetically to the dominant culture.[23]

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[20] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 320.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 323.
[23] Ibid., 326.

The long-haired hippie figure of the 60s is another important archetype, especially with regard to formation of white masculinity during that era.[24] However, the nerd stereotype and the hippie stereotype are, in most respects, antithetical in nature.[25] Namely, it is the supposed open and promiscuous sexuality of the hippie that places them in firm contrast with the asexuality of the nerd. Like the Beats before them, the hippie also garners knowledge from experience (as opposed to books or electronic brains), from a connection with nature and the environment (as opposed to civilization and institutions), and from mind-altering drug use (as opposed to the stark sobriety of the nerd). The hippie was all about physical pleasure and community, and the hard-working mental studiousness and asocial behavior of the nerd served only to strengthen the perception that hippies were cool, and that nerds would continue to be not cool.[26] This difference between the nerd and the hippie in the 60s, fostered indirectly by the Student Movement, marks a more complex departure from the previous phase with regard to models of white masculinity. Now not only was the white male nerd contrasted with the

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[24] Before the 60s, "long-hair" usually referred to any male who exhibited feminine characteristics, and was often used to describe overly intelligent, overly cultured absent-minded professor types, especially those with a geeky passion for classical music. However, after the 60s, the image of the phrase predominantly shifted to conjure the hippie stereotype instead, although the connotation of emasculation clearly remains prevalent in both. See, for example, Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 64.

[25] While largely antithetical, both the male hippie and the male nerd do share an important feature: effeminacy, which in this historical context places both stereotypes in a vital juxtaposition with that dominant, long-standing image of masculinity: the active, physical, brave, violent solider. See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 190. It is also worth noting that the hippie shares certain commonalities with the nerdy computer programmer stereotype (see chapter 3), namely a disrespect for competition, careerism, and corporate America—not to mention the prerequisite long hair, beards, and sandals that symbolize that disrespect.

[26] It is worth noting that both the image of the 50s Beat and the image of the 60s hippie, almost as soon as they arose in their respective cultural climates, were almost instantaneously "transformed" in the dominant cultural discourse into utterly ridiculous stereotypes: the Beat became the foolish beatnik and the hippie became, well, the ridiculous hippie. This shift to object of ridicule is so sudden for both, I feel, because both assumed, successfully or no, such a decisively political stance in opposition to the dominant culture, an opposition which of course had to be swiftly counteracted and subdued by hegemonic discourse through mass ridicule. This is almost the opposite of what happened to the nerd stereotype, which generally speaking started out ridiculous and (relatively) apolitical—no nerds were fighting aggressively for their civil rights in the 60s or at any time for that matter—and only began to be taken "seriously" later.

hypermasculine ideal, his status as an uncool youth took on even greater significance in the 60s.

One of the most significant features of the hippie/nerd contrast is that of group affiliations with the respective generations: hippies were young and proud, and nerds were essentially youthful traitors that unwittingly supported their older oppressors. Much of the hippie mantra relied on anti-institutionalism, including that of the university system itself, whereas the studious and obsequious nerd was viewed as a brown-nosing patsy of the system. This perception of nerds as over-conforming to the university extended to the entire adult generation: nerds became those studious youth who behaved and did what their parents and teachers told them to do, whereas hippies rebelled against such strictures, which in turn made them "cool." As nerds were associated with the very "un-groovy" older generation, their overall "style" reflected the relationship: they dressed in the older 50s fashions of their parents (horn-rimmed glasses, white button-down shirt, bowtie, etc.), they still appreciated the old-fashioned hobbies foisted upon them like stamp collecting and ham radio operating, they did not drink or take drugs, and they most certainly did not engage in free love. Along these same lines, the nerd stereotype presumably did not have a proper appreciation of rock and roll and the other "cool" genres of youth-oriented music of the 60s.

And it is this contrast in musical tastes that is, funnily enough, particularly telling with regard to the nerd stereotype in the 60s, primarily because popular music in America continued to be highly informed by both the politics of age and race. Nerds, in theory, listened instead to the uncool, old-fashioned music of their parents and grandparents,

especially classical music and Broadway showtunes.[27] Popular music, which is always

important to youth culture and its perceived identity (as well as youth-driven

consumerism), was of especial significance in the 60s (take, for example, Woodstock)

primarily because of its relationship to the counterculture. It is, after all, no accident that

rock and roll (and its various related subgenres, like folk rock and acid rock) became a

primary pillar of that triumvirate of all things cool (i.e. *not* for nerds): sex, drugs, and

rock and roll.

While rock and roll still maintained the association it had developed with black

culture in the 50s, the genre had taken on a distinctive relationship with whiteness in the

60s, perhaps best summed up by the British Invasion. Generally speaking, many British

cultural borrowings were suddenly popular in the U.S. in the 60s, from the mod style to

(as we shall see below) James Bond.[28] This is a particularly puzzling phenomenon,

considering that, in the American imagination, nurtured as it is by its old colonial past

and nationalistic biases, all things English are usually labeled aristocratic, stuffy,

pompous, intellectual, effete, and pasty white—in other words, nerdy.[29]

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[27] In terms of Broadway showtunes, here begins the great cultural divide that made musicals old-fashioned, conservative, and for "old folks," as opposed to rock and roll and other genres more oriented to a youth consumer base. The fact that many of the Academy Award winning films of the 60s were musicals, perhaps, speaks to the older generation's desire to escape to happier, simpler times, and not face the domestic turmoil occurring throughout their nation and abroad as well. Regardless, musicals would become very "uncool" for the next three or four decades, making any passionate fan of the musical—a musical theatre geek, as it were—very nerdy. The genre would also shortly take on its popular conception as both "for women" and "for homosexuals," another example of the complex gender and sexual politics involved in geek interests.

[28] For more on the American perception of "Britishness" during the 60s, see Herbert J. Gans, "Who's O-O-Oh in America," *Vogue*, March 15, 1965, 108, 151.

[29] Recall from Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* that the primitivism and populism that fosters American anti-intellectualism stems in part from the long-held perception of "'decadent' Europe as more barbarous than 'natural' America." (158) The English (and the French) in particular have long been seen as over-civilized, over-educated, and effete in the American imagination, and hence their consistent conflation with the nerd stereotype as an unmasculine form of hyperwhiteness. In a similar vein, in his framework of American masculinity, Kimmel calls this masculine archetype "the Genteel Patriarch," which represents "a dignified aristocratic manhood, committed to the British upper-class code of honor and to well-rounded character, with exquisite tastes and manners and refined sensibilities" (13). Even the

This general appreciation for Britishness in the 60s is another indication of the recuperation of intelligence in American culture. Yet it also suggests, since hyperwhite "Anglo-ness" is often situated in contrast to blackness in the biased American imaginary, why certain British cultural performances resonated in the States in the 60s—as the Civil Rights Movement unsettled the nation more and more, the more the nation turned, perhaps paradoxically, to Britishness for coolness and sexiness instead of blackness. The British Invasion, then, may be seen as a cultural moment, from the American perspective, where the hyperwhiteness of the British performers helped to counterbalance or gloss the blackness of the genre of rock and roll, thereby making it more acceptable to the culture at large.[30]

The most pronounced manifestation of this American love of Britishness is the Beatlemania of the mid-60s, which helped to make rock and roll white(er) through its performance of Britishness.[31] As Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs suggest in their article on Beatle fandom, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun," the perception of Elvis was "visibly lower class and symbolically black,"[32] and Elvis,

stereotypical constructions of non-American nationalities play an important role in the construction of American masculinity. Interestingly, I would argue that this American stereotypic view of the British as nerds would in future decades become another vital feature of the American nerd identity: anglophilia. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 158; and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

[30] Just like Elvis before them, many rock bands of the British Invasion can be seen as appropriating blackness without the black bodies. My argument here is just as the whiteness of Elvis made rock and roll more popular and palatable to white American audiences, the *hyper*whiteness of the bands of the British Invasion erased the black roots of the genre even further.

[31] In particular, the release of their first hit single "From Me to You" in 1963 and their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964 roughly mark the height of Beatlemania.

[32] Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 100.

they say, "stood for a dangerous principle of masculinity."[33] In contrast to Elvis, however,

> the Beatles were almost respectable. They wore suits; they did not thrust their bodies about suggestively; and to most Americans, who couldn't tell a blue-collar, Liverpudlian accent from Oxbridge English, they might have been upper class. What was both shocking and deeply appealing about the Beatles was that they were, while not exactly effeminate, at least not easily classifiable in the rigid gender distinctions of middle-class American life.[34]

Part of what lent the (early) Beatles their distinctive, sexy androgyny, the heartthrob status that catapulted them to such fame (especially among their young female fan base) was the American stereotypic perception of Britishness, which rendered them as poised neutrally between hyperwhiteness (due to their nationality) and blackness (due to their status as rock stars). While the iconography of the Fab Four was most certainly not that of the nerd stereotype, their exceptional popularity is certainly indicative of the hyperwhiteness, effeminacy, and upper-class elitism that the American associates with Britishness, which in the discourse of rock and roll helped to counter older associations with blackness.[35] And while the Beatles may not have reinforced the particular notion that intelligence is the providence of whiteness, they certainly went a long way to showcasing how whiteness could be sexy and cool, just like blackness.

If the American cultural turn to Britain (and Swinging London) reveals anything about American culture, it is how—in light of the Civil Rights Movement, the stirrings of the Women's Movement, and the Student Movement—white American males of the 60s

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[33] Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun," 101.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Of course, the Beatles were not upper crust Englishmen in reality. As mentioned in the block quote above, they came from a working class, Liverpool background. But as also suggested in the block quote, most Americans, due to essentializing stereotypic national biases, ignorantly assume that "all things British" are inherently sophisticated, upper crust, and intellectual.

were searching for new models of sexuality and masculinity.[36] Furthermore, with blacks

demanding their civil liberties with increasing passion and well-articulated reason, and

with women demanding a right to leave the homestead to pursue the life of the mind,

hegemonic white masculinity also needed to redeem the intelligence it so thoroughly

debased in the previous decade. For white male hegemony to continue, it would have to

adapt. Intelligence had to remain the province of whiteness, of course, but be redeemed

with regards to masculinity, yet without turning to blackness (as it so often does). What

was needed was a new archetype, a white straight male that was brilliant and cultured, yet

not feminized or sexually neutered by his brilliance and culture. Out of this immediate

and pressing cultural need, the archetype of the playboy thrived.

The Playboy and the Nerd Stereotype: James Bond and Q

If white American men of privilege and power were pointing to the British as

models of masculinity by the mid-60s, something had certainly shifted in the construction

of white masculinity in the United States. Hegemonic masculinity—particularly that

American brand of hegemonic masculinity from the late 40s and 50s—was for the most

part coming under a number of challenges and critiques throughout the 60s, from the

aforementioned Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Student

Movement, to name a few.[37] Some white men were supportive of the changes, others

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[36] "Swinging London" is, generally speaking, a cultural trend and style from London that arose out of the youth culture of the mid-60s that celebrated hedonism and all things new and exciting. It also resonated with a certain free-wheeling sexuality. Along with (and part of) the British Invasion, it also had a large impact on American culture as well, and certainly furthered the notion that whiteness, through a "cool" stylishness, could be rendered sexy and cool.

[37] One could—and should—also explore the connections and contradictions between the nerd stereotype in the 60s and the Gay Liberation Movement as well as the American Indian Movement (AIM, or also the Red Power Movement), and the Chicano Movement (the Brown Berets or *Los Boinas Marrones*).

were wary, while still others were aggressively obstinate in their resistance to what they viewed as a threat to America and masculinity itself.

For this intractable latter group (frankly, the majority), once again escape into masculine fantasy was the order of the day, as they turned to ideal masculine icons like Clint Eastwood in the spaghetti westerns and other, similar figures. But cowboys were becoming old-fashioned and passé, the stuff of nostalgia. Eventually, even the powerful masculine image of the obedient soldier—the young son who obeys his elders and exhibits hypermasculine bravery (and violence) in the defense of his beloved nation— was, especially by the late 60s, a questionable figure. Even "the most reliable refuges for beleaguered masculinity, the soldier/protector," Kimmel writes, "fell into such disrepute as the news about Vietnam filtered home that even today Vietnam veterans are seen by some as having acted out an excessive and false hypermasculinity."[38] True, the astronaut served as a highly compelling ideal of American masculinity, but clearly not every American could be an astronaut despite the dreams of many American boys. Becoming a nerd, of course, was by no means a proper method of masculine escape, but his polar opposite—the playboy—provided the romantic escapist image of masculinity that many men in the 60s so desperately craved.

The new ideal role model of the playboy came to the fore in the late 50s, arising primarily between the racy pages of a controversial new magazine called *Playboy*. Unlike many of the other men's magazines that started up in the 50s that capitalized on the image of the rugged outdoorsy man—*Male, Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men, Impact: Bold True Action for Men*, and *True*—*Playboy* took a slightly different tack.[39]

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[38] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 190.
[39] Ibid., 183.

Sure, they all suggested the misogynistic sexual domination of attractive young women, but instead of placing masculinity in the milieu of athleticism, nature, and the outdoors, *Playboy* placed it squarely (and yet not as *squares*) in the comfortable, hyper-heterosexual bachelor pad.

The first issue of *Playboy* appeared in December of 1953, and by 1956, it passed the one million mark in sales, making the magazine one of the most popular in American history by the late 50s and early 60s.[40] This was due not only to the photos of voluptuous female beauties, but also because it suggested another avenue of male rebellion for the American man, an image of manliness that challenged conformity, maturity, and the role of the breadwinner. For *Playboy* clearly loved women, but heartily despised wives, seeing marriage as a trap that sucked the life out of the poor "beleaguered male."[41] In certain respects, by challenging conformity, maturity, and marriage in the late 50s, the magazine was revolutionary. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes, "through its articles, its graphics and its advertisements *Playboy* presented, by the beginning of the sixties, something approaching a coherent program for the male rebellion: a critique of marriage, a strategy for liberation (reclaiming the indoors as a realm for masculine pleasure) and a utopian vision (defined by its unique commodity ensemble)."[42] Regardless of whether or not this rebellion was fair, successful, or just downright sexist, the magazine nevertheless helped to create the escapist image of the playboy, who "was a domesticated bachelor […], a stereotypic ladies' man now offered up as a new model for manliness."[43]

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[40] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), 42.

[41] Myron Brenton, *The American Male* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), 80. Brenton writes that, in the presence of the Playboy bunny, the playboy "can seem like the most intelligent of men, for no intelligence is needed" (81).

[42] Ehrenreich, 50.

[43] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 184.

In terms of the nerd stereotype, the playboy archetype positions itself in an antithetical fashion—the playboy is suave, manly, and attractive, whereas the nerd is clumsy, feminized, and unattractive. However, they do share one important commonality: they are both cultured and intelligent. As Cuordileone posits, the "prototypical *Playboy* male reader, […] was a highbrow, an urbane man of taste and intellect."[44] Here was a man that eschewed marriage and the suburban home for all the manly consumer comforts that money could buy, money that was not to be sucked out of him by some gold-digging wife. But it is particularly the "aura of intellectuality and style" that makes the playboy different from the gray flannel drones duped into marriage.[45] With regard, moreover, to the appreciation of intelligence (or the projection thereof), both the nerd stereotype and the playboy archetype tread common ground. This intellectuality of the playboy illuminates both the general recuperation of intelligence in the late 50s/60s and a drastic change in masculine role models from the previous phase, where it was the modest common sense of the average joe that was celebrated, not the feminizing, even subversive trait of intelligence.

Due to this shared characteristic of cultured intelligence, the same can be said about the appreciation of typically feminizing hobbies and activities: the nerd and the playboy supposedly share a love of the private sphere and, depending on your point of view, geeky pursuits. As Hefner himself wrote in the first issue of *Playboy*, in contrast to the other 50s men's magazines that showed men "thrashing through thorny thickets or splashing about in fast flowing streams," the playboys "plan spending most of our time

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[44] K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 196.
[45] Ibid.

inside. WE like our apartment."[46] Hefner also writes in this premiere issue that he and his

fellow playboys "enjoy mixing up cocktails and an *hors d'oeuvre* or two, putting a little

mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet

discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex."[47] Suddenly, the playboy made it somewhat

more acceptable to appreciate the arts, sip martinis, to read fine literature, to listen to

"classy" music, to discuss philosophy—activities traditionally thought to be reserved for

eggheads and nerds. The playboy also fought to gain control over the feminizing

association with the private sphere, reclaiming it as masculine territory: the indoors had

become their new frontier.[48]

There are, however, two vital differences that forever separate the nerd from the

playboy: style and virility. The playboy is resolutely suave and debonair; he is cool, calm,

collected, and composed at all times. He may not say much, but when he does, it is

poignant, witty, and urbane.[49] As for his image, he always cuts a dashing figure wearing

the finest clothes (see his expensive well-tailored suit or, perhaps more predominant, his

Hefner-esque smoking jacket) drinking the finest drinks, smoking the best cigars, and

purchasing the finest gadgets and décor for his tasteful bachelor pad. He has style, which

in this case is of a decidedly aristocratic flavor, but still populist in that any American

man could aspire to be him.

The nerd, on the other hand, is defined by a complete lack of style and no social

graces whatsoever. While the playboy thrives in the social sphere when he leaves his

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[46] Quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 44.
[47] Ibid.
[48] This notion of the playboy's so-called "bachelor pad" is an intriguing one, as it clearly connects to the more contemporaneous, more hypermasculine "man cave," as well as the notion that nerds never leave their basements, forever trapped indoors away from sports and sunlight (one reason why they are so pasty (hyper)white) and glued to their computer screens.
[49] He also apparently drinks Dos Equis as well. The advertising campaign featuring "the Most Interesting Man in the World" is a contemporary example of the playboy as older roué.

bachelor pad, wooing ladies left and right, the nerd resolutely fails when he leaves his basement, sounding ridiculous and annoying with his speech (both in terms of sound, which is often high-pitched, nasal, or whiny; and also in terms of subject matter, which is often esoteric, science-related jargon) and lacking any physical composure whatsoever, clumsy, bumbling, and uncoordinated as he is often portrayed during this period.

The key contrast between the nerd and the playboy, however, is virility. The playboy has it; the nerd definitively does not. Most importantly, the playboy relies on the old trope of confirming masculinity through heterosexual intercourse.[50] And it is the playboy's ceaseless, youthful sexual virility that makes him stylish, that makes it permissible for him to stay indoors and partake in certain slightly feminizing activities. As he is incessantly affirming and reaffirming his virile heterosexuality, be it by making love to a gorgeous new lady every weekend or just by having a subscription to *Playboy*, the playboy figure is confirming both his virility and his heterosexuality. In an important sense, the playboy is conspicuously and compulsively heterosexual to stave off accusations of being a queer sissy or homosexual, the worst of possible charges American culture during this period. As Ehrenreich summarizes,

> The real message [of *Playboy*] was not eroticism, but escape—literal escape, from the bondage of breadwinning. For that, the breasts and bottoms were necessary not just to sell the magazine, but to protect it. When, in the first issue, Hefner talked about staying in his apartment, listening to music and discussing Picasso, there was the Marilyn Monroe centerfold to let you know there was nothing queer about these urbane and indoor pleasures. And when the articles railed against the responsibilities of marriage, there were the nude torsos to reassure you that the alternative was still within the bounds of heterosexuality.[51]

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[50] Although Tom Lee from *Tea and Sympathy* is much more a nerd than a playboy, his desperate attempt to "prove his masculinity and heterosexuality" by have sex recapitulates this very same trope, a trope that is definitive to the playboy archetype. See chapter 1 for more on the sissy Tom Lee in *Tea and Sympathy*.
[51] Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 51.

In a certain sense, then, the playboy must successfully prove, again and again through incessant performative iteration, that he is a stylish, virile heterosexual to ensure his white masculine power and privilege and intellect—and to avoid charges of being a nerd. It is perhaps not a historical accident that these two figures, these two sides of the same coin, came into being roughly one after the other: the nerd stereotype first, and then, in the late 50s, the playboy archetype, almost as if in response, a partial attempt to resuscitate the life of the mind, albeit couched in promiscuous heterosexuality. In any case, the American playboy archetype developed and took hold with startling rapidity, becoming a dominant figure of masculinity by the early 60s and well beyond.

In his *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America*, Bill Osgerby writes

> As the dominant culture increasingly embraced an ethos of leisure-oriented consumption, images of youth and masculinity emerged as complementary, entwined emblems for American post-war prosperity and success—a synthesis of cultural signifiers that found its apotheosis in the image of the playboy. Prosperous and independent, virile and irrepressible, the suave and smooth-talking playboy arose during the 1950s and early 1960s as one of the defining icons of American vitality and modernity.[52]

The playboy archetype, merging youthful vitality, virile heterosexuality, and conspicuous consumerism became by the early 60s the ultimate masculine escapist fantasy—for middle-class white males, particularly. And unlike the exceptionally rare, yet inspirational astronaut or the old-fashioned cowboy, any American man had the potential to become a playboy, provided that he could partake in the consumption of the affluent trademark commodities that were the hallmark of the stereotype, the "props" that allowed

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[52] Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 4.

for the performance of playboyism: the stylish and well-furnished bachelor pad, the state-of-the-art hi-fi turntable, upscale clothes, haute cuisine and fine liquors, etc.

There are many cultural indicators of the prominence of the playboy stereotype during this period, from the 1959 movie *Pillow Talk*, to the popularity of Burt Bacharach's swingin' tunes, to the flourishing of swanky Playboy Clubs across the U.S. One of the most vibrant examples of playboys in action in the early 60s was the much-publicized antics and carousing of Sammy Davis, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and other members of the Rat Pack, who not only helped to make Las Vegas the cool place to be, but modeled a sort of stylish masculinity to the enthralled American male.

Even the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, lived and performed a conspicuous playboy masculinity.[53] In many ways, the iconography of JFK rested on a youthful hypermasculinity, and the public perception of his personal playboy style and virility served to foster his masculine credentials. Interestingly, while remaining overtly hypermasculine, the playboy stylings of JFK also redeemed intelligence to a degree. As Cuordileone remarks,

> The Kennedy style was distinctly and resolutely masculine, and if there was one notable stylistic accomplishment that marked Kennedy's presidency, it was a reconciliation of intellect, education, cultural refinement, and liberalism itself with masculine virility. The disjuncture between American manhood and virility so often observed in the 1950s found its antidote in the New Frontier.[54]

In short, Kennedy's "coolness" and playboy style "had masculinized the liberal intellectual, made him tough, cool, cynical, adventurous, and not a little frisky."[55] In many ways, the playboy archetype reaches its fullest cultural expression through the

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[53] While the degree to which JFK embodied the playboy archetype was not fully understood by the broader American public until later in hindsight, his iconography at the time still resonated greatly—and visibly—with the playboy archetype.
[54] Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 169-70.
[55] Ibid., 188.

iconography of Kennedy in the early 60s, who simultaneously performed both tough-minded masculinity and, albeit conditionally, intelligence.[56]

Importantly, however, the white male nerd stereotype was not abandoned during this time, but only further reinforced as a failed white masculinity. While possessing intelligence may have been somewhat redeemed during this period, it is crucial to recognize that it remained intertwined with both whiteness and male effeminacy. The playboy figure redeemed intelligence to a degree for white men, but primarily to exclude blacks and women from that life of the mind. And unless the intelligent and cultured white male conspicuously performed his promiscuous heterosexuality for all to see, he might as well be a nerd. As such, the (white) intellectualism of this period retained much of its racist, misogynistic, and homophobic connotations, and the nerd stereotype continued to perform both its heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics.[57]

In terms of the heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype, a closer look at the aforementioned traits of style and virility is in order. As the playboy archetype suggested, intelligence and style could be attractive characteristics (a marked change from the late 40s/50s), but only if that intelligence was "redeemed" by a hypervisible, virile compulsory heteronormativity. The playboy compulsion to have sex with (and objectify) as many beautiful young women as possible can be seen as both 1) hedonistic

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[56] It is worth mentioning that many cultural commentators point to the 1956 marriage of Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe as a sort of turning point in the public reception of intelligence in the late 50s.

[57] For more on the playboy, see both Osgerby's and Cuordileone's books cited above. In particular, chapter 4 from the Cuordileone, "Reinventing the Liberal as Superman," pages 167-236, is especially useful for its connections between intellectualism, Kennedy, masculinity, and the playboy stereotype. And while the literature on Kennedy is immense, solid works that examine Kennedy with regard to style, masculinity, and intelligence include Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Robert D. Dean, in *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 169-99; and Christopher Lasch, "The Anti-Intellectualism of the Intellectuals," in *The New Radicalism in America 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 286-349.

and leisure-oriented, rooted in consumer- and commodity-based pleasure-seeking and 2) a compensatory justification to indulge in the more feminizing behaviors of intelligence, style, and leisure.

The opposite is seen in the nerd, who not only lacks an attractive sense of debonair style, but also the masculine virility deemed necessary for healthy American males. In fact, the pendulum swings to the other binary extreme, marking the nerd as possessing a ridiculously extreme unattractiveness and unstylishness, as well as the excessive inability to relate to women at all socially, let alone romantically. Accordingly, while nerd figures in popular culture may have received a slightly better treatment in the 60s on the surface (as we shall see below), they were often also conspicuously marked as exaggerated and farcically comic—even more so than their late 40s and 50s counterparts. This comic exaggeration often manifested in terms of style and virility: the white male nerd being not merely a white masculine failure in a general sense, but an absurdly extreme failure in terms of lacking both style and virility. According to the popular culture of the late 40s and 50s, male and female nerds were rare oddities and anomalies who perhaps wound up in bizarre relationships with each other—quirky but not really worth much notice or mediated treatment. By the 60s, popular nerd stereotype portrayals started to become more prevalent and, in contrast to the playboy, began focusing more— and in more exaggerated ways—on the failed style and virility of the nerd.

For one of the most illuminating performance examples of the redemption of intelligence for white masculinity in the 1960s—particularly one involving the playboy and nerd stereotypes—the early James Bond films are especially cogent.[58] More

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[58] For more on James Bond as a cinematic expression of masculinity in the 60s, see Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 248-92.

specifically, the first five Bond films (*Dr. No*, 1962; *From Russia With Love*, 1963; *Goldfinger*, 1964; *Thunderball*, 1965; *You Only Live Twice*, 1967)—all of which star Sean Connery as Bond—demonstrate a complex reconstitution of white male intellect primarily through two key characters: the hero James Bond, who of course embodies the suave playboy, and his techie sidekick Q, who embodies the nerd. After all, as Joan Mellen suggests in her *Big Bad Wolves*, Connery's Bond is "the most pervasive male image" of the 60s, an image that transferred to the cinema "the pubescent distaste for women disguised as lust for female objects like those flaunted by *Playboy* magazine."[59]

Bond is, of course, the quintessential playboy. The filmic examples that establish both his white male credentials and super-playboy status are legion: his impeccable style (from his witty banter to his clothes, cars, and shaken martinis) and virile libido (his sundry sexual escapades with various "Bond girls") are now the stuff of cinematic legend.[60] Still, it is interesting to point out that in terms of his whiteness, Bond's job as super-spy places him and his work squarely on the side of Western imperialist interests— both English and American—and often against other races, especially Asians (and more specifically the Communist Chinese). Furthermore, it is also his "Britishness" that lends him a sort of highly civilized hyperwhiteness for North American audiences.[61] And if his

[59] Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 249.
[60] For more on Bond's status as a playboy archetype, see Claire Hines, "'Entertainment for men': uncovering the *Playboy* Bond," in *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Christoph Lindner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 89-105; and Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 157-61.
[61] For more on Bond's Britishness, see Cynthia Baron, "*Doctor No*: Bonding Britishness to Racial Sovereignty," in *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Christoph Lindner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 153-68; James Chapman, "Bond and Britishness," in *Ian Fleming & James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007*, eds. Edward P Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005), 129-43; James Chapman, *License to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 114-7; Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London,

witty banter, refined tastes, Britishness, and hyperwhiteness call into question his

masculinity (or heterosexuality), Bond's incessant and conspicuous sexual conquests,

along with his predilection for ass-kicking physical violence (his much-touted license to

kill, for example) work to reaffirm his unquestionable manliness. In many respects,

Bond—especially Connery's Bond—somehow struck that perfect, if fantastical and

impossible, balance between the older rugged American masculinity of the 50s and the

more stylish masculinity of the British Invasion and JFK's New Frontier, which may well

explain the immense international popularity of James Bond and his enduring legacy.[62]

While Bond is a vital icon of white masculinity and the playboy, other characters

from the early Bond films also deepen our understanding of the construction of

whiteness, masculinity, and intelligence in the 60s. In contrast to Bond's whiteness, many

of the nameless henchmen are portrayed as Asian, or more specifically, "the Red

Chinese." As Joan Mellen points out, the Bond movies "are intensely racist," and

"invariably the films pit white against yellow."[63] Perhaps the individual Bond villain that

best embodies this sentiment is Bond's eponymous enemy from the 1962 film *Dr. No*, a

nemesis totally in line with the evil mad scientist villains of the previous decade.[64]

Portrayed as arrogant, cold, and immoral, Dr. No uses the trademark villainous atomic

power to disable U.S. rockets—symbols of all that is good (and phallic) in American's

heroic quest to reach the moon. Furthermore, he is of mixed racial heritage, part German

Macmillan, 1987), 34-35; and Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 100-1, 159-60.

[62] Apparently, JFK was a bit of a Bond fan himself, which is perhaps not surprising. For more on Kennedy's connection to Bond, see Skip Willman, "The Kennedys, Fleming, and Cuba," in *Ian Fleming & James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007*, eds. Edward P Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 178-201; and Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 28-33.

[63] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 266.

[64] *Dr. No* was released in 1962 in England, and 1963 in the U.S.

and part Chinese (as if to say, part Nazi and part Red), a biographic bit he shares with

Bond during their rather posh dinner together. A diabolical foreigner trapped between

East and West, Dr. No even possesses the deformed hands to further augment his extreme

Otherness. And there is also his unsurpassed evil genius, something that he and Bond

explicitly discuss when Dr. No states that the evil organization SPECTRE is "headed by

the greatest brains in the world."[65] In short, in contrast with the character of Dr. No,

Bond's pure whiteness, virile playboy masculinity, and appropriate level of intelligence

are all made even more visible.[66]

While infamous Bond villains like Dr. No continue the older tropes of the 50s

evil, foreign, feminized mad scientists whose hyperintelligence have perverted their

minds and morals, it is actually the smaller character of Q who comes closest to

portraying the nerd stereotype in the Bond films.[67] It is perhaps revealing that Q went

from a non-existent character to a much-beloved fan favorite of the film franchise, even

despite early attempts by film creators to downplay the presence of Q and his now

famous gadgets.

It is primarily through the characters of Bond and Q that we see the contrast

between the playboy and the nerd. Bond is youthful and fun, whereas Q is a bit stuffy,

possessing little patience for Bond's jokes and playfulness ("I never joke about my work

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[65] *Dr. No*, DVD, directed by Terence Young (1962; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012).

[66] Notably, we also find in Dr. No all the racist, anti-Asian intent associated with the Fu Manchu stereotype and the yellow peril, which is briefly addressed in chapter 8. For more on Dr. No, as well as his status as both yellow peril and mad scientist, see James Chapman, *License to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 65-110; and Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards: Images of the American Scientist as Hero and Villain from Colonial Times to the Present* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 185-6.

[67] It should be pointed out that Q is more specifically a "boffin," which is roughly the British equivalent of the American "nerd," especially during this period.

007").[68] Where Bond is suave and stylish, Q is often portrayed as stylishly inept (the blue

and green Hawaiian shirt that Q sports in *Thunderball*, for example). Bond loves to jet set

around the world and be the true imperialist tourist, whereas Q is always upset when he

must leave his hijinks-filled laboratory and go into the field. And while Bond seems more

concerned with handling the ladies, Q always seems to be more concerned with the

handling of his technology (in later films, Q even comes across more sexually ignorant

and unaware, usually to comic effect).

In many ways, these contrasting characteristics serve to feminize Q, and make

Bond even more hypermasculine. Take for example the 1967 Bond film *You Only Live

Twice*, which interestingly enough finds Bond primarily in Japan.[69] In the brief Q scene

of the film, Bond enlists Q's help to engage in some covert reconnaissance over a

suspicious volcanic island. Upon Q's arrival in the field, Bond greets him with the playful

"Ah, welcome to Japan, Dad, is my little girl hot and ready?" to which Q icily replies

"Look, 007, I've had a long and tiring journey probably to no purpose and I'm in no

mood for your juvenile quips."[70] The audience is left in suspense as to who this "hot and

ready" girl might be, until it is revealed to be an impressive gadget, a portable autogyro

(mini-helicopter) that Q has brought to Bond so he can fly to the island. Funnily enough,

Bond jokingly refers to the autogyro as "Little Nellie," and Q as its father. While "Little

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[68] *Goldfinger*, DVD, directed by Guy Hamilton (1964; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012).

[69] While it is likely more of an historical coincidence than anything else, it is interesting to note that *You Only Live Twice* was released a year or so after the 1966 Petersen article, "Success Story, Japanese American Style," which first articulated the model minority myth (see chapter 8); and the film, while still highly racist towards Asians (especially the Chinese), made vague attempts to include some "good guy" Japanese allies like Tiger Tanaka. This set of representations may also reflect the international politics of the late 60s, namely the perception that Japan was allying itself with the industrialized, capitalist West through its modernization and technological expertise, whereas Communist China, with its "Cultural Revolution" and Chairman Mao Tse-tung, remains the generic bad guy. See James Chapman, *License to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 133-4.

[70] *You Only Live Twice*, DVD, directed by Lewis Gilbert (1967; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012).

Nellie" may just be an innocuous and humorous phrase, it also carries strong

connotations of failed masculinity, of both queerness and the supposed "nervous nellies"

that refused to fight in the Vietnam War during the film's release.[71] Regardless, as "Little

Nellie's" so-called father, Q's own masculinity is, albeit playfully, called into question

for raising a sissy child that is actually no child at all, but a piece of technology. Even

though she is writing about the later Bond film *Goldeneye*, Judith Halberstam astutely

points out that "the science nerd" Q, portraying a sort of gay masculinity, is "a queer

subject who exposes the workings of dominant heterosexual masculinity."[72] In this way,

the representation of Bond's heteronormative hegemonic masculinity is actually

dependent on a subordinated masculinity—in this case, the queer masculinity of the nerd

Q.

Even with Q's queerness, Bond and Q are a quirky mismatched pair, working

together despite their differences, allowing for a different kind of "good" intelligence

from that of the evil mad scientists that Bond must defeat in each film. But even the

supposedly "good" intelligence of Q is qualified in a number of ways. One qualification

is the usual appreciation of practical applied technology (Q's highly useful, almost too

convenient gadgets) over the impractical (and immoral) theoretical science of

megalomaniacs like Dr. No. In his relationship to Bond, however, Q is still rendered as

too scientifically oriented, and Bond as the proper example of the expert user of

technology. Writing about the later film *Goldeneye* (1995), starring Pierce Brosnan,

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[71] Perhaps another historical coincidence, but even LBJ, in a speech in 1966, referred to a man that did not support the war as a "Nervous Nellie." See Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 251-2.

[72] Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 4.

Martin Willis draws a useful analogy between all of the Bond/Q relational

representations:

> The Q scenes place Bond within a clear system of roles and responsibilities with
> regard to science and technology. Bond's technological superiority, so pivotal to
> the success of his missions, is disregarded in this context. The laboratory of the
> scientist privileges creation and invention. Bond's expertise is application. It is
> undoubtedly this division of labour that the Q scenes attempt to represent in the
> background activity in which the audience can watch experimental trials go awry.
> These slapstick events serve as a balance to Q's superior attitude by suggesting
> that the application of Q's inventions should be left to the expert, Bond. Science,
> even applied science, is portrayed as comic, pompous, and self-inflated, and its
> value shifts to use and application.[73]

Q's intelligence also reveals important relationships to the

corporate/managerial/professional (i.e. white masculine) hierarchy. Q may be intelligent,

but intelligence does not imply leadership. Just as Jews achieved a certain qualified

degree of upward mobility for their intellect, there was still a glass ceiling that prevented

them from getting the top jobs and from getting into the best schools.[74] In short (and as

discussed in the previous chapter), "tolerable" nerds—like the NASA nerd and the nerdy

computer programmer—make good helpers and sidekicks, but not leaders or heroes.[75]

The intelligent man, like Q, who respects his slightly lower place in the corporate

hierarchy can be nominally appreciated; the intelligent man like Dr. No, who fancies

himself the ultimate, if despotic leader of men, is a perversion. Just as the new social type

of software programmers of the 60s threatened to upend the corporate status quo, there

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[73] Martin Willis, "Hard-wear: The Millennium, Technology, and Brosnan's Bond," in *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Christoph Lindner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 173-4.

[74] For more on Jews and this "Einstein Syndrome," see chapter 2. We also see a similar phenomenon occur in the late 60s/early 70s with the Asian model minority stereotype, which is discussed in chapter 8.

[75] This theme of the nerd being the supportive sidekick remains an important one for many decades. One might even think of the public intellectual Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as being such a "nerd sidekick" to Kennedy. In a general sense, tracing the American public's perceptions of various incarnations of presidential "brain trusts," be those perceptions non-existent, negative, or positive ("the best and the brightest"), is a revealing way of tracing the country's ever-shifting anti-intellectual sentiments.

appears in 60s popular media a greater delineation between the old mad scientists and the good nerds like Q who follow orders and know their place. Interestingly, Q is a tolerable nerd figure that plays a subservient role to both the playboy hero Bond and the other important recurring Bond film character, the true corporate boss M, the proper managerial leader and institutional authority who is the head of MI6.

Taken together, both playboy Bond and nerd Q suggest a certain redemption of intelligence for white males, with Bond offering the perfect model of white male intellect and Q offering an example of a tolerable nerd with just a bit too much intelligence for his own good. In a variety of ways, Q is a representative nerd figure of the (late) 60s popular culture: a quirky, intelligent oddball that lacks the style and virility of a proper male, but means well and is generally likable.[76] Unlike the evil mad scientists who dominated the late 40s and early 50s, these stereotypical nerds were ambivalent and benign, even a bit funny—as long as they did not challenge the corporate or heteronormative status quo and continued to build "useful" and "practical" things like rocket boosters for NASA and gadgets for James Bond. In fact, given this slight shift towards likeable, tolerable nerd sidekicks in the early 60s, it is not accidental that we start seeing a small spate of films that focus primarily on poking playful fun of brainy nerd protagonists. Interestingly, much of the same white masculine politics occur in these films in relation to the tropes of playboy style and virility.

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[76] It should be noted that the term "nerd" was still not in full usage during the 60s, and was still found with many alternate spellings. Generally speaking, it seems that "egghead" was one of the most popular synonyms in the 40s and 50s, and the term "oddball" was used with especial frequency in the 60s. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the term "nerd" would not fully arrive until the late 70s.

<u>*Of Nutty and Absent-Minded Professors*</u>

In the early 60s, a small but sizable number of film comedies were made that momentarily shifted the role of the nerd from background character or even sidekick to that of the actual "hero" and protagonist of the plot. This focus on lead nerd characters, let alone in highly popular films, may be yet another indication of the importance placed on intelligence at the time. However, the roles were far from ideal representations, suggesting that with the increase in cultural discourse about intellectual appreciation, there was still a distinct line of gender performativity that demarcated too much intelligence, even for white males. If anything, given the particular importance on style and virility that typified masculinity in this era as evidenced by the figure of the playboy, the failure of the nerd had shifted from merely gender misperforming oddball, to gender misperforming oddball who failed—spectacularly—at romantic and sexual pursuits.

Some of the most successful of these nerdy movies were the 1961 film *The Absent-Minded Professor*, the 1963 film *The Nutty Professor*, and the 1964 film *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*. *The Absent-Minded Professor* was so financially successful that it merited a sequel, *Son of Flubber*, in 1963—Disney's first sequel, actually—and the same applies to Disney's *The Misadventure of Merlin Jones*, which spawned *The Monkey's Uncle* in 1965. Taken together, all of these successful comedies took the classic egghead/nerd stereotype and put it in the limelight in a relatively benign fashion—these nerds, no longer the insidious egghead traitors of the McCarthy era, were more benign bumbling buffoons.[77] And in family-friendly, squeaky-clean Disney fashion,

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[77] While in a different stylistic vein than the rest of these family comedies, it is worth noting that the famous 1964 film satire *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* was also released during this period of the early 60s. This film, I feel, also represents in small measure a slight

the nerd protagonists of these films all mean well and have good intentions: the harmless plot complications arise more because of their wacky and eccentric social behaviors than anything else.[78] And not surprisingly, these movie nerds all emphasize the intelligent scientist as a white male—moreover, a white male lacking proper masculine style and virility.[79]

In *The Absent-Minded Professor*, chemistry professor Ned Brainard (Fred MacMurray) (note the portmanteau of "brainy" and "nerd") is portrayed as clumsy and forgetful, but essentially well-meaning and kind-hearted. Some of the students refer to him as "Neddy the Nut."[80] Much of the film focuses on his accidental discovery of a new form of energy and matter that defies gravity, a substance that he gives the ridiculous-sounding name of "flubber" (another portmanteau, combining "flying" and "rubber"). And while his discovery piques the interest of both the scheming businessman Hawk (Keenan Wynn) as well as the noble American military, much more of the film focuses on Ned's relationship to his fiancé, Betsy (Nancy Olson).

Ned, the true heteronormative failure, does the unthinkable: he misses his own wedding to Betsy for the third time, distracted by his scientific work and discovery of flubber as well as his own absent-mindedness. For most of the rest of the movie, Ned

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redemption of intellectualism, mainly by mocking the foolishness of cold war brinkmanship as well as satirizing the ridiculous mad scientist character Dr. Strangelove himself.

[78] It is worth noting that the upbeat, idealistic nature of these films rests much on Disney's desire to promote an image of clean family fun, of course, but also Disney's desire—especially during this period—to make science and technology fun and accessible to the American family, as evidenced by Walt Disney's earlier collaboration with von Braun on the 1955 TV show "Man in Space," as well as his commitment to Tomorrowland for his new theme park, *Disneyland*. See Matthew Brzezinski, *Red Moon Rising: Sputnik and the Hidden Rivalries that Ignited the Space Age* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 90-2.

[79] For a solid overview of these films in their historical context as well as their relationship to science and anti-intellectualism, see Sevan G. Terzian and Andrew Grunzke, "Scrambled Eggheads: Ambivalent Representations of Scientists in Six Hollywood Film Comedies from 1961 to 1965" *Public Understanding of Science* 16 (2007): 407-19.

[80] *The Absent-Minded Professor*, DVD, directed by Robert Stevenson (1961; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2003).

attempts to win Betsy back—usually by using flubber in funny and fantastical, but ultimately futile, ways—but near the end, Betsy puts her sympathy and trust back in Ned all on her own. From there she helps him get back the flubber that the greedy Hawk stole from Ned's flying Model T and delivers it safely to the U.S. government in Washington, DC.

While he is more of the older egghead/absent-minded professor stereotype, Ned Brainard is also highly representative of the nerd stereotype in the early 1960s. He is shown as clumsy in a number of ways, from blowing up his chemistry lab to his admission that he cannot dance. Ned is also socially awkward and oblivious, clueless as to why Betsy should be upset that he once again missed their wedding. He lacks style, polish, and social graces, but it is primarily his lack of manly virility that receives the film's focus. After the third aborted wedding ceremony, Betsy starts seeing Ned's competition, a smarmy English Professor named Shelby Ashton. When many of Ned's attempts to win her back fail, he becomes despondent and all but gives up. It is then that his *raisonneur* housekeeper Mrs. Chatsworth advises him to punch Ashton on the nose, because "even a chimpanzee will fight for its mate."[81] Ned momentarily ponders this option but decides punching Ashton "wouldn't be civilized."[82] Instead, he gets the idea to put flubber on his own shoes to somehow make him a better dancer than Ashton in order to show him up at the dance, which inevitably backfires. Instead of exhibiting the virile and aggressively masculine behaviors the film deems necessary to win over a woman, Ned instead employs wacky, flubber-assisted attempts that usually end up with him as a public laughingstock.

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[81] *The Absent-Minded Professor.*
[82] Ibid.

Even in this light-hearted, somewhat nerd-friendly comedy, clearly we are to understand that Ned Brainard's love of science is antithetical to his virile, manly obligation to win the girl. In the aforementioned scene with Mrs. Chatworth, as Ned sits slumped and dejected and unsure what to do, the chatty housekeeper gives the scientist the important advice he so clearly needs:

> All right. Do as you please. Go on with your head in the clouds and your nose poked places it doesn't belong. Go ahead like I said. Unlock the secrets of the universe. But remember this: the universe is millions and millions and millions of years old. It can wait a little. But girls can't wait. […] If I were in your shoes, I'd stop that smashing or mashing the atom, or whatever it is you're doing out there, and I'd go to that dance.[83]

So even when the nerd is the protagonist of the film, his affiliation with science only serves to call his heteronormative masculinity into question. But, of course, this is a family comedy, and all ends well with Ned and Betsy finally getting married at the very end, so Ned's masculinity, through heterosexual coupling, is somewhat redeemed (at least until the sequel).

Another way that Ned's character, despite his lack of masculine virility and style, is made redeemable for the audience is that he is clearly established as having a very high degree of moral fiber, countering the association of intelligence with immorality. He stands up against the crooked businessman Hawk; refuses to inflate the grades of Hawk's failing son, Biff (Tommy Kirk); and he clearly cares about his institution, Medfield College. Ned's good character is best exemplified by the "practical" uses to which he puts his newly discovered flubber, which essentially are three: first, he uses flubber to help his college basketball team win the big game; second, he uses flubber to try and impress Betsy and chase off Shelby—basically, to win back the girl; and third, Ned

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[83] *The Absent-Minded Professor*.

rejects the opportunity to make a personal profit off of his discovery, choosing instead to give it to the United States military in true patriotic fashion. In terms of the discourse of practicality, Ned and his flubber are also redeemed by how the discovery—more technical engineering than theoretical science—is highly useful, especially since what is good and practical is in line with supporting sports, patriotism, and the most eminently practical of tasks: getting a girl.

In the 1963 slapstick film farce *The Nutty Professor*, again the protagonist is a bumbling professor and scientist—more specifically, another chemistry professor.[84] Directed by and starring Jerry Lewis at the height of his popularity, the film accentuates more exaggerated farce and slapstick (Lewis' stock and trade) than Disney's *The Absent-Minded Professor*. Via this exaggeration, the protagonist Lewis's Professor Julius F. Kelp (Jerry Lewis), is the archetypal nerd stereotype.[85] Realizing that he is clumsy, physically weak, puny, and all-around undesirable to the opposite sex, Kelp spends the film trying to find ways to catch the eye of his love interest, the pretty Stella Purdy (Stella Stevens). First, after being humiliated in class by a football jock student who crams him into a closet, he tries to hit the gym—and fails hilariously.[86] Then Kelp gets the idea to use chemistry, developing a formula that, in true Jekyll and Hyde fashion, magically transforms him from nerd to the swingin' Buddy Love. The split personality inevitably

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[84] Note that these wacky nerds from the early 60s still rely on simple public perceptions of science. They are no longer mad scientists dabbling in atomic physics (although Brainard does use gamma radiation to control his flubber) like the previous decade. Nor are they associated with computers, either. It would take Disney until the late sixties (and the height of the so-called software crisis [see chapter 3]) to turn a young Kurt Russell into the walking computer in the 1969 film *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*. Why the emphasis on chemistry? One contributing factor is surely the visual element, so important to establishing the *mise-en-scène*: the mad scientist-esque conglomeration of beakers, flasks, and tubes, bubbling with sundry liquids, had already long been established as the usual expository visual markers for film scientists.

[85] It is probably completely unrelated, but I find it delightful that Professor Kelp's initials are JFK.

[86] The football-playing jock bully is another masculine stereotype, of course, and one that surfaces often during this period in antithesis to the nerd. Often, however, the jock is just as ridiculous as the nerd, and does not receive full treatment. The jock/nerd binary would not be emphasized fully until the 80s, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

leads to hijinks, but by the end of the film, Kelp realizes that, instead of becoming Buddy Love, he needs to accept who he really is: his nerdy self.[87]

In many ways, the character of Julius Kelp possesses many similarities to the lead character of *The Absent-Minded Professor*, Ned Brainard. They are both bumbling chemistry professors, of course, and both begin their respective films with wacky explosive lab mishaps that highlight their relative ineptitude. Perhaps even more intriguing is how both of their primary journeys in their respective films center on their ridiculous attempts to woo a woman, attempts that consistently fail—that is, until the surprise reversal at the end of each film which retains the traditional happy ending. In both films, the romantic pairs are played as an attraction of opposites, simultaneously reinforcing the classic heteronormative script, but also gender roles: while the men are allowed marginal leeway to be kooky scientists, the women are still restricted to being objects to be won, wholesome women whose work focuses on being attractive to men. In other words, the women are not the intelligent scientists or professors in either of these films; they are the prizes to be earned and the objects of the male gaze.[88]

What is most fascinating is that both of these nerds actually do get the pretty girl in the end, something that rarely ever happens to nerdy male characters outside the early 60s. Again, this momentary, "positive" shift is likely attributable to the overall surface redemption of intelligence that made nerds "tolerable," especially white male nerds. It should be observed, however, that the happy romantic coupling at the end of each of

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[87] For more on the work of Jerry Lewis and *The Nutty Professor*, see Chris Fujiwara, *Jerry Lewis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Frank Krutnik, *Inventing Jerry Lewis* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 153-8; and Murray Pomerance, ed., *Enfant Terrible!: Jerry Lewis in American Film* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

[88] This male gaze is most evident when literalized in *The Nutty Professor*, when the audience sees, from Kelp's point of view, a series of fantasy images of Stella wearing sexy and proactive outfits like a pageant contestant. This sequence was likely also an opportunity to highlight the costumes of designer Edith Head.

these films is not due to anything specific that the nerdy males have done so much as it is the women who finally recognize and accept their bizarre love for the oddball. Poignantly, this recognition on the part of the female romantic interest comes not out of some manly deed or even the impressive scientific achievements of the men, but moments when they have been publically humiliated and shown to be weak and fragile, yet still demonstrating good moral fiber. We see this with Brainard when his Model T fails to fly before the town and the military officials at the dance, and with Kelp when he reverts back to himself on stage while headlining the prom as Buddy Love. Both Betsy and Stella already begin their respective films with an interest in their nerdy lovers—their journeys are more about learning to accept the inevitable, to "tolerate" their nerdiness, and love them by the end.

While similar, the character of Kelp goes much further than that of Brainard in fully performing the nerd stereotype—it would not be too much to say that Lewis' farcical portrayal of Kelp fully embodies the stereotypical nerd in the extreme, serving as a model for nerd portrayals for decades thereafter. An intelligent white male scientist, Kelp is defined primarily by his utter lack of style and virility, a feminized failure. Kelp's lack of virility is clearly established throughout the movie, serving as the entire impetus for the comedic romantic plot. In a more general sense, his lack of proper masculinity also manifests itself in other ways, from being belittled by his boss Dr. Warfield (Del Moore), who claims to understand "that scientists and creators have their little eccentricities," to getting bullied by his very own students.[89] Another interesting example is a flashback that reveals a baby Kelp's early childhood home life, where his belligerent

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[89] *The Nutty Professor*, DVD, directed by Jerry Lewis (1963; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2004).

and overbearing mother pushes around Kelp's timid milquetoast father, thereby

demonstrating how Kelp became who he is in a way reminiscent of the sissy-producing

family gender politics of the previous decade.

In terms of style, Kelp establishes the overall nerd image *par excellence*: the

broken horn-rimmed glasses, the white lab coat, the unfashionable mismatched outfits,

the bow ties, the pens in his breast pocket, the matted shiny black bowl cut hairstyle, the

buck-teeth, the clumsy deportment and stooped posture, the weak and puny frame, the

lack of athleticism, and so on. Almost every visual marker possible renders Kelp

unstylish and therefore unattractive.

The most important aspects of the Kelp's failed white masculinity are made

blatantly evident through the juxtaposition of his Jekyll and Hyde split personality: the

extreme contrast between Kelp and his alter ego Buddy Love (also Jerry Lewis). These

dual personas embody and perform the nerd stereotype and the playboy stereotype to

perfection, squarely positioning them as they truly were—as complete antitheses to one

another. While Kelp is rendered unattractive due to his complete lack of style, Buddy has

swingin' style to spare, a hard drinking, piano-playing, leader-of-the-pack crooner who is

the ultimate playboy.[90] The same principle applies to virility: Kelp is a wimp and a sexual

failure whereas Buddy Love is so beloved by all the ladies of the club, The Purple Pit,

that the female students insist that, as "one of the truly great swingers of all time," he be

the main entertainment of their prom.[91] Through Julius Kelp and Buddy Love, the nerd

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[90] Many critics could not resist drawing the parallel between the character Buddy Love and Jerry Lewis' old partner Dean Martin, a connection that Lewis denied. Regardless, as Dean Martin is in many ways a prime example of the swinging playboy, it is not surprising that such parallels should be drawn.
[91] *The Nutty Professor*.

stereotype and the playboy stereotype find not only full treatment, but also the literal

juxtaposition that relates the two constructs (see Figure 4 in the Appendix).[92]

Interestingly, the playboy Buddy Love is portrayed as a rather mean-spirited,

sexist jerk throughout the film instead of a heroic Bond-like figure, and at the end Stella

realizes that she has loved Kelp and not Buddy the entire time. Even more spectacular—

and rare for popular representations—is that Stella explains that she likes Buddy because

of, and not in spite of, his intelligence. It should be noted, however, that during the

epilogue of the film, when Kelp's now macho father (he used the formula on himself)

enters bullying his wife and trying to get rich selling the formula as "Kelp's Kool Tonic"

to his "square bookworm" of a son and his students, Stella stashes some of the tonic

bottles in the back of her pants as she and Kelp walk away from the camera together.[93]

Overall, both *The Absent-Minded Professor* and *The Nutty Professor* capitalize on

the nerd stereotype and the highly similar absent-minded teacher/egghead stereotypes.

And while it is true that as products of the early 60s these films allow a degree of

redemption for the scientist/intellectual, these films are still not reverting or challenging

the stereotype, only capitalizing on them in a different fashion, making them instead

ambivalent and benign on the surface while maintaining the same identity politics

beneath. Both Brainard and Kelp remain masculine and heteronormative failures due to

their passion for science, but in the genre of comedy, this failure is something to be

playfully laughed at instead of feared as a force unraveling the fabric of civilization.

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[92] For more on masculinity in *The Nutty Professor* and the juxtaposition of Kelp and Buddy Love, see Peter
Lehman and Susan Hunt, "'The Inner Man': Mind, Body, and Transformations of Masculinity in *The Nutty
Professor*," in *Enfant Terrible!: Jerry Lewis in American Film*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New York: New
York University Press, 2002), 195-209.
[93] *The Nutty Professor*.

Therefore, despite being the white male heroes who end up "getting the girl" by the end of their films, these nerd stereotypes still vividly perform the heteronormative dynamic.

This notion also manifests in the 1964 film *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*, which treads much the same ground as the other two films, albeit with some minor differences. Along the axis of age, the titular character Merlin Jones (Tommy Kirk), a college student at Midvale College, fits the youthful nerd stereotype.[94] Like his older counterparts, Merlin is an inquisitive lover of science and tinkerer of gadgets, and as the film's title suggests, this passion for science leads to a series of misadventures and wacky mishaps. In this youth-oriented Disney comedy, however, the hijinks remain especially squeaky clean, and the film goes to great lengths to establish the high moral fiber of Merlin, even more so than with Professor Brainard. The fact that the movie also stars teen icons, respectable child actors from the *Mickey Mouse Club*, also demonstrates how the film works hard to create positive stories with positive role models for its young audience. Not only does this "positive" image of the nerd exemplify the general intellectual redemption narrative of its historical moment, but as Disney was particularly invested in promoting positive role models for youth, science and math education for young students, and even space exploration efforts, it also indicates a specific didactic strategy on the part of Disney.

In short, the film attempts to make the nerdy Merlin "cool" by purposefully subverting the stereotype. Along those lines, Tommy Kirk, a handsome young actor, not

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[94] It is worth noting the importance that the setting of the college/university plays in all three of these films, focusing on two professors and a college student. In many ways, the college/university is the natural milieu for the stereotypically over-intelligent person in performance and American culture more broadly. Still, this emphasis in these films, in the context of the 1960s, is an intriguing one, perhaps suggesting a contentious view of college life in America at the time.

rendered too unstylish in his dress, plays Merlin.[95] Perhaps most important, Merlin

actually has a steady girlfriend, Jennifer, a popular "normal" girl played by Annette

Funicello. And in another twist, Merlin's primary nemesis in the film, the thuggish

football-playing jock Norman (Norm Grabowski), is portrayed as more the buffoon and

brunt of the jokes than the nerd Merlin. In a multitude of ways, the film attempts to

render the nerd as somewhat stylish, virile, moral, and a worthy role model for American

teens—a truly redeemable, tolerable nerd. In a strange and exceedingly rare way, the film

actually attempts to celebrate the nerd character.

However, even this rather propagandistic Disney film does not quite offer a

utopian nerd image. Merlin is still rendered as an oddball, and as the title of the movie

suggests, he is more apt to be involved in *mis*adventures rather than just adventures. Like

Brainard and Kelp, Merlin's experiments tend to backfire with humiliating results, such

as when he accidentally gets the ability to read minds when he clumsily electrocutes

himself while wearing a ridiculous (and unstylish) helmet covered in coils, wires, and

other bizarre, vaguely scientific doodads. As for his girlfriend Jennifer, his love of

science and crazy experiments usually puts a strain on their relationship: Jennifer would

rather go out to the movies and do other traditional teenage dating activities. And it

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[95] In a rather tragic Hollywood backstory, it was roughly during the time of *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones* that actor Tommy Kirk was outed as gay and, after the filming of the sequel, subsequently fired by Disney. Perhaps coincidental and accidental, a gay actor playing a nerd character does possess a certain resonance. There is an odd but intriguing parallel here with the story of the closeted Sheila Kuehl playing Zelda Gilroy—perhaps young gay and lesbian teen actors tended to be typecast as nerds, regardless of gender? For more on Tommy Kirk, see Kevin Minton, "Sex, Lies, and Disney Tape: Walt's Fallen Star," *Filmfax* 38 (April 1993): 67-71; Jesse Monteagudo, "The Tommy Kirk Story" Gay Today, http://gaytoday.com/index.php/2000/01/31/the-tommy-kirk-story/ (accessed May 30, 2016); Codi, "Remembering When and Who Tommy Kirk," Stonewall Society, http://www.stonewallsociety.com/famouspeople/tkirk.htm (accessed May 30, 2016); and Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 99-101.

should also be observed that Jennifer ends up playing more the subservient sidekick role to Merlin; and like Betsy and Stella before her, here again the female character is rendered not as the scientist or intellectual herself, but the beleaguered love interest. When the hero is a masculine male like Bond, the nerd plays the lesser sidekick role; when the nerd becomes the hero, the sidekick role shifts further "downward," either to the woman or even an animal (Brainard's pet dog Charlie and Kelp's pet bird Jennifer).[96]

Perhaps the most revealing part of *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones* is the opening musical credit sequence, which not only gives the basic exposition, but also firmly establishes, from Jennifer's perspective, her relationship with Merlin, which evidently demands explanation. The lyrics of the song establish that Merlin is "the scrambled egghead" and "the campus kook," but also that Jennifer cannot help, despite her better judgment, loving him, admitting that despite being proud of his braininess, a "voice inside me cries get me out of here!"[97] In short, she admits that even though "his way-out brain is on cloud nine," she still wants to be his "Mrs. Frankenstein."[98] Even when this idealistic nerd character is the protagonist, rendered stylish, and heteronormative enough to even have a girlfriend, the character cannot escape being marked as a crazy oddball. Even Disney's Merlin Jones cannot be represented as a fully realized cinema hero, and is treated more like a Q than a James Bond.

Through cinematic nerd characters like Q, Professor Brainard, Professor Kelp, and Merlin Jones, a number of complex ambiguities and contradictions arise regarding the nerd stereotype. On one hand, we see a small handful of popular characterizations

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[96] It may well be an odd coincidence that both Merlin's girlfriend and Kelp's talking bird are both named Jennifer. Regardless, even Merlin ends up with an animal friend, a chimpanzee, in the film.
[97] *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*, DVD, directed by Robert Stevenson (1961; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2004).
[98] Ibid.

where the nerd is the protagonist and, to a small degree, redeemable, comparable to the earlier mediated popular treatments. On the other hand, however, these nerd characters are still conspicuously marked as oddballs and objects of derision for their lack of style and virile masculinity. They may have a lovely love interest, but that relationship is always marked as an accident of fate, something the girl cannot help, instead of normal or natural—the nerds find themselves in these relationships in spite of themselves. Then there is the simple fact that all of these nerd representations are white and male: these somewhat redeemable cinematic nerds are conspicuously not female or non-white. Taken together, they are ambiguous representations that seemingly celebrate the "practical" intelligence of the useful, tolerable nerd, elevating them to cinematic hero status, yet cannot completely depart from the comedic mockery that marks that nerd as lacking style and virility. They also remain exclusively white and predominately, conspicuously male, as well as heteronormative failures, even if the treatment has "improved" from previous performances.

Nerdy Intellectual Redemption, Refuted

Throughout the late 50s and 60s, as "practical" intelligence was momentarily redeemed in much of American culture, the relationship between intellect and white masculinity entered a tenuous moment. As intelligence became a moderately admirable trait, it had to be partially remasculinized and recuperated, as evidenced by the popularity of the playboy model of ideal hegemonic masculinity. However, the nerd stereotype remained, often working in conjunction with the playboy figure, to delineate the types and degrees of intelligence that would and would not be tolerated. Style and virility became the dividing line between the two constructs, delineating the appropriate

behaviors for the heteronormative white male. Furthermore, in reaction to the various

civil rights movements gaining momentum during this period, intelligence was further

collapsed into whiteness as it was simultaneously (partially) reconciled with masculinity.

So while many subtle shifts occurred with the nerd stereotype during this second phase,

the heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics remained firmly at play.

As explored in this and the previous chapter, starting roughly with the launch of

Sputnik and culminating with the Apollo 11 moon landing, the period that stretches from

1957 to 1969 sees a number of significant cultural discourses that contribute essential

variations to the nerd stereotype. Some of the most important of these variations include

the association of nerds with Britishness, the association of nerds with the space race and

computers, and the exaggerated juxtaposition of the nerd with the playboy. Also, due to

the slight relaxation of anti-intellectualism mainly in the early 60s—especially

surrounding the Kennedy administration—a number of important public perceptions

shifted to be more supportive of science, education, and intellectualism. For these

reasons, it is not surprising that the nerd stereotype also relaxed somewhat, allowing for

complex and ambiguous performances as far ranging as Charles van Doren (very much

publicized as a playboy) and the quirky character Q in the James Bond movies, from the

relentless Zelda Gilroy to that nutty Professor Kelp.

That said, America was far from an intellectual utopia. The male nerd stereotype

continued to mark a failed white masculinity; it also simultaneously continued to reserve

scientific and intellectual pursuits as the proper province of white males. Instead of

fundamentally changing in the 60s, the nerd stereotype merely shifted in tone and

emphasis, slowly accruing more and more purchase throughout American culture as well

as absorbing and reflecting the identity politics of its day. Two of the most important characteristics emphasized by the nerd stereotype during this second phase were an extreme lack of style, and an extreme lack of virility (i.e. success with the opposite sex), both often played to comic extremes. These two characteristics, from this moment forward, would dominate performances of the nerd stereotype. In fact, in the next phase, the nerd's lack of virility would become even more predominate, shifting from a wacky nerd characteristic to an anxious and troubling one.

The late 60s/early 70s, then, mark another important transition for the stereotypical nerd, ushering in the third phase of the stereotype's evolution. One of the most important facets of this third phase is undoubtedly how the nerd stereotype skyrocketed in popularity, moving from the recesses of youth subculture and slang in the late 60s to the limelight of the broader American popular culture and mass media by the late 70s. And as the next chapter asks: What was it about American culture in the 70s that necessitated the mass proliferation and popularization of the nerd stereotype?

Part III: 1968 - 1980

Chapter 5: Neoconservatism, Feminism, and the Rise of the Nerd Stereotype in the Late 60s & 70s

The Popularization of the Unpopular Nerd

By the late 60s, most of the various ideological building blocks of the nerd stereotype were well in place: the association with popular youth culture (high school and college-aged student cliques, in particular) and a concordant sort of infantilism and pubescent sexuality; the connections with science/technology/computers, educational achievement and elite leftist intellectualism; the generic and ubiquitous whiteness of the nerd; the peculiar ethnic relationships to Britishness and Jewishness (both of which in turn also made strange appeals to whiteness, feminization, passivity, overcivilization, culture, physical weakness, queerness, and hyperintelligence); and the paradoxical notion that being nerdy feminized males yet also masculinized females, rendering both unattractive and, in a fashion, queer in terms of their sexuality. These various characteristics, scattered throughout the larger discourse, were well ingrained in American culture by this crucial historical juncture of the late 60s and early 70s.

However, while many of these ideological building blocks were in place at this time, the slang word "nerd" had not yet entered the broader American lexicon. But as we shall see, roughly a decade later in the late 70s/early 80s, the term, the image, and the full-fledged nerd stereotype concretized into a well-known mainstay of American popular culture. Throughout the "long 70s" (a period designation which many historians see as starting in 1968 and extending up to or into the 80s), the ideological characteristics mentioned above were finally codified into the identifiable and commonly understood

nerd stereotype.[1] Accordingly, 1968-1980 marks the third crucial phase of the nerd

stereotype: the time in which this stereotype began to appear more and more throughout

popular American culture. In the first phase, the stereotype was present, but rather sparse;

in the second, a nominal increase in representations occurred. But it is this third phase

that sees a distinctively sharp increase in stereotypical nerd representations and, vitally,

usage of the term "nerd" itself, suggesting a difference from previous incarnations as well

as a more pressing need in American culture at this time to employ the nerd stereotype.

This chapter focuses, therefore, on examining this extreme popularization of the

nerd stereotype throughout the long 70s, and more specifically, the cultural context that

facilitated this popularization. We begin by first examining the various shifts in American

culture that necessitated the growth and articulation of the nerd stereotype. As one might

expect, the rise of the nerd stereotype correlates with the rise of a uniquely

neoconservative formation of anti-intellectualism—an anti-intellectualism that is taken to

new heights due to a growth of neoconservatism in the U.S. Furthermore, as the nerd

stereotype concretized and grew sharply in popularity throughout the period in

conjunction with this neoconservative anti-intellectualism, nerd representations also

reverted back to being as disparaging as they were during the first phase, if not more so.

In other words, the tolerable nerd characters of the 60s, by the end of the 70s, were all but

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[1] Mindful of how decade-based periodization can be misleading, I again admit to painting "broad strokes" when it comes to establishing the given periods in my study. Usually 1968 is seen as the benchmark year when "things changed" in the United States (i.e. MLK, RFK, etc.). William H. Chafe, for example, devotes an entire chapter solely to "1968." Bruce J. Schulman, in his highly useful *The Seventies*, begins with 1968 and proceeds to define the "long 1970s" as 1969 to 1984, which I feel is perfectly acceptable as well. That said, it is also highly tempting to use the admittedly nerdy, space science-associated dates of 1969 (the Apollo moon landing) and 1983 (when Reagan announced his controversial and rather "un-scientific" Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) to mark the cultural shifts: after all, how different, yet indicative, are those two scientific-related events? See William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), xvi.

abandoned for much harsher and damning representations. With this context laid out, the chapter goes on to trace how the nerd stereotype rose to such ubiquitous popularity primarily through popular performances, charting its growth over time. Finally, the chapter looks specifically at the late 60s/early 70s in particular, when this marked growth of the nerd stereotype began. Here, I argue that the rapid growth of the nerd stereotype was facilitated not only by the rise of anti-intellectual neoconservative politics, but more specifically the neoconservative backlash against feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement. As touched upon in the previous chapter, the Women's Liberation Movement began coalescing in the 60s, but really came to the forefront of American popular culture in the late 60s/early 70s, making feminism and feminist thought a vital new intellectual discourse in the country. In turn, the dominant culture came to conflate the feminist, the lesbian, and the female nerd into one stereotypic figure. This chapter, taken all together, is a close study of a strange cultural phenomenon: how—and why—the unpopular nerd got so popular in the long 70s.

"The Great American Cultural Shift" of the 1970s

So what was it, exactly, about American culture in the long 70s that demanded the further articulation and mass popularization of the nerd stereotype? As suggested previously, the growth of neoconservatism lies at the heart of this growth of the nerd stereotype, but the answer to this question is infinitely more complex. It may be more appropriate, rather, to ask what facet of American life *did not* demand the nerd stereotype?

To begin, economics played a vital factor in this volatile period. The pendulum had swung from the post-war economic boom to the halt of economic growth. Inflation

and unemployment rose and poverty became a national crisis. Japan and Western Europe

began to outproduce the U.S., forcing many Americans to question their supposed

economic superiority. Between the Arab oil embargo, gas shortages, offshoring, and

"stagflation," the U.S. economy had never looked so dreary to its citizens, and a

nationwide sense of pessimism set in. Among other things, this placed a great strain on

racial and gender relations, not to mention class tensions between the middle and lower

classes.[2] Economically-motivated demographic shifts encapsulated in phrases like "Sun

Belt," "Rust Belt," and even "Silicon Valley" soon become commonplace in the long 70s,

further signifying a large-scale shift in the class composition of the United States.

In a bit of what he referred to as "social forecasting," Daniel Bell's 1973 *The*

Coming of Post-Industrial Society appeared to be ringing true by the late 70s.[3] As the

United States shifted from an industrial to a postindustrial economic structure, the

economy shifted from the production of goods to the production of services. According to

Bell, this new service/information economy also entailed the rise of a new professional

and technical class, which included scientists, engineers, professors, and a whole host of

college-educated, white collar workers (occupational roles that I have addressed in

conjunction with the nerd stereotype in previous chapters).[4] By the late 70s, other

thinkers of various political leanings were wrestling with this "New Class" and their

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[2] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 445-50.

[3] Another important and prominent text that forecasted postindustrialism that topped best-seller lists in the early 70s was Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, first published in 1970. Christopher Lasch also published an early essay on postindustrialism in 1972, "Toward a Theory of Post-Industrial Society." See Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) and Christopher Lasch, "Toward a Theory of Post-Industrial Society," in *Politics in the PostWelfare State: Responses to the New Individualism*, ed. M. Donald Hancock and Gideon Sjoberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 36-50.

[4] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, Special Anniversary ed. (1973; repr., New York: BasicBooks, 1999), 15-8. For more on Bell and his work on postindustrialism, see Malcolm Waters, *Daniel Bell* (London: Routledge, 1996); and J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 7-11.

relationships to culture, power, knowledge, and intelligence, such as Alvin W. Gouldner

(*The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*), Barbara and John Ehrenreich

("The Professional-Managerial Class"), and perhaps most notably—and pessimistically—

Christopher Lasch (*The Culture of Narcissism*).[5] In short, it seems the long 70s were not

only an age of economic downturn, but also an age of massive reorganizations of class

structures and relations.[6] The postindustrial age was dawning, for better or worse, in the

United States, and the nerd stereotype was deeply imbricated in this new era.[7]

Interestingly, as this New Class began to rise—or at the very least, to come to

wider attention and greater scrutiny—in the long 70s, anti-intellectual sentiments began

to increase as well, perhaps as an initial negative reaction to the supposed economic

empowerment of this New Class.[8] There were many contributing factors to, and

symptoms of, this anti-intellectualism, but perhaps among the most important were the

political shifts that occurred throughout the long 70s, namely the shift from the radical

New Left to the conservative New Right. As the Left and the counterculture's collective

actions began to fragment and fall apart in the late 60s and early 70s, neoconservatism

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[5] See Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End, 1979), 5-45; and Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979).
[6] While there is no place to fully explore the connections here, it is worth emphasizing that the nerd stereotype and the nerd identity are both deeply imbricated in the rise of this new, knowledge-based class.
[7] The literature on postindustrialism and the new information society is obviously extensive. For a solid start, see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 1-14; Seymour Martin Lipset, ed. *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979); David Clark, *Post-Industrial America: A Geographical Perspective* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Hugh Mackay, *Investigating the Information Society* (London: Routledge, 2001); Nico Stehr, *Knowledge Societies* (London: Sage, 1994); and Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).
[8] This association between nerds as member of the New Class, as well as the class tensions between the working class and the New Class, are only briefly mentioned here and briefly touched upon in the next chapter. This is an important area, however, that certainly deserves further research.

began to rise, with its populist, anti-elitist appeals against intellectuals. From the presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater and George Wallace to Kevin P. Phillips' foundational 1969 *The Emerging Republican Majority*, a new kind of Republican Party was emerging. As historian David Hoeveler, Jr., writes,

> Indeed, *Republican Majority* exudes its author's own populist rhetoric, denoted by his ready references to "silk-stocking" urbanites, the "knowledge industry," "conglomerate corporatism," and "dollar internationalism." Nor were there undisguised in Phillips the anti-intellectual overtones so pronounced among populist neoconservatives. Keynoting the liberal Democratic trend, he said, were "the research directors, associate professors, social workers, educational consultants, urbanologists, development planners, journalists… communications specialists, culture vendors… poverty theorists and so forth."[9]

The rising New Right, recognizing that populist, anti-intellectual appeals to those Americans who disliked the social changes and challenges brought on by the Civil Rights Movement, student protesters, the Women's Movement and Gay Liberation, began garnering more power by actively subverting these various social justice movements.

Soon, the New Right had its own cadre of organic intellectuals,[10] founding their own political think tanks (American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation) and journals such as *The Public Interest*, *The American Spectator*, and *The National Interest*.[11] "The most noted and notorious" of these rising neoconservative thinkers, interestingly, "were journalists, not academics, their weapons of choice the short, biting essay, not the learned treatise."[12] Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol, and Michael Novak, for example, all began to shift towards supporting neoconservative

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[9] J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 140. Hoeveler quotes from Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 44, 88.
[10] I borrow the term "organic intellectual" from Antonio Gramsci, who has some excellent insights into the figure of the intellectual. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed. and trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
[11] Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn*, 145.
[12] Ibid. In a general sense, as the New Left got older and began fragmenting, many moved to the ivory tower of academia in the 70s.

thought in their work. And as Novak notes in his 1972 *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, there was a mounting hostility towards "The Intellectuals of the Northeast."[13] Generally speaking, then, there was a strong anti-intellectual component to neoconservatism and the New Right as they ascended to prominence in the long 70s.[14]

This anti-intellectualism and neoconservatism was greatly fostered by the Nixon administration in particular, which in McCarthy-like fashion resumed much of the masculinist, anti-intellectual baiting of the 50s. Particularly vicious and vocal was Vice President Spiro Agnew, who often denounced the Eastern intellectual elite. Attacking antiwar protesters and student radicals as well as the unmanly "liberal establishment" that supposedly provoked them, Agnew argued there was a "spirit of national masochism" that was being "encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."[15] Rendered as both elitist and effeminate, intellectualism was again on the outs.

The rise of anti-intellectualism in the long 70s was not only fostered by the anti-elitist rhetoric of the burgeoning neoconservative movement, but also by the anti-rationalist sentiment undergirding the rise of evangelicalism that also typified the

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[13] Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn*, 151. Refers to Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
[14] For a few of the many resources on neoconservatism, the New Right, and neoconservative intellectualism, see William B. Hixson, Jr., *Search for the American Right Wing: An Analysis of the Social Science Record, 1955-1957* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times Books, 1986); J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
[15] Quoted in Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 387.

decade.[16] Suddenly the "Jesus Freaks" movement and the new cultural label of "born-again Christian" (much like President Carter himself) rose to prominence. Televangelists like Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts populated the American airwaves.[17] Perhaps the most notable figure of this evangelical revival—often referred to as the Third Great Awakening—was Jerry Falwell, who merged Right wing politics with his own brand of aggressive evangelicalism. By 1979, Falwell had organized the Moral Majority, which happened to include many of the major New Right political activists. Preaching anti-communism, homophobia, and anti-feminism, Falwell also derided "secular humanism" as major causes of the social and moral decay that he saw rife throughout America.[18] For many of these evangelicals, intelligence—especially liberal, empirical, scientific intelligence—was an impediment to good Christian morality.[19]

Whatever the many contributing factors, intelligence seemed to be less important to most of the so-called Me Generation, replaced instead by a penchant for popular

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[16] As Daniel Rigney suggests in his article "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter" (and as suggested in the introductory chapter of this work), it is useful to think of three types of anti-intellectualism: anti-rationalism (often associated with evangelicalism), anti-elitism (often associated with populism), and unreflective instrumentalism (often associated with capitalism). All three, one might argue, began to be emphasized in American society in the 70s, and grew to dominate the 80s. See Daniel Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter," *Sociological Inquiry* 61, no. 4 (November 1991): 434-51.
[17] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 93.
[18] Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn*, 141.
[19] For more on the evangelicalism of this period, see George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Phillip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Wade C. Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988); and Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann, *Prime-Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1981).

entertainments, pop psychology-lite and a sort of pseudo-spiritual introspection.[20]

Perhaps more indicative was how the American public's interest in both education and science waned in the long 70s. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch bemoaned the decline of intellectual standards and examined the "spread of stupefaction" and the "new illiteracy" of American schooling, as well as the mounting public distrust of science.[21] While such pessimistic sentiments from cultural commentators are not exactly new, the publicized trends of the period backed up such perceptions, such as the sharp and drastic drop in SAT scores for both the math and verbal sections.[22] In general, whether they were on the Left or Right, whether they were educators, policy-makers, or parents, the American people seemed resigned about the overall decline in academic achievement. By 1983, the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report seemed to confirm that the state of American education of the last decade was indeed one of sad decline. "The climate of the 1970s," wrote one notable educational commentator, "was not healthy for learning, excellence in education, or intellectual daring."[23]

Science education in particular was on the downslide in the 1970s. As science education scholars John L Rudolph and David Meshoulam wrote in their contribution to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Medicine, and Technology*,

> If the 1960s were the heyday of science education reform—an era of lavishly funded curriculum projects directed by high-status, nationally renowned scientific researchers who had the attention of officials and the highest levels of government—the 1970s were nearly the opposite. The enthusiasm for fixing high

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[20] For the origin of the "Me Generation," see Tom Wolfe's essay "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening," which is included in Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 126-67.

[21] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), 125.

[22] Ibid., 128. Also see Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980* (BasicBooks, 1983), 311-2.

[23] Ben Brodinsky, "Something Happened: Education in the Seventies," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 6, no. 4 (December 1979): 238.

school science teaching through large-scale curriculum reform and new teacher-training programs waned in the face of entrenched school practice, social unrest, and a new skepticism of the social value of science.[24]

Not only was there evidence in the long 70s of a decline in science education, there was also a purported decline in the public trust in science overall.[25] It should also be noted that hard economic times likely also played an important role in this decline, primarily through cuts in funding. A prominent example of such a phenomenon was the loss of interest in space travel (and in the funding of NASA) that occurred after the moon landing in 1969.[26] By the time of the Three Mile Island disaster of 1979 (in tandem with the film *China Syndrome* (1979), released a mere twelve days before the nuclear meltdown), the American public seemed more suspicious of science than ever.[27]

Taken all together, the rise of the New Right, along with perceived declining interest in educational standards and public trust in science, anti-intellectualism was finding new expression in the 1970s, which in turn, much like the 50s, fostered greater "cultural use-value" for the nerd stereotype. One could even argue that academic

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[24] John L. Rudolph and David Meshoulam, "Science Education in American High Schools," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the History of American Science, Medicine, and Technology*, ed. Hugh R. Slotten (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 503-23. Entry originally accessed in PDF format online at http://www.amscied.net/Publications_files/Web%20PDF.pdf (accessed July 6, 2016). (Quote from PDF, page 17).

[25] Interestingly, a 2012 report in the *American Sociological Review* suggests that, while there was an overall decrease in the public trust of science in the 1970s, that decline was more prominent among those individuals on the conservative side of the spectrum, especially those who frequently attended church. It is also interesting to point out that by the 00s, it was primarily liberals who exhibited a much higher trust in science than conservatives or moderates. See Gordon Gauchat, "Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010" *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 2 (April 2012): 167-87.

[26] For one brief account of this decline of support—and funding—for NASA, see Roger D. Launius, *NASA: A History of the U.S. Civil Space Program* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1994), 93-105.

[27] For more on the near disaster at Three Mile Island and its relation to the film *China Syndrome*, see Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 218-9; and Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 128-30.

intellectuals were, themselves, also anti-intellectual in the long 70s.[28] As feminism began

to be theorized and expressed in academia, it met a deluge of vociferous opposition from

many fellow scholars, combining anti-intellectualism with blatant sexism (something

examined further below).[29] Perhaps even more fraught with tension was the arrival of

postmodern thinking in U.S. academic circles, particularly in the realm of literary theory.

Suddenly names like Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, and Lacan

were being tossed about in U.S. universities in the 70s, much to the chagrin of the older

guard who tended to dismiss this impractical new emphasis on "theory," rife with useless

jargon—an inherently anti-intellectual sentiment.[30]

Academia, that purported bastion of the New Class (or the New Left), was also

shifting due to pressures both inside and out. External factors like government influence,

bureaucracy, and corporatization began to markedly increase during this period, shifting

the values of American universities and colleges away from fostering intelligence and

towards capitalist-driven business concerns. Even the very compositions of faculty

membership and the student bodies began to shift due to the first notable, albeit slight

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[28] This is not to say that scholars are not often contentious and "in-fighting:" in many ways this is standard practice. Rather, the 70s were an especially contentious period in American academia, particularly along the lines of the discourses of practical vs. theoretical, pure vs. applied—binary oppositions that are themselves related to anti-intellectualism.

[29] For some basic overviews of the early reception of feminist theory and related issues, see Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989); Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender, eds., *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2012); Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory," in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 255-70; and J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 100-18. For more on women in academia during the 70s, also see Christie Farnham, *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Himani Bannerji, Linda Carty, Kari Dehli, Susan Heald, and Kate McKenna, *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); Judith Glazer-Raymo, *Shattering the Myths: Women in Academe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Florence Howe, ed., *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimonies from Thirty Founding Mothers* (New York: Feminist Press, CUNY, 2000).

[30] Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn*, 15-34.

increase of women and African-Americans in the university. This seeming influx of marginalized faculty, despite its low numbers in reality, created a new set of gender and racial tensions in the sphere of higher education. Competition for faculty positions increased overall, and many of the slowly growing number of female and black professors found themselves relegated to adjunct and non-tenured positions, often restricted to teaching courses on the female and black experiences, respectively.[31] So while the doors were finally starting to swing open among the professoriate, the top jobs—those often reserved for the most prominent of public intellectuals—were still predominantly allotted to white males with only a few token figures from marginalized identities. Even with neoconservative anti-intellectualism mounting throughout the long 70s, education and intelligence was still reserved for hegemonic white masculinity, now with an increasing neoconservative push to limit the advances of marginalized groups.

In a similar fashion, the student body was also in flux in the long 70s, seeing a sizeable increase in female and non-white students. Of course this was not entirely without controversy—or neoconservative influence—as evidenced by the 1978 Supreme Court decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*—a controversial case that reflected dueling perceptions regarding affirmative action.[32] Paul Bakke was denied admission to the Medical School at the University of California, Davis. The school did, however, admit minority students with lower GPAs and test scores than Bakke's through admission slots reserved for students with minority status.[33] Hearing of such occurrences

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[31] William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

[32] Busing was also an important, racially charged issue in the 70s.

[33] For more on *Bakke*, see Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980* (BasicBooks, 1983), 285-91; and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 69-70.

in the media—especially when argued from a neoconservative perspective that tended to denounce affirmative action—the American people were subjected to a discourse that, bluntly, painted college-hopeful minorities (especially blacks) as intellectually inferior to their white male counterparts. According to this biased line of reasoning, blacks were only getting into college because of the unfair interference of affirmative action, certainly not because they were actually intelligent. Accordingly, African Americans (as well as Hispanics and Native Americans) were still being excluded from (and by) the nerd stereotype for not being "smart enough." So while economic and political landscapes were undergoing drastic transformation in the United States, much of the same exclusionary identity politics of the past remained intact, now intimately entwined with a growing neoconservatism.

Such issues of identity, broadly construed, became increasingly important in the long 70s, as a sort of social fragmentation (in true postmodern fashion) began to occur. Loosely speaking, American culture of the late 40s and 50s was largely perceived to be— and perpetuated through hegemonic media to be—a rather "unified" (albeit racist and patriarchal) culture, rather tightly bound and single-minded in its expression of the domestic revival and anti-communist appeals, organized by what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., might call "a vital center."[34] By the 60s, the culture had seemingly ruptured in two antithetical parts along generational lines in the American imaginary: the straight culture and the counterculture. But the long 70s, as David Savran writes, "saw this rupture turn into radical fragmentation."[35] Suddenly, America was grappling with a veritable

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[34] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).
[35] David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 163. For more of Savran's useful thinking on this cultural fragmentation in the 70s, also see 163-9.

explosion of, to use the parlance of the day, "diversity" (although that diversity had always existed), a seemingly endless variety of "lifestyles" and "subcultures," all fueled by "atomized individuals" whom many social critics, in a broad fashion applying to all sorts of groups, decried as hedonistic and narcissistic.[36] Generically speaking, Americans overall seemed more interested in exploring the inner self than outer space, more interested in personal therapy than in political activism, in identifying themselves as discrete individuals with specifics tastes in mass entertainment than in forging a singularly united nation of American peoples.[37] With this cultural shift in mind, it makes sense that people with stereotypically "nerdy" interests would also begin to coalesce around those interests.[38]

While Nixon made appeals to "Middle Americans" and the supposed "Silent Majority" (not to mention his so-called "Southern strategy"), more and more people came to recognize that their identity was actually comprised of multiple identities, and that part of what identified a person—for good or for ill—was their tastes and patterns of consumption in popular culture. Genres in American popular culture across the board began to multiply in the 70s to cater to these target demographics with a sort of

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[36] Of course much of this call for diversity took place along racial lines. See both Harold Cruse's 1967 *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, the Black Power movement, and the 1975 spin-off of *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*. Also see Cesar Chávez, Corky Gonzales, and Rodolfo Acuna's 1972 *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle toward Liberation*. But this general shift from the previous ideology of liberal universalism to diversity (and eventually multiculturalism) went beyond race, too, to women and LGBTQ peoples as well. Also, the rapid growth of various subcultures (punk, for example) can be tied to this cultural phenomenon.

[37] Another possible contributing factor to this rise of individualism was the decline of anti-communist fervor, which among other things united Americans in the 50s and 60s against a singularly imagined foe: the U.S.S.R. By the 70s, this sentiment began to wane and be replaced instead by a new fear, that of terrorism, especially the diverse and dispersed terrorism that was associated vaguely with the Middle East (the Iran hostage crisis, etc.). As "the enemy" became more fragmented and loosely defined across the globe, so did America's conception of itself.

[38] Although it is a subject for another time—and another book—it is worth noting that many of the traditional fandoms associated with nerds arose at this vital time: *Star Trek* fandom, Dungeons & Dragons fandom, *Dr. Who* fandom, *Star Wars* fandom, etc.

unprecedented specificity. Music suddenly varied as widely from the punk rock of the

Ramones to the soul music of The Jackson Five, from the experimental glam rock of

David Bowie to the pop disco of the Bee Gees, from the country of Dolly Parton to the

working-class Americana folk rock of Bruce Springsteen. Cinema stretched further as

well; from Disney's *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) to the surprise hit pornographic

film *Deep Throat* (1972).[39] Even American television began to test the waters by

broadening its appeal and widening the types of available programming, from *All in the

Family* (1971-1979) to *Sesame Street* (1969-present), from *Monday Night Football*

(1970-present) to *Masterpiece Theatre* (1971-present). In brief, just like Americans

themselves, popular entertainment was slowly beginning to diversify, and how

Americans performed their individual fandoms, their relationships to multiple mass

mediated genres, began to take on a greater sense of importance in their individual

identity construction. And of the many identities of the era, it is not surprising to find the

nerd identity among them.[40]

When considered collectively, the economic, political, and cultural shifts of the

long 70s clearly contributed to the popularization of the nerd stereotype. Between the rise

of the New Class and the growing conflict between the working and middle class, the rise

of anti-intellectualism as especially fostered by the New Right and its aversion to the

social (and educational) gains of minorities, the perceived decline in public appreciation

for education and science, and the rise of diverse lifestyles (which included the lived nerd

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[39] *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* opened in North America on December 13, 1971, and *Deep Throat* opened
June 12, 1972, only six months apart. Any closer, and they could have been an interesting double feature.
[40] For useful, general overviews of American culture in the 70s, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The
Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001); Edward D.
Berkowtiz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York:
Columbia University Press, 2006); and Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the
1970s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

identity), it makes sense why the nerd stereotype flourished throughout the long 70s. In fact, the correlation between the popularization of the nerd stereotype in popular performance and the popularization of neoconservative anti-intellectualism in American life can practically be traced as rising in tandem throughout the period.

The Propagation of the Nerd Stereotype and the Term "Nerd" in Performance

One could easily make the argument that the long 70s is perhaps the most crucial period for the American nerd. It was during this period, after all, that American audiences not only witnessed the ultimate codification of the nerd stereotype, but also experienced the promulgation of that stereotype across the country. The ideological building blocks may have been in place by the late 60s, but it is not until the late 70s/early 80s that we can finally say that the nerd stereotype had truly been built: fully articulated *and* widely popularized, most especially by the mass media and popular entertainments (film television, radio, literature, etc.). And while the scope of this project does not allow for a nuanced investigation of identity formation, I would also argue that this period also saw the early beginnings of the actualized nerd *identity* as well—that is, when real life folks first began to wrestle with nerdy identifactory practices as individuals and within small communities.[41] The growing presence of "real-life" nerds likely exacerbated the use of the nerd stereotype, and symbiotically both became more prevalent.[42]

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[41] While I hope to explore the nerd identity more specifically in future research, I would like to point out that I feel it is no accident that the nerd identity begins to be expressed in concurrence with the rise of the nerd stereotype. As the stereotype reaches special prominence at this time, it is reasonable to assume that the ideas and politics that it expresses are also heightened, which in turn had a palpable, real-life impact on individuals. It is almost as if, *à la Althusser*, the nerd stereotype had "hailed" the nerd identity into being. For more on Athusser's concept of "hailing" or "interpellation," see his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85-126.

[42] For a bit more on the nerd identity, see the conclusion.

In a way, the formation and growth of the nerd stereotype, from the late 40s/early 50s up to the late 70s/early 80s can be loosely thought of as moving spatially over time from elementary/middle school playgrounds (late 40s/early 50s), then into high school hallways (mid 50s/late 50s), then onto college campuses and into corporate offices (early 60s/mid 60s), and spreading finally into the imaginations of all Americans and the larger American culture (the late 60s through the early 80s). From another perspective, as approximately three decades had passed, the stereotype had simply grown up with a full generation of Americans.

The popularization of the nerd stereotype during this third phase, however, goes beyond a mere increase in the quantity of nerd performances disseminated in American popular culture. More specifically, this popularization reflects strong cultural efforts to create, name, and define "nerd," to disseminate a common visual and, importantly, linguistic vocabulary for the express purpose of fostering wide public dispersal and consumption of the nerd stereotype. Many important nerd images and manifestations may have been around for a long time preceding this phase (as we have seen in the previous chapters), but in terms of concretizing a common term of reference, name, and meaning, it is the long 70s that witnesses the full-fledged "arrival" of the nerd stereotype.

In order to chart this growth and eventual "arrival" of the nerd stereotype, it is useful to trace three particularly important and prominent cultural expressions of the nerd stereotype, expressions that were key to disseminating—and defining—the nerd figure to the public at large: first, the "Are You a Nurd?" photograph from a 1974 issue of *National Lampoon* magazine; second, the use of the word "nerd" on the television show *Happy Days* (1974-1984), and then finally the nerd skits on *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*),

which aired from 1978 to 1980.[43] Tracking these three examples helps illuminate how the nerd stereotype moved from the periphery of the culture and subsequently on to perhaps its most flagrant and infamous marker in the next (fourth) phase, the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds*.[44]

As we have seen, throughout most of the 60s, the term "nerd"—along with its spelling variants "nurd" and "knurd"—was primarily a slang term for a "square"; usually an intelligent, bookish, studious type of student who chose to be a good student over partying and getting "drunk" ("knurd" spelled backwards). What is worthy of note is that these slang terms appeared to be most prevalent on college campuses in the 60s, and more particularly, in college humor magazines and comedic college skits.[45] The annual Swarthmore College comedy revue in the early 60s, for example, included a skit about the square-ish Millard Fillmore Nerd, whose problem is that he has never broken a school rule. Another instance is the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute humor magazine *Bachelor*, which featured a picture captioned "Why are 61 nurds so excited?" in the 1965 Homecoming edition.[46] Thus it appears that the nerd stereotype was growing in usage in the 60s, but still mainly relegated to the cultural periphery of academic relationships and in-crowd college humor.[47]

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[43] For another examination of this popularization of the nerd stereotype, see Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 55-71.

[44] This film is analyzed in-depth in chapter 8.

[45] I believe this strong relationship between nerds and college in the 60s is further reflected on the representation of many prominent nerds as professors and college students, as explored in chapter 4.

[46] For more on RPI and their contribution to the etymology of the word "nerd," see the introductory chapter.

[47] For more on the Swarthmore skit and the RPI *Bachelor* picture—as well as other potential examples of 60s nerd manifestations—see Jim Burrows, "Nerd Mail," 2005, http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/NerdCorner/NerdMail.html#Swarthmore (accessed August 28, 2016); and Jim Burrows, "The Origin of the Nerd," 2005, http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/NerdCorner/nerd.html (accessed August 28, 2016).

College humor of this nature, in its most crass and brazen form, reached a much wider audience with the publication of *National Lampoon* magazine. The first issue of the magazine appeared in April of 1970, primarily the effort of two young scribes fresh from Harvard: Henry Beard and Doug Kenney. It was at Harvard that they worked together at the *Harvard Lampoon*, honing their skills as writers and parodists, and as such they brought much of that witty, gritty, often offensive, often political, often vulgar, and often academic sensibility with them to the *National Lampoon*. Anyone and anything was a target for their lampooning—nerds included.[48]

By the mid-70s, the magazine was, against all odds and expectations, doing extremely well, both financially and artistically. In 1974, for example, the *Lampoon* special edition *1964 High School Yearbook Parody* sold over 1.5 million copies, encapsulating not only the magazine's overall success at the time, but also embodying its preoccupation with parodying adolescence, school relationships, and college (sex) life—a dominant theme that would later define the magazine's most notable cinematic manifestation, *Animal House* (1978).[49] Also appearing in 1974, in the October "Pubescence" issue, was a rather simple, yet telling picture: "Are You a Nurd?"

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[48] For more on the *National Lampoon*, see Tony Hendra, *Going Too Far: The Rise and Demise of Sick, Gross, Black, Sophomoric, Weirdo, Pinko, Anarchist, Underground, Anti-Establishment Humor* (New York: Doubleday, 1987); Josh Karp, *A Futile and Stupid Gesture: How Doug Kenney and National Lampoon Changed Comedy Forever* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006); Ellin Stein, *That's Not Funny, That's Sick: The National Lampoon and the Comedy Insurgents Who Captured the Mainstream* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013); and Rick Meyerowtiz, *Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Writers and Artists Who Made the National Lampoon Insanely Great* (New York: Abrams, 2010). This latter book was made into an interesting documentary: *Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon*, DVD, directed by Douglas Tirola (2015; Los Angeles: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2016). One can also argue that many of the writers and artists that worked on the *National Lampoon*, like Beard and Kenney, were very nerdy themselves.

[49] Interestingly enough, the *Yearbook Parody* has many nerdy features, such as the made-up profile for Gilbert Bunsen Scrabbler, nicknamed "Univac." See Rick Meyerowtiz, *Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Writers and Artists Who Made the National Lampoon Insanely Great* (New York: Abrams, 2010), inside back cover.

The picture is of a young white boy: the quintessential nerd stereotype, complete with labels indicating "High-water pants," "Reads too much," and "Strap on slide rule," among other descriptors.[50] He has slicked hair, thick glasses held together with tape on the bridge, and a T-shirt under his short-sleeve button-down, which sports two breast pockets: one holding a pocket protector filled with writing utensils, the other a spare case for his extreme prescription spectacles. His pants are jacked up high on his waist, his zipper undone, his shirt partially untucked, his pants hems so high his white socks show, and his shoes untied. At the top of the picture is a supposed definition for the term "nurd also nerd," a definition that is rather astute:

> an adolescent male possessing any of a number of socially objectionable characteristics, including passivity, disregard for personal appearance, obsessive neatness, introversion, undue respect for authority, sexual ignorance, disinterest in athletics, fidgeting, kooties, anality, infantilism, pusillanimity, obsequiousness, and using big words; *see*: TWINK, WONK, FINK, TWIT, [*greasy*], GRIND, FLAMER, WIMP, WEENIE, DINK, CREEP, FLYER, GEEK, DIP, LEMUR, Q-BALL, SIMP, TWIRP, DRIP, WOMBAT, ZOOMER, SCREAMER.[51]

Finally, at the bottom of the picture are captions that warn that if you possess too many of these characteristics, you might just be a nerd in need of a leper colony (see Figure 5 in the Appendix).

While it is worth pointing out that the picture assumes that the nerd is, by definition, an "adolescent male," what may be the most important aspect of this simple picture buried in an issue of *National Lampoon* is that it is perhaps the most prominent performance of the nerd stereotype up to this historical moment, vitally linking the physical image, the general description, and most importantly the term itself. Furthermore, the publication of this particular picture demarcates an important move

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[50] "Are You a Nurd?," photograph, *National Lampoon*, October 1974, 52. DVD-ROM, National Lampoon Vintage Library Vol. 1, 2010.
[51] Ibid.

away from isolated college humor magazines to a national publication in its heyday. The lone picture, interestingly enough, was popular enough with readers that, subsequently, the *National Lampoon* offered posters of the picture for sale.[52] In many ways, the "Are You a Nurd?" picture is a key step in the popularization of the nerd stereotype.

Compared to the oft-obscene, in-your-face satire of the *National Lampoon*, the breezy, nostalgic, conservative television sitcom *Happy Days* is an entirely different sort of venue for the dissemination of nerd constructs. If the *National Lampoon* provided the image and terminology of the nerd stereotype for a broad segment of American culture, *Happy Days* ensured that the word "nerd" itself was broadcast to nearly every American home with a television set, even if it did not directly portray a prominent nerd character. Not only does *Happy Days* mark an important step up from *National Lampoon* in terms of popularization, it also embodies a strong connection to the mounting neoconservative politics of the era.

Created by Garry Marshall, the television series *Happy Days* aired on ABC from 1974 to 1984, presenting a highly idealistic and nostalgic image of life in the late 50s and early 60s. For much of the series, the show revolves around teenager Richie Cunningham (Ron Howard), who is, in a multitude of ways, the personification of Archie from the Archie Comics series, from his clean cut, American-as-apple pie looks to his squeaky-clean behavior—right down to his red hair.[53] An All-American teen and model son who

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[52] These posters of the photograph, interestingly enough, became popular among nerds themselves, a sort of ironic acquisition. See Eric S. Raymond, *The New Hacker's Dictionary,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xi; and Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 69.

[53] Many of the themes and much of the subject matter of *Happy Days* is presaged by the George Lucas film *American Graffiti* (1973), which, importantly, also stars Ron Howard as a clean-cut teen about to go off to college, but who ultimately stays home to be with his girl. The circle of young friends at the center of the film includes a prominent comic nerd figure, Terry "The Toad" Fields (Charles Martin Smith), who serves as another excellent example of the nerd stereotype (despite not being labeled with that particular term).

remains lovingly obedient to his parents, Richie embodies what American parents of the 70s wished their children could be like. Accordingly, the series—and its reception—is especially steeped in the nostalgia of the 1950s, vividly recalling the *Father Knows Best* family dynamic.[54] Besides a little harmless necking and wacky hijinks, Richie and his pals are about as innocuous as can be. This sort of escapism allowed many of the viewers of *Happy Days* to distance themselves from the tumultuous politics and economics of the 70s and instead recall those "happy days" when youth behaved themselves—even if that act of recollection is a reductive misinterpretation. In short, the happy days of *Happy Days* implicitly imply the days before Civil Rights and the social activism of the 60s and early 70s.[55]

Richie has an entourage of friends, including the dopey Potsie Weber (Anson Williams), the jokester Ralph Malph (Donny Most), and the highly iconic greaser The Fonz (Henry Winkler), the most beloved character from the series. Even the ever cool Fonzie, complete with leather jacket and motorcycle, is essentially benign—a juvenile delinquent with a heart of gold. *Happy Days* goes out of its way to remain as safe and harmless as possible, even for a sitcom.[56] It is perhaps because of this very safe, sanitized

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Only nerdy director George Lucas could have created a character like The Toad, who despite being awkward and inept with the ladies, ends up having a surprisingly nice evening with a beautiful woman. See *American Graffiti*, Special Edition, DVD, directed by George Lucas (1973; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2011).

[54] For a useful article examining how nostalgia operates conservatively with regard to the family sitcom, see June M. Frazer and Timothy C. Frazer, "'Father Knows Best' and 'The Cosby Show': Nostalgia and the Sitcom Tradition," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 163-72.

[55] For basic information on *Happy Days*, see "Happy Days," IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070992/?ref_=ttfc_fc_tt (accessed September 4, 2016).

[56] This mounting neoconservative outlook is a particularly pronounced phenomenon for much of American television during the 70s. While the early 70s saw a few shows attempt to "tackle social issues"—from *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M*A*S*H*, etc.—the late 70s saw a shift towards escapist farce, fantasy, and the ever problematic "jiggle television"—shows like *Charlie's Angels*, *Three's Company*, *The Love Boat,* and *Fantasy Island*, for example. This generally conservative shift throughout the 70s, partially initiated by the success of *Happy Days*, further embodies the rise of neoconservatism that took place during this period.

style that, ironically, no fully developed, stereotypical nerd character appears on the show. If anything, Richie himself is the ultimate nerd: obedient to his parents, often unskilled or reserved with the ladies, an exceptional honors student and valedictorian, etc. But to mark him as a nerd would be to mock these qualities, which the series clearly does not wish to do.

So while *Happy Days* popularizes the term "nerd," it should be observed that the show neither prominently portrays nor mocks nerds, *per se*.[57] Instead, unlike the more specific and derogatory (yet perhaps parodic) "Are You a Nurd?" picture, the word "nerd" is used more generically on *Happy Days*, primarily referring to anyone who is a square—in other words, someone antithetical to the Fonz. So "nerd" is used merely as a relatively generic insult, perhaps as it actually once was in the 50s.[58]

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[57] While *Happy Days* does not offer a fully realized nerd stereotype, its association with the word "nerd" marks the beginning of an important television relationship: that of TV shows revolving around children/teens and nerds. It seems that almost every television show (or movie, for that matter) from the 70s on that deals specifically with the lives of American youth—especially in terms of their time at school/college—has a nerd or nerd-like character, further cementing the relationship of the nerd stereotype with youth culture. Arnold Horshack (Ron Palillo) from *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975-1979) is one early example, although he is not quite a brainy type—he is a remedial Sweathog after all. That said, it is worth noting that Horshack is marked as the smartest of the bunch in the episode "Arrividerci, Arnold" (season 1, episode 13), capable of moving up and out of the remedial class. One of the nerdiest characters in *Welcome Back, Kotter* is actually the recurring female nerd Judy Borden (Helaine Lembeck), along with Todd Ludlow (Dennis Bowen). Regardless, from the time of *Happy Days* and *Welcome Back, Kotter*, TV shows that deal with youth in school, from *The Facts of Life* (1979-1988), to *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), to *Saved By the Bell* (1989-1992), to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), tend to be prime vehicles for nerd performances. For the "Arrividerci, Arnold" episode of *Welcome Back, Kotter* and other episodes including the nerdy characters Judy and Todd, see *Welcome Back, Kotter*, The Complete First Season (1975, 1976, Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

[58] We will likely never know if the creators of *Happy Days* used the term "nerd" aware of its etymological roots in the late 40s/50s, or if they were primarily using their then contemporaneous 70s understanding of the term anachronistically. Regardless, it is fascinating that the show is a nostalgic performance of "teens in the 50s," which is so often the basis of nerd performances (i.e. *American Graffiti* (1973), *Back to the Future* (1985), etc.) Another interesting parallel with *Happy Days* is another nostalgic childhood TV series, *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), that also utilized the premise that each season occurred in sync with the twenty previous years (1968-1973) and, importantly, contained many nerd representations, primarily the character of Paul Pfeiffer (Josh Saviano). Even a more contemporaneous show like the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-) also achieves this interesting sort of "nerd nostalgia" by setting itself in the early 80s.

While the Fonz is most often the character to use the word (and Potsie is most often the character to be on its receiving end), funnily enough the first usage of "nerd" on the series is uttered by Richie's little sister Joanie, who uses it to insult Potsie at the dinner table: "Gee, Potsie, you should act this nice all the time, then people wouldn't think you're such a nerd."[59] This utterance occurs in the episode "Guess Who's Coming to Visit?" (season 1, episode 4), which originally aired on February 5, 1974—less than a year before the *National Lampoon* published its iconic nerd picture. The term "nerd" is only used once again in the first season (Potsie asks Richie, "Do you want to be a nerd, or a cool guy with the chicks?"), but its usage picks up markedly in the second season.[60] Generally speaking, the term "nerd" became a much-used, iconic catchphrase—much like Fonzie's "Ay" or "Sit on it"—mainly during the second through the fifth seasons, which stretch from 1974 to 1978, the show's heyday of popularity.[61] As authors Fantle and Johnson put it, writing of their 1981 interview with The Fonz himself: "Thanks to Henry Winkler, the word 'nerd' is now part of the American vernacular."[62]

Shortly after *Happy Days* "jumped the shark,"[63] it would be "The Not Ready For Prime-Time Players" of the funky new NBC show *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) that would pick up the nerd stereotype baton and run with it. In many ways, *SNL* took the button-

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[59] Lowell Ganz and Mark Rothman, "Guess Who's Coming to Visit?," *Happy Days*, season 1, episode 4, directed by Jerry Paris, aired February 5, 1974 (Hollywood, CA: CBS Studios, 2016), DVD.

[60] Frank Buxton and Michael Leeson, "Hardware Jungle," *Happy Days*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Jerry Paris, aired February 12, 1974 (Hollywood, CA: CBS Studios, 2016), DVD. All of these observations regarding *Happy Days* come from my own viewings of the first six seasons of the program, where I traced every time the word "nerd" was uttered.

[61] The *Happy Days* spinoff *Laverne and Shirley* also used the word "nerd," usually in reference to Squiggy (David Lander). Like on *Happy Days*, the term was used as a generic slander.

[62] David Fantle and Tom Johnson, *Reel to Real: 25 Years of Celebrity Interviews from Vaudeville to Movies to TV* (Oregon, WI: Badger Books, 2004), 238.

[63] The phrase "jumping the shark" refers to that point in a television series when it has usually been on the air a bit too long and starts to resort to bizarre and outlandish plot devices. The phrase actually comes from *Happy Days*, when, in season 5, the Fonz water ski jumps over a shark. The ratings began declining from that point on.

pushing, edgy college humor of the *National Lampoon* and brought it to late night television.[64] It is not surprising, then, to find the pictorial nerd stereotype so thoroughly lampooned in the *National Lampoon* brought to life on the live television sketch comedy/variety show in 1978-1980 in the "Nerd sketches."

The Nerd sketches—there were 13 in all—focus primarily on two nerds who perform the nerd stereotype to a T: Lisa Loopner (Gilda Radner) and Todd DiLaMuca (Bill Murray).[65] Lisa (AKA Four-Eyes) and Todd (AKA Pizza Face), two unpopular high school students, bring all of the visual markers of the nerd to their performances. While Todd may have lacked the horn-rimmed glasses, he comically sported high-water pants jacked high to his belly (with a lopsided, mismatched belt that stuck out awkwardly) as well as the infamous pocket-protector. Lisa does wear the nerdy glasses (with a beaded chain) as well as frumpy-looking sweaters, usually draped across her slouched shoulders. Beyond their outfits, both Murray and Radner make their performances as comically extreme as possible, rendering their stereotypical characters as awkward, annoying, and uncool as can be imagined: from Lisa's asthmatic wheezing to Todd's penchant for pestering Lisa with noogies and juvenile mockery—the latter of which would often

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[64] There is a very strong connection between the *National Lampoon* and *SNL*, which explains the similar style of humor: many of the writers and performers of the magazine and its performative incarnations (namely the *National Lampoon Radio Hour*) were poached by Lorne Michaels for his new show. In fact, both Bill Murray and Gilda Radner worked with the *National Lampoon* crew, as did the writer Anne Beatts. It was Beatts, along with fellow writer Rosie Shuster, who developed and wrote the first Nerd sketch and oversaw the development of the characters that Murray and Radner would embody. For more on this relationship between *National Lampoon* and *SNL*, see Ellin Stein, *That's Not Funny, That's Sick: The National Lampoon and the Comedy Insurgents Who Captured the Mainstream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013); and for more background on the creation of the *SNL* Nerd sketches, see Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 61-6.

[65] The 13 sketches appear on the following episodes: season 3, episodes 10, 13, 16, 18, and 20; season 4, episodes 1, 4, 10, 13, and 16; and season 5, episodes 4, 8, and 14. The Nerds may have lasted longer given their popularity, but there were drastic changes at *SNL* after season 5: Lorne Michaels left the show and a new producer, Jean Doumanian took over, introducing a new cast of players: and with both Murray and Radner gone, the Nerds sketches were no more. For some basic background on the early days of *SNL*, see Hal Schuster, *SNL! The World of Saturday Night Live* (Las Vegas, NV: Pioneer Books, 1992); and Michael Cader, ed., *Saturday Night Live: The First Twenty Years* (Boston: Cader Books, 1994).

prompt Lisa to respond with her most prominent catch phrase: "That's so funny I forgot to laugh!"

Beyond their nerdy appearance and demeanor, Lisa and Todd also embodied many of the specific characteristics of the nerd stereotype. They were both in the Chess Club and longed to win the school Science Fair—classic nerd characteristics denoting braininess and a love of science. Both are "A" students who love to do homework. In one sketch (season 5, episode 4) Todd says that he cannot go to an exciting chess tournament because he has "some Trig homework that I'm dying to get to."[66] An even more thoroughly expressed example of their nerdy love for study is when Lisa is in the hospital to have a surgery for her deviated septum (season 4, episode 4). Stuck in the hospital and missing school, she woefully confesses, "I so miss learning."[67] What's more, when Todd arrives to bring Lisa the homework she so desperately craves, another nerd, Spaz (Steve Martin)—Todd's even nerdier competition for Lisa's attention—also brings her homework. Todd is affronted to learn that she is "taking homework from two different guys at the same time."[68] For a teenage nerd, homework takes on all the importance of sex: a comic inversion denoting misplaced priorities.

It is the respective performance of sexuality for both Todd and Lisa that is especially intriguing, as each represents the two major types of nerd stereotype sexuality: obliviously asexual (Lisa) or hypersexual failure (Todd). Like many female nerd representations, Lisa is usually portrayed as not being aware of her own sexuality

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[66] *Saturday Night Live*, season 5, episode 4, hosted by Buck Henry, aired November 10, 1979 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.
[67] *Saturday Night Live*, season 4, episode 4, hosted by Steve Martin, aired November 4, 1978 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.
[68] Ibid.

(although she confesses a serious celebrity crush on composer Marvin Hamlisch).[69] When her piano teacher Mr. Brighton (Michael Palin) tries to molest her, she is caught unawares, just as she is usually oblivious to Todd's own sexual advances. One particularly funny moment is when Todd borrows his brother's apartment in an attempt to get some action with Lisa (season 4, episode 16). When Todd is clumsily attempting to seduce Lisa, and he asks her what intoxicating perfume she is wearing, she stuffily intones, "Vicks VapoRub."[70] Todd also makes fun of Lisa relentlessly for being flat-chested in most of the sketches, calling her breasts "mosquito bites"[71] or "underdeveloped nations."[72] And when doing the nativity play at school, Todd points out that Lisa is the best girl around to play the role of the Virgin Mary because she is "one of the few girls here at Gus Grissom High who is physically correct for this part."[73]

Unlike Lisa, Todd is usually attempting "to get some," but like many male nerd representations, he is a ridiculous failure. If Lisa is a virgin by naïve happenstance, Todd is a virgin because he is inept at performing his masculine duty, no matter how often he tries. For example, in one sketch (season 4, episode 13), Todd develops a crush on an attractive nurse, which inevitably does not pan out, leaving him dejected. And again in the episode where Todd tries to put the moves on Lisa in his brother's apartment, shortly

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[69] Writer Anne Beatts attests that there is a strong sense of Jewishness to Lisa Loopner, who not only loves Marvin Hamlisch, but is also a huge fan of the Streisand film *The Way We Were*. See Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 65.

[70] *Saturday Night Live*, season 4, episode 16, hosted by Richard Benjamin, aired April 7, 1979 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD. It should be noted that Richard Benjamin plays Todd's nerdy older brother, Milt. Given Benjamin's association with Jewishness as an actor, this may not be a mere coincidence. See chapter 6 for more on the rise of the Jewish performer in the late 60s/early 70s and the association with nerds.

[71] *Saturday Night Live*, season 3, episode 20, hosted by Buck Henry, aired May 20, 1978 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

[72] *Saturday Night Live*, season 4, episode 1, hosted by The Rolling Stones, aired October 7, 1978 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

[73] *Saturday Night Live*, season 5, episode 8, hosted by Ted Knight, aired December 22, 1979 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

after a hilariously awkward kiss, Lisa's mom, Mrs. Loopner, shows up to ruin the moment.[74]

While both misperformed gender and sexuality are dominant themes to the stereotypically nerdy Lisa and Todd, it is also worth noting that their whiteness is inadvertently emphasized by the performance of a black male nerd who appears in a minor role periodically—perhaps the first televised black male nerd performance to date. In the sketch set at the science fair (season 3, episode 18), the nerdy "Grant Robinson, Jr. from Harriet Tubman High" (Garrett Morris) introduces himself to Lisa and Todd.[75] Sporting a sweater vest, glasses, and a bow tie, Grant Robinson, Jr. is just as nerdy as Lisa and Todd. Sadly, Grant's minor appearance is to be rendered an outcast even among nerdy outcasts—his science fair entry is exceptionally poor and lackluster: only some balloons and their static electricity. Grant does not quite belong at the science fair, which Todd clearly emphasizes in racial terms by saying "You're the only negro here."[76] While the black nerd character of Grant makes a couple more appearances in the Nerd sketches, it is always as an awkward outlier to the main thrust of performance.[77] This reveals, perhaps accidently, how Todd and Lisa and the other nerds are predominantly white,

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[74] Lisa's mother, the quirky, egg salad sandwich-making, housecoat-clad, sexually repressed Mrs. Loopner (Jane Curtin) emphasizes not only the infantile nature of Lisa, but how abnormal parents lead to abnormal children. This equally applies to Todd's bumbling father (Buck Henry). Both are single parents, recapitulating the dire warnings of the parenting manuals of the 50s: it is clear that misguided parenting begets nerdy children. In one sketch (season 5, episode 4) the nerdy Mr. DiLaMuca proves to be just as an inept wooer as Todd, confirming again that nerdy males are no good with the ladies.

[75] *Saturday Night Live*, season 3, episode 18, hosted by Steve Martin, aired April 22, 1978 (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Another contributing factor is that the actor Garrett Morris was often treated like a token black male on *SNL*, and often relegated to more supporting roles. It is also worth mentioning that one possible reason that a black nerd appears in the skit at all is because he was one of the few *SNL* cast members willing to take on the role. For more on Garrett Morris and his tokenism, see Hal Schuster, *SNL! The World of Saturday Night Live* (Las Vegas, NV: Pioneer Books, 1992) 73-4.

whereas the idea of a black nerd was still a relatively foreign concept to the mainstream (i.e. white) culture.[78]

Lisa Loopner, Todd DiLaMuca, and the *SNL* Nerd sketches are an exceptionally important turning point for the nerd stereotype, marking not only a major step in the growth of the stereotype in the broader American culture, but also the first prominent example of the full stereotype—term, characteristics, and image all together—in the mass media of performance.[79] Furthermore, both Lisa and Todd embody not only the nerd stereotype, but a particularly neoconservative politics, indicating how by the late 70s, the female nerd stereotype particularly derided female intelligence and the male nerd stereotype was performed as a laughable sexual and masculine failure. And unlike the nerd sidekicks and protagonists of the previous phase, these nerds elicited little sympathy, only much pointed derision.

In a way, a direct line of ascendance can be traced from the *National Lampoon* "Are You a Nurd?" picture in 1974, though *Happy Days*, and up to the *SNL* Nerd sketches (1978-1980), suggesting that an important cultural shift took place in roughly the late 60s/early 70s; a cultural shift that took the loosely construed, peripheral nerd stereotype of previous decades and caused it to blossom. As previously suggested, I would argue that this cultural shift can primarily be attributed to the arrival and

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[78] The black male nerd, so strange and implausible in the late 70s and early 80s would of course explode on the scene and achieve great popularity in the 90s with characters like Steve Urkel (Jaleel White) from *Family Matters* (whose first appearance was in the episode "Laura's First Date," season 1, episode 12, which aired on December 15th, 1989); Carlton Banks (Alfonso Ribeiro) from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996); and the Eddie Murphy 1996 remake of *The Nutty Professor*. This "rise of the black male nerd" will be mentioned, albeit briefly, in the concluding chapter.

[79] One could argue that the next and final step of the ascendance of the nerd stereotype would be when nerds merited primary treatment in a full-length feature film, a film that even featured the word "Nerds" in the title: the 1984 movie *The Revenge of The Nerds*, which is discussed in chapter 8. If *SNL* was the first to truly broadcast the full nerd stereotype to the entire country, *Revenge of the Nerds* would seal the deal and ensure that the nerd would become a permanent fixture of the culture.

promulgation of neoconservatism in American thought, which in turn fostered anti-intellectual sentiment. However, I would further argue that the popularization of the nerd stereotype is not only attributable to the general *anti-intellectualism* of neoconservatism, but also the specific *identity politics* of neoconservatism. After all, some of the most primary catalysts for the ascendance of neoconservatism in the late 60s and early 70s are those that occurred with regard to race, gender, sexuality, and the particular neoconservative need to reinforce white masculine hegemony. More specifically, I would argue that in a highly neoconservative fashion, the nerd stereotype was used throughout the long 70s to undermine and counterattack those who dared to challenge white masculine authority, most especially the feminists of the Women's Liberation Movement.[80] This neoconservative retaliation against feminism is not merely another symptom of the nerd stereotype in the long 70s, but rather a much deeper, more causal factor in the popularization of the nerd stereotype. In short, the nerd stereotype started its climb to popularity in the late 60s/early 70s thanks in large part to the impact the Women's Liberation Movement had on American culture. And the prominence of stereotypical female nerds like Lisa Loopner—and as we shall see, some famous animated female nerds—embody these neoconservative identity politics.

Conflating Feminist, Lesbian, and Nerd: Kate Millett and Velma from Scooby-Doo

By any measure, the late 60s/early 70s were an especially charged time for identity politics, from the Black Panthers to the Stonewall Riots of 1969. With regard to the nerd stereotype, however, the Women's Liberation Movement deserves special

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[80] As for why neoconservative thinkers seemed especially challenged by intelligent feminists in particular as opposed to, say, the intelligence represented by the Black Power Movement, some potential reasons are suggested below, although it should be emphasized that much of the same racist ways of thinking—namely the dismissal of black intelligence—are still firmly in play.

attention, as there is a coinciding increase in stereotypical female nerd performances.

While the Women's Movement has its roots back in the early 60s, it is really the late

60s/early 70s when the movement takes American popular culture by storm. From the

founding of NOW in 1966, to the Miss America protest in 1968, to the publication of *Ms*.

magazine in 1971, to the "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match between Bobby Riggs and

Billy Jean King in 1973, to the long-embattled fight for the ERA—not to mention the

Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977) and *Maude* (1972-1978)—this period saw a

passionate and wide-spread battle for women's rights along with all of its aftershocks and

backlash.[81]

Interestingly, the Women's Movement engaged deeply with intellectualism,

fostering not only a number of various activist-writers and publications, but also an

almost immediate and burgeoning production of scholarly feminist theorization—

potently symbolized by the establishment of Women's Studies as an academic field of

study. While there still remained anti-intellectual tension between "practical" activists

and "impractical" theorists, the Women's Movement, for the most part, was able to

reconcile many of these differences. The movement struggled internally, however, with

the fragmentation of identities, especially with the lack of full consideration for black

feminists and lesbian feminists. The early Women's Movement, after all, was primarily a

white, middle-class Women's Movement.[82] From the outside perspective of American

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[81] For more on these various pop cultural indicators of the rise of feminism—both cultural and radical—at this time, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 11-2, 161-76; Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
[82] The early feminist movement wrestled with internal racism, particularly in terms of overlooking the specifics issues face by women of color. The movement also tended to ostracize lesbian feminists, not only

popular culture, however—especially those who, like conservative politico Phyllis

Schlafly, saw the Women's Movement as dangerous—there was a strong linkage

between feminism and intellect and lesbianism. This association with both intelligence

and homosexuality would be used as neoconservative weapons against feminist

activism.[83] One consequence of this widely perceived connection between feminism,

lesbianism, and intellect is the conflation of the feminist and the female nerd stereotype.[84]

An important figure in the Women's Movement who perhaps best unites all of

these various nerd-related threads of intellectualism, feminist activism, and lesbianism is

scholar Kate Millett. In the lynchpin year of 1970, when "women's liberation became a

dominant story in the national press," the young Millett published *Sexual Politics*, an

erudite attack on patriarchy and a foundational text of feminist theory.[85] The book, based

on her Columbia University dissertation, became a controversial bestseller, launching

Millett to celebrity status and turning her, along with Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and

Gloria Steinem, into a poster child for the Women's Movement. Featured on the cover of

Time in late August 1970 and the subject of articles within its pages, she was described in

the magazine as an "ideologue," a "longtime brilliant misfit in a man's world," with the

suggestion that *Sexual Politics* had "made Millett the Mao Tse-tung of Women's

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due to internal homophobia, but also because there was a fear that lesbianism, that lavender menace, would tarnish the feminist movement in the public arena and undermine the cause.

[83] Recall from chapter 2 that there is a long-standing historical connection with homosexuality and intelligence.

[84] For general overviews of the Women's Liberation Movement, see Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: The Dial Press, 1999); and Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

[85] Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

Liberation."[86] A more personal article further emphasized her excellent education and her collegiate teaching experience ("first at Hunter, then at Barnard"), further painting Millett as the scholarly public intellectual.[87] A subsequent article in *Life* called Millett a "Furious Young Philosopher," and "author of a scholarly polemic which is to Women's Lib roughly what *Das Kapital* was to Marxism."[88]

In these early articles about Millett, there is a consistent trend of acknowledging her academic credentials and intelligence, yet the tone in regard to that intelligence is a highly qualified one: her smarts mark her as an oddball. As Victoria Hesford puts forward in *Feeling Women's Liberation*, in the *Life* article in particular, "Millett's unconventionality becomes explicit evidence of a wayward or 'wrong' femininity."[89] I would further add that the emphasis on her education and status as a scholar, rather than establishing her credentials with the American public, were used instead in a subtle anti-intellectual fashion, further rendering Millett as strange and even subversive, like a Mao or Marx. Perhaps most telling is that both *Time* and *Life* included pictures of Millett wearing thick, round, black glasses as well.[90]

A couple of months after the publication of these two magazines, Millet was pressured by the audience at a Gay Liberation Front meeting held at Columbia University to disclose her bisexuality and publically declare she was a lesbian. Shortly thereafter, *Time* published a sort of follow-up article on Millett, "Women's Lib: A Second Look,"

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[86] "Whose Come a Long Way Baby?," *Time*, August 31, 1970, 16. The comparison with Chairman Mao, the Chinese communist, revolutionary, theorist, and founder of the People's Republic of China is a problematic one, to say the least, especially as this article was printed before Nixon was invited by Mao to visit to China in 1972.
[87] "The Liberation of Kate Millett," *Time*, August 31, 1970, 19.
[88] Marie-Claude Wrenn, "The Furious Young Philosopher Who Got It Down on Paper," *Life*, September 4, 1970, 22.
[89] Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 164.
[90] For a nice analysis of these three articles as well as reprints of some of the pictures of Millett, see Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 159-69.

which not only outed Millett, but was much less kind to her, her work, and Women's

Liberation in general. As this second *Time* article states (and thereby manifests), Millett's

admission of her queer sexuality was "bound to discredit her as a spokeswoman for her

cause, cast further doubt on her theories, and reinforce the views of those skeptics who

routinely dismiss all liberationist as lesbians."[91] The article continues as both an attack on

Millett and an attack on the Women's Movement. There was even a generic drawing that

accompanied the article of an angry, unattractive women's libber, complete with burning

bra—and also a pair of glasses.[92]

Through the sudden celebrity icon of Kate Millett and her swift, supposed

downfall upon being outed, the popular American media cultivated and promulgated the

stereotypical figure of the "feminist-as-lesbian," a figure that would go on to have a

strong impact on American culture.[93] This is not to say that the outing of Millett in *Time*

was the first time feminists have been slandered, denounced, and undermined by

accusations of, or associations with lesbianism: that sort of "dyke-baiting" easily goes

back to the first wave of feminism as well as the second.[94] But the feminist-as-lesbian

stereotype—that unfortunate image of "overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting,

selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women"—took on new life and

immediacy in 1970 and beyond (and frankly is still with us today) thanks in small part to

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[91] "Women's Lib: A Second Look," *Time*, December 14, 1970, 50.
[92] For a nice analysis of this second *Time* article outing Kate Millett as well as the drawing of a stereotypical feminist, see Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 25-31. The drawing, it should be noted, was borrowed from *Esquire* magazine.
[93] I borrow this term from Hesford. For more on this stereotype, see Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); and Bonnie Zimmerman, "Confessions of a Lesbian Feminist," in *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance*, ed. Dana Heller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 157-68.
[94] I would suggest that earlier associations linking feminism with lesbianism tended to lack this intellectual component: women's libbers of the first wave were more often portrayed stereotypically as stupid and gullible. The new feminist-as-lesbian stereotype associated with the second wave, on the contrary, tends to portray feminists as overeducated and misguided by the wrong sorts of knowledge. You just can't win for trying.

the outing of Millett.[95] As Hesford writes, "the moment when the 'shit hit the *Time*

fan'—when Kate Millett was outed by *Time* magazine, and lesbians were being kicked

out of various feminist groups and organizations in 1970—was a moment when feminism

and lesbianism become explosively conjoined for those outside as well as inside the

movement."[96]

Furthermore, as evidenced by the public denouncement of Millett, not only were

feminists conflated with lesbians, but they were also conflated with female nerds as well.

This three-way connection combines anti-intellectual sentiment as well as a sort of

female masculinity that the hegemonic culture finds so disturbing. After all, as evidenced

by past stereotypical female nerds Dora from the 50s (see chapter 2) and Zelda Gilroy

from the 60s (see chapter 4), female nerds are often performed as aggressive and

masculine, just as male nerds are often performed as passive and feminine.[97] In other

words, since the female nerd had already been conflated with homosexuality, adding the

new feminists of the late 60s and early 70s was an easy connection for the American

public.

Furthermore, this feminist-as-lesbian stereotype, fostered in popular culture

primarily by misogynistic and homophobic opponents to women's rights (especially

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[95] Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 7.

[96] Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 13. The internal quotation is from Millett herself: Kate Millet, *Flying* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1990), 14. For another useful perspective on the conjunction of lesbianism and feminism, also see Katie King, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[97] It is interesting to note that when female nerds (like Dora and Zelda) are played as the hypersexual failure type of nerd, the supposed humor is slightly different than that of male nerds of the same type. We are asked to laugh at stereotypical *male* nerds who desperately try to get the girl because we know they are terrible at it and are doomed to fail, whereas we are asked to laugh at stereotypical *female* nerds who desperately try to get the boy because they are misperforming their gender and acting in a masculine way—after all, girls are not meant to pursue boys, but vice versa. In other words, the male nerd is rendered ridiculous because he cannot get the girl, and the female nerd is rendered ridiculous because she is trying to get the boy. Both are performed as failures of ideal gender norms, but in slightly different ways.

those of a neoconservative persuasion, particularly as the anti-feminist backlash grew post-*Roe v. Wade*) was also used to attack the new batch of feminist intellectuals and the explosion of feminist theory and scholarship. This strain of anti-intellectualism in the feminist-as-lesbian stereotype in many ways mirrors the anti-intellectualism geared towards Marxists in the anti-communist 50s; instead of being a dupe who read too much Marxist theory and had their mind poisoned by wrong-headed ideas, now the feminist-as-lesbian was a dupe (usually a woman who "learned it at college") who read too much Simone de Beauvoir, not to mention Kate Millett. Regardless, by the early 70s, the nerd, the feminist, and the lesbian were intimately conjoined in the American imagination.

As such, the female nerd stereotype and the feminist-as-lesbian stereotype are essentially one in the same. Unstylish in dress, unattractive to men, and overly masculine (either for being too intelligent or a slew of other characteristics), both stereotypes combined primarily to disempower feminists. Oddly enough, this rather preposterous phenomenon is best exemplified by the popular reception of one of the most prominent mediated representations of the female nerd in American culture: Velma Dinkley from the animated television show *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* While the nerdy Velma may not be an actual lesbian character, her reception in popular American culture reveals such an assumptive connection.

Created by Joe and Ruby and Ken Spears, the first manifestation of Hanna-Barbera's highly successful *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* Saturday morning cartoon series originally aired between September 13, 1969 and October 31, 1970 on CBS, during

the height of the Women's Movement.[98] From that moment forward, the wacky hijinks of

the Scooby gang—Fred, Velma, Daphne, Shaggy, and of course Scooby—would be a

prominent fixture of American popular culture. And the bookish, logical, pontificating,

polysyllabic word-defining Velma would quickly become one of the most famous nerds

of all time—male or female.[99]

Interestingly, as the Scooby creators attest, the four human characters of the

Scooby gang had two primary inspirations: "the Dobie Gillis gang" and "the Archie's

[sic]."[100] As discussed previously, the stereotypic representations of the teenagers in both

the Archie universe (see chapter 1) as well as those of the television series *The Many*

Loves of Dobie Gillis (see chapter 4) suggest a similar treatment in terms of the Scooby

gang. In fact, the creators of *Scooby-Doo* knowingly drew upon *Dobie Gillis* when they

were casting about for models for the teenage gang of the Mystery Machine. As writer

Mark Evanier attests, "Fred was based on Dobie, Velma on Zelda, Daphne on Thalia and

Shaggy on Maynard."[101] The visual look of Velma, however, departed from that of Zelda.

Animation artist and character designer Iwao Takamoto, who designed the motley

Scooby gang, confesses that "since Velma is the intellectual bookworm of the group, I

made her sort of squat and stumpy, and then put horn-rimmed glasses on her."[102]

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[98] For basic information on the series as well as popular musings, see "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!," IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063950/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt (accessed August 2, 2016); and "Scooby-Doo," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scooby-Doo (accessed August 2, 2016).

[99] *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!: The Complete 1st and 2nd Seasons*, DVD (1969-1970; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).

[100] Ruby-Spears Productions, Inc., "Scooby Doo - The History of a Classic," http://www.rubyspears.com/scoobydoo.html (accessed August 2, 2016).

[101] Mark Evanier, News From Me, "Shaggy Dog Story," http://www.newsfromme.com/2002/06/10/shaggy-dog-story/ (accessed August 2, 2016).

[102] Iwao Takamoto with Michael Mallory, *Iwao Takamoto: My Life with a Thousand Characters* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 129. He goes on to mention that Shaggy is indeed based off of beatnik Maynard G. Krebbs from *Dobie Gillis*.

Subsequently, Velma looked less like Zelda of the early 60s and more like the feminist-as-lesbian stereotype as portrayed by the drawing in *Time* magazine in the early 70s.

Oddly, the character of Velma went on to garner pop culture attention as a supposedly lesbian figure. Despite the fact that Velma and other members of the Scooby gang of the 70s are not really portrayed as romantic or sexual beings—marking Velma as more of the asexual nerd type (unlike her predecessor Zelda, who is clearly the desperate-for-Dobie type)—somehow people began circulating the false notion that Velma was a lesbian. As Saturday morning gurus Timothy and Kevin Burke relate:

> Velma was the brainy woman, often given the role of explaining the mystery at the conclusion of the episode—usually with some help from Fred and Shaggy. Bespectacled and perpetually clad in an orange sweater that made her look like a pumpkin (several of our respondents commented that they remembered Velma being fat and were surprised to find out that she wasn't), Velma represented a distillation of virtually every noxious stereotype about intelligent women that one could find. Small wonder that Saturday morning veterans have joked about Velma being a lesbian.[103]

While any sort of lesbian sexuality conferred upon Velma is more the stuff of cultural gossip and not fully substantiated by the original *Scooby-Doo* series itself (one might say that Velma's lesbianism is not canon), the connection is rather revealing. After all, there is nothing posited by the *Scooby-Doo* series at all to suggest that Velma is a lesbian, so where did this quirky assumption come from if not from American culture itself, and its stereotypic conflation of Velma's nerdy characteristics with lesbianism? The very fact

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[103] Timothy Burke and Kevin Burke, *Saturday Morning Fever* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 218. The Burkes also mention Velma's supposed lesbianism again on page 106. Two other random mentions of Velma-as-lesbian appear sarcastically in Tony Norman, "First they came for Tinky Winky," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 21, 2005, http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/05021/445954.stm (accessed August 3, 2016); and in Richard Andreloi, ed., *Mondo Homo: Your Essential Guide to Queer Pop Culture* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2004), 27.

that an American audience could make such an unsubstantiated leap of logic emphasizes how the culture of the long 70s fostered the nerdy feminist-as-lesbian stereotype.[104]

It is even more revealing how this very same "lesbianizing" of a nerdy female character in pop culture occurs with another famous animated nerd from the period: Marcie from the *Peanuts* gang. The parallels between Marcie and Velma—similar looks and designs, similar nerdy characteristics—are pronounced, but all the more intriguing by the fact that both were introduced roughly around 1970: Marcy first joined Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty in July of 1971 and also became widely popular.[105] The presumption that the nerdy Marcie and the sporty tomboy Peppermint Patty are lesbian partners and not just good friends is perhaps even more bewildering than the lesbianization of Velma: after all, the shy Marcie is usually depicted as having an unrequited crush on Charlie Brown, marking her more as the failed desperate nerd type, not to mention heterosexual. Regardless, much like Velma, American culture saw fit to conflate Marcie the nerd with lesbianism (see Figure 6 in the Appendix).

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[104] The quirky animated series *The Venture Bros.* (2003-) on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim astutely parodied Velma's supposed radical feminist and lesbian associations in the episode "¡Viva los Muertos!" (season 2, episode 11), which aired October 1, 2006. Much thanks to scholar Andrew Byers who, at the 2017 PCA/ACA Conference, made me aware of this episode. For more, see Fandom, The Venture Bros. Wiki, "¡Viva los Muertos!," http://venturebrothers.wikia.com/wiki/¡Viva_los_Muertos! (accessed May 28, 2017); and Fandom, The Venture Bros. Wiki, "The Groovy Gang," http://venturebrothers.wikia.com/wiki/The_Groovy_Gang (accessed May 28, 2017).

[105] Marcie's first appearance was in a short, four-panel strip on July 20, 1971. Importantly, this very first appearance has Peppermint Patty referring to Marcie as a "dorky kid." For a reprint of this particular comic strip, see Charles M. Schulz, *Celebrating Peanuts: 65 Years* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015), 226. For some basic information on Marcie from the *Peanuts*, see "Marcie," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcie#cite_ref-3 (accessed August 3, 2016); and "Marcie," Peanuts by Shultz, http://www.peanuts.com/characters/marcie/#.V6JCkBQigqN
 (accessed August 3, 2016). For references to Marcie's supposed lesbianism, see Tony Norman, "First they came for Tinky Winky," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 21, 2005, http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/05021/445954.stm (accessed August 3, 2016); and Richard Andreloi, ed., *Mondo Homo: Your Essential Guide to Queer Pop Culture* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2004), 27.

The appearance of female nerd characters like Velma and Marcie during the height of the Women's Liberation Movement is highly suggestive: a new breed of intelligent woman, the feminist, was appearing in American culture, and these nerdy characters reflect that appearance. However, despite whatever the intentions of the artists who created these characters may have been, the fact that the popular culture at large conflated them with lesbianism speaks not only to the feminist-as-lesbian stereotype, but also the exclusionary dynamic of the nerd stereotype. After all, the female nerd stereotype not only chastises women who misperform their idealized femininity—a charge, in stereotypical and homophobic fashion, also made of lesbians—but it also mocks their intelligence in order to prevent them from obtaining any real power. In brief, we find a sizeable increase in prominent female nerd performances in the 70s—from Lisa Loopner to Velma and Marcie—just as the hegemonic culture felt the need to poke fun at and dismiss feminist intellectuals and activists.[106]

The Nerd Stereotype (and Neoconservatism) Rising

While the nerd stereotype was clearly operating from the late 40s to the late 60s, the late 60s/early 70s mark a crucial turning point for the nerd stereotype, the moment when a little-known youth culture fad began its strong ascent to prominence in American popular culture. From that moment on and throughout the 70s, the nerd stereotype would make a slow and steady climb until the 80s, when it would not only become a ubiquitous and permanent fixture of the culture, but also reach a hypervisible, fever pitch. And as this chapter has explored, that steady climb in the performance of the nerd stereotype

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[106] As will be addressed in chapter 8, this cultural impulse to poke fun at and dismiss feminists in the 70s becomes much more vicious as time wends into the 80s and 90s, requiring another shift in female nerd representation: namely their erasure from the life of the mind.

throughout the 70s was not accidental, but accomplished in intimate conjunction with the

steady climb of neoconservative anti-intellectualism. And just as this anti-intellectualism

and neoconservatism has its roots in the late 60s/early 70s squarely in opposition to the

Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, and

the Women's Liberation Movement, so too does the impetus behind the ascendance of

the nerd stereotype. As the notable performance (and reception) of stereotypical female

nerds in the 70s highlight the troubled reception of feminism in certain corners of

American popular culture, these performances also emphasize how deeply imbricated the

general nerd stereotype is with the growing anti-intellectual neoconservative sentiment of

the period.

This connection between nerd representations and neoconservatism is perhaps

best understood through the lens of white male hegemony. After all, much of the

neoconservative movement of the period stems from an oppositional reaction against the

social advances of the marginalized Other, as evidenced by its demonization of feminism.

And while the Women's Movement—along with all of the other important movements of

this era—presented a serious challenge to white male hegemony, white male hegemony,

sadly, was not about to go quietly into that good night.

Not only was the female nerd stereotype used as a way to undercut the Women's

Movement, the male version of the stereotype was also used to ridicule white men into

"manning up" in opposition to the supposed attack that feminism mounted against their

manhood. Not only did the growth of neoconservatism work in conjunction with anti-

intellectualism, it also did so with hegemonic white male masculinity. And as we shall

explore in the next chapter, the performance of hypermasculinity by the anxious white

male threatened by feminism and black empowerment (and emboldened by neoconservative values) was an exceptionally pressing issue throughout the long 70s. Although the *National Lampoon* picture may have asked the question "Are You a Nurd?" in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, many American men began to anxiously ask that question of themselves, and found themselves wanting.

Chapter 6: Macho Men, the New Man, and the Jewish Schlemiel: White Male Nerds in the Late 60s & 70s

White Male Anxiety and Hypermasculinity in the Long 70s

While white female nerds and feminists were suffering homophobic accusations of lesbianism, the white male nerd was not fairing much better in the late 60s/early 70s. In her 1969 *The Feminized Male*, for example, sociologist Patricia Cayo Sexton recapitulated much of the biased findings from previous decades (especially the 50s) regarding how school "makes sissies out of many boys and feminizes many more."[1] Noting an outdated study of college students from the 30s (that relied on the dubious Terman and Miles M-F test)[2], Sexton averred with distaste that "the more scholarly the men the lower their masculinity score tended to be," and she also found that among college women, high intelligence made them too masculine.[3] Clearly, much of the same gender politics and anti-nerd sentiment of the past few decades remained as America entered the late 60s/early 70s and the third phase of the nerd stereotype.[4]

It was a time of flux, however, and (as explored in the previous chapter) much change, conflict, and confusion was on the horizon: on the one hand, neoconservatism and anti-intellectualism was on the rise; and yet on the other, the Women's Liberation,

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[1] Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The Feminized Male: Classrooms, White Collars & the Decline of Manliness* (New York: Random House, 1969), 55. Mentioned in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 199.

[2] The Terman-Miles M-F test was created in the 1930s and was structured much like an IQ test, assigning points for items ranked on a scale of supposedly predetermined masculine and feminine behaviors. It was primarily instituted to root out the abnormal psychology of "sexual inverts" (homosexuals), which speaks to its highly problematic biases. In many ways, the Terman-Miles M-F test reified a highly prescriptive and polarized understanding of masculinity and femininity well into the 70s. For some basic information on the Terman-Miles M-F test, see Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 102-6.

[3] Sexton, *The Feminized Male*, 97.

[4] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 199.

Gay Liberation, and Black Power movements were aggressively taking on straight white

male hegemony. Speaking specifically to the effects of these movements on masculinity

at the time, Michael Kimmel notes:

> Together feminism, black liberation, and gay liberation provided a frontal assault
> on the traditional way that men had defined their manhood—against an other who
> was excluded from full humanity by being excluded from those places where men
> were real men. It was as if the screen against which American men had for
> generations projected their manhood had suddenly grown dark, and men were left
> to sort out the meaning of masculinity all by themselves.[5]

The long 70s, then, was a turbulent time for American masculinity, an age riddled with

anxiety[6] within which a number of different masculinities appeared in the culture (and in

popular performance), ranging from the militant Black Panther to the model minority

Asian male—and even the nerd as well.[7]

The emphasis of this particular chapter is how the white male nerd stereotype

relates specifically to this anxiety over masculinity from the late 60s to the late 70s. As

the long 70s progressed, neoconservatism, anti-intellectualism, and a prescriptive

hypermasculinity all steadily rose concordantly to dominate the culture. Coupled with the

rise of diversity that also occurred in this period,[8] these discourses contributed to—and

reacted against—the circulation of a number of various masculinities during the period,

shaping the various models of how to perform (and *not* perform) American manhood.

Among the many masculinities of the era, we find three important archetypal

performances for white American males that were popular during this period, especially

in the cinema. On one end of the spectrum is the anti-intellectual hypermasculine macho

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[5] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 202.
[6] As often expressed in recent studies of masculinity, the 70s and 80s are an age of mounting male
"anxiety," whereas the 90s and the 00s generally see that anxiety shifting towards white male "anger."
[7] It is important to note that the Asian model minority myth also arose primarily during this crucial period
of the late 60s/early 70s. For more on the Asian model minority myth, see chapter 8.
[8] Again, see the previous chapter for more on the discourse of diversity that arose during the long 70s.

male hero, an idealized model of American manhood usually represented as a gruff loner, a working class tough guy—essentially an antithetical figure to the nerd. On the other end of the spectrum is the ultimate failure of manhood, the hyperintelligent Jewish sexual schlemiel, a neurotic masculine and sexual failure—and quintessential nerd type. Poised in between these two extremes is the popular treatment of the problematic figure of the "new man," the supposed middle-ground everyman who tries to be intelligent and supportive of feminism, yet as we shall see, in popular performance, must renounce these nerdy characteristics and embrace a hypermasculine identity if he is to be "redeemed."[9]

What is particular about these three male figures is how each of them operates together in popular performances of the long 70s to foster a neoconservative anti-intellectual sentiment, an idealized white hypermasculinity, and a backlash against

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[9] It should be understood that the figure of the "new man" that I am referring to throughout this work is specific to the manifestation of American masculinity in the 1970s, and should not be confused with the more commonly understood conception of the "new man" as a philosophical, utopian political ideal often associated with communism or fascism. Sadly, very little historical or scholarly work has been done on this 70s American new man figure, even in Men's Studies or Masculinity Studies more generally construed. Sometimes loosely referred to as "new man," "new male," "liberated male/man," or even "New Age guy," often there is not even consensus on the use of a particular term, if a term is even used at all. The simplest definition of the "new man" is a profeminist man, a man who supports women's rights and challenges hegemonic masculinity. But even this definition is problematic because, as the various men's movements of the past 50 years have shown us, it is often difficult to separate out sexism from the male, and there are many movements and individuals who claim to support women, but remain inherently misogynistic. Sadly, the best definition of "new man" is a negative one: *not* a "real man." Funnily, one of the best explanations of the "new man" (at least as expressed in popular culture of the long 70s) comes from satirist Bruce Feirstein, who pits the new man against "Real Men" in his book *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*: "We've become a nation of wimps. Pansies. Quiche eaters. Alan Alda types—who cook and clean and *relate* to their wives. Phil Donahue clones—who are *warm* and *sensitive* and *vulnerable*. It's not enough anymore that we earn a living and protect women and children from plagues, famine, and encyclopedia salesmen. But now we're also supposed to be *supportive*. And *understanding*. And *sincere…*" (9-10) Bruce Feirstein, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche: A Guidebook to All That Is Truly Masculine* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982), 9-10. For more on the new man, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 176-85; Michael S. Kimmel, *The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (And the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer)* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 77-9; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), 212-13; Rob A. Okun, ed., *Voice Male: The Untold Story of the Profeminist Men's Movement* (Northhampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2014); and Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Pro-feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

feminism. The hypermasculine hero, like Dirty Harry or Rocky, is an anti-nerd; the medial new man character, such as many of Dustin Hoffman's notable characters from the long 70s, must renounce his nerdy behaviors in an attempt to become like the hypermasculine hero; and the Jewish schlemiel, like Woody Allen's characters, is an irredeemable nerd through and through. This chapter then, focuses in turn on popular cinematic performances of the hypermasculine macho male, the new man, and the Jewish schlemiel in turn. Building off of the rising neoconservative and anti-intellectual sentiment of the long 70s examined in the previous chapter, this chapter examines how during the very same phase, the rising (white) hypermasculinity—fueled by the very same neoconservative/anti-intellectual factors—uniquely crystalized the nerd stereotype and the narratives surrounding the white male nerd.

Dirty Harry and Rocky: The Hypermasculine Macho Male

Overall, the development of the various masculinities during this period tended towards the hypermasculine, emphasizing homophobia, a misogynistic rejection of women, and extreme physical violence. This applied to black men as much as white men: Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 *Soul on Ice* as well as his essay "To All Black Women from All Black Men" exemplifies these characteristics, as does much of the work of Amiri Baraka. A poignant example is Baraka's essay "american sexual reference: black male," which fosters an extremely violent, masculine image—what bell hooks calls a "phallocentric idealization of masculinity"—for the black male at the expense of gays, women, and whites.[10] In this mid-60s essay, Baraka writes that, "most American white men are trained to be fags," and that they "devote their energies to the nonphysical," relying not

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[10] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 98.

on physical violence as true men should, but instead on "technology," which contributes to their "softness" and "weakness."[11] Here as elsewhere and throughout the culture, the physical-driven, violent, hypermasculine black male (Baraka's ideal) is contrasted with the mental-driven, weak, effeminate, sissy white nerd.[12] And in response to such encroachments on their manhood, many white males responded with their own recapitulations of hypermasculinity.[13]

Accordingly, being effeminate and nerdy was under attack in the third phase of the nerd stereotype in a way that contrasted the wacky tolerable nerds of the previous phase. Yet in certain discourses (namely feminist discourses) so was being masculine and tough—and many men, white men in particular, were reeling in confusion regarding their manhood. Subsequently, many men pushed even harder for a stronger persona of hypermasculinity. Much of the push towards a violent hypermasculinity can be linked to an anxious and angry rejection of the Women's and Gay Liberation Movements as well as a refutation of college-educated student activists and anti-war demonstrators. A majority of white American males, fed up with student protestors ("hawks" and hippies) and marginalized activists for social justice, were floundering about, looking for new ways to embrace and reinscribe their hegemonic white masculinity.[14]

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[11] Quoted in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 98.

[12] And again, it is likely these stereotypic associations with physicality, animality, and hypersexuality that hindered any thorough representations of African Americans, both male and female, as stereotypical nerds.

[13] Much of this same hypermasculine and anti-intellectual rhetoric also appears in other racial, ethnic, and sexual fields of the time, including the Chicano movement, the Red Power movement, and interestingly enough even in gay culture (the hypermasculine clone over the sissy) and Jewish culture (see reactions to Philip Roth's 1967 novel *Portnoy's Complaint* and the wave of support for Zionist militarism in Israel). For more on this Jewish turn to hypermasculinity, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200-1; and David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992). For more on the masculinity of the gay clone, see Kimmel, 202; and Seymour Kleinberg, *Alienated Affections: Being Gay in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 143-56.

[14] For an exceptionally useful and astute analysis of white masculinity in the 70s (and elsewhere), see Savran's *Taking It Like a Man*, especially chapter 3, "The Sadomasochist in the Closet." David Savran,

Of all the popular media, American cinema in particular became almost

instantaneously bound up in exploring and expressing these new masculinities, especially

in terms of glorifying the hypermasculine. The homosocial buddy films, for example,

tended to foster homophobia and a strong contempt for women; films like *Easy Rider*

(1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969),

Deliverance (1972), and *The Sting* (1973), to name a few.[15] Much of the same can be said

of "the black stud" hero that populated the blaxploitation films of the 70s, such as *Sweet*

Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971), *Shaft* (1971), and *Superfly* (1972).[16] Even the

playboy character of James Bond played by Sean Connery, so much a male icon in the

60s, was becoming a bit campy in the Roger Moore 70s—too polished and poised and

cultured to be a true masculine hero. The male characters of movies in the long 70s had to

be gritty and tough, as in *Walking Tall* (1973), *Death Wish* (1974), and *Taxi Driver*

(1976). Frankly, the sheer number of these hypermasculine films in the long 70s is

overwhelming, suggesting that hypermasculinity was indeed becoming an increasingly

important cultural discourse during this phase. Still, if there is one cinematic icon who

best exemplifies the highly popular masculine hero of the early 70s, it is Clint

Eastwood's character Harry Callahan from *Dirty Harry* (1971).

Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[15] For basic feminist and queer analyses of these films, see Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); and Vito Russo *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

[16] Again, for one review of these Blaxploitation films, see Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Funnily enough, Michael Kimmel writes that Shaft (Richard Roundtree) "is always one step ahead of the rather nerdy white police officers on the case." (209) The more virile and violent the black stud of these films, the nerdier the white male characters seem to become. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 209.

The character of Dirty Harry quickly became a national hero for hegemonic white masculinity; he was the penultimate example of the gruff vigilante hero that dominated American cinema throughout the 70s. Harry is firm and fearless, never shaken by emotion or "'bleeding heart' sentimentalism."[17] Barring the occasional gruff remark, Dirty Harry has no time to talk: armed with his massive revolver, Harry is a doer, not a man of contemplation nor of many words. Violence is his specialty and his primary masculine appeal. Unlike Bond, Harry does not need to sleep with numerous women to confirm his compulsory heteronormative sexuality; instead, he violently kills criminals. As Joan Mellen points out, "Harry is admired even by his victims for a sexuality too urgently needed elsewhere to express itself in intercourse. Violent activity suffices, as if women are no longer required for men to be virile or physically fulfilled—a variation on the elimination of women from the buddy films."[18] Unlike the cowardly nerd, Harry is capable of violent physical action, and then some.

A strong anti-intellectual streak is also apparent in *Dirty Harry*, the first in the series of Dirty Harry films.[19] Like a true vigilante, Harry must defy the red tape of procedures and rules—rules set down by desk-jockeys and paper pushers and lily-livered bureaucrats who lack street smarts. Harry exudes the true intelligence of experience and common sense, not the collegiate book-learning of the New Class, to achieve real masculine power and justice.[20] Again, as Mellen highlights, "Harry is intensely anti-intellectual and sarcastic toward learning, which he equates with impotence. In *Dirty*

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[17] Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 295.
[18] Ibid., 296.
[19] The Dirty Harry film series includes *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Magnum Force* (1973), *The Enforcer* (1976), *Sudden Impact* (1983), and *The Dead Pool* (1988). Much of the politics examined here remain in all the films, not only the first.
[20] For more on the New Class, see the previous chapter.

Harry he greets his Mexican partner with an insult: 'Just what I needed, a college boy.'"[21] When his partner Chico Gonzales (Reni Santoni) reveals to Harry that he received his degree from San Jose State in Sociology, Harry mockingly quips, "Oh, you'll go far, that's if you live. […] Don't let your degree get you killed."[22] Near the end of the movie, Chico contemplates leaving the dangerous police force for the unmanly safety of a teaching position.[23]

The worst of the middle-class bureaucrats, however, is the District Attorney Rothko (Josef Sommer). It is this paper-pushing lawyer who not only tells off Harry for his police brutality, but then allows the killer that Harry just caught to go free due to pesky laws and bothersome constitutional amendments. To solidify the anti-intellectual sentiment further, Rothko is joined by Judge Bannerman (William Paterson), who seconds Rothko's sentiments against Harry. The film makes it a point to emphasize that Judge Bannerman, "holds classes in constitutional law at Berkeley."[24] By connecting the meddlesome judge to Berkeley and making him a professor, the film further reinforces its anti-intellectual stance. Lawyers, professors, and the college-educated are impediments to Dirty Harry's true justice, and certainly lack the masculine credentials to get their hands dirty and get the job done.[25] As Mellen goes on to say, "only a physical male as opposed to a prevaricating intellectual can be as skillful with a switchblade knife as Harry is; no

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[21] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 298.
[22] *Dirty Harry*, DVD, directed by Don Siegel (1971; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009).
[23] Although not quite a true representation of the nerd stereotype, Chico comes very close at times, potentially making him one of the few Mexican American nerd representations. Funnily enough, he sports black horn-rimmed glasses periodically throughout the film.
[24] *Dirty Harry*.
[25] It is interesting to specifically trace the trajectory of the college-educated figure in American culture: gone are the "rah rah rah" college lads and lasses of the early twentieth century. After the SDS and the college student activists of the 60s, the college student and the college professor come under more and more fire—the more conservative the treatment, the more negative the portrayal.

one but a fool would go out to meet the evil sniper without one."[26] Clint Eastwood's

Harry Callahan, along with the plethora of other violent vigilante males that populate 70s

cinema, provides the model of an anti-intellectual hypermasculinity that starkly contrasts

that of the nerd stereotype.

An important facet of the hypermasculine cinematic heroes of the long 70s is how

many of them are squarely placed in the working class—even more specifically, the

white ethnic working class.[27] The films populated by these protagonists, particularly

popular in the late 70s, can be traced back to the May 1970 "hard hat riots" against the

antiwar protestors, most of which were college students. These riots, such as the one in

New York City on May 8—days after the Kent State shootings—painted a picture in

American popular culture that pitted conservative hard hat wearing, blue collar laborers

against spoiled liberal white-collar college kids protesting the war. After these men

(mostly construction workers) beat up the antiwar demonstrators, Nixon lauded these

working-class heroes for doing so, these representatives of his Silent Majority of Middle

Americans. Polarizing the working class versus the New Class, these riots also

demonstrated both an appeal to tough, physical masculinity as well as an appeal to rising

anti-intellectual, anti-college education sentiment.[28]

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[26] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 298.

[27] Particularly after the success of *The Godfather* (1972), much of that white ethnic masculinity focused on the Italian ethnicity: see the Italian Stallion and John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. In an odd way, as the Italian ethnicity became a respite for hypermasculinity throughout the long 70s, the Jewish ethnicity became even more associated with a failed hypomasculinity. While I do not thoroughly examine ethnicity here with regards to the nerd stereotype, it would likely be another interesting take on the subject, as it clearly impacts the various masculinities populating the long 70s.

[28] For more on these hard hat riots, see William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 413-5; Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Joshua B. Freeman, "Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 725-44.

Throughout the 70s, these macho, hardhat-wearing, working class stereotypes came to represent a powerful masculine ideal, particularly after the economic crisis in of 1973-1974.[29] And concordantly, more and more the figure of the college student came to be represented as a pompous, elitist, middle-class feminized nerd (or prep).[30] As Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich posit in "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," films like *Rocky* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Breaking Away* (1979), even when they periodically prescribe "sensitivity and gentleness" as a primary theme on the surface, the visual spectacle of the working class male body "is raw, 'old-fashioned' masculinity."[31] Furthermore, Biskind and Ehrenreich argue that in these movies *class* has been depoliticized and sexualized, whereas working class *masculinity* has been politicized, taking on "new properties—a touch of violence, glimpses of brawn, an aura of primitivism."[32] As this primitive working class masculinity soars in popularity, especially in the late 70s, the overcivilized failed masculinity of the New Class—the stereotypical nerd—is even more denigrated in turn.

Much like the *Dirty Harry* films and their vigilante ilk, many of these working-class macho male movies have a strong anti-intellectual, anti-nerd component. Almost across the board, the sexy macho male is not only a barely educated member of the

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[29] This notion of a manly working-class ideal contrasted against the middle class appears not only in cinema, but also throughout all American mass media. One small example is the previously mentioned television sitcom *Happy Days* (see the previous chapter). The Fonz, of course, is the representative of the heroic white male working class, a manly mechanic who works at a garage. In addition, Fonzie often comments how adorable he finds the Cunninghams, his "favorite middle class family." For more on the Fonz as a working-class figure, see Robert Sklar, "The Fonz, Laverne, Shirley, and the Great American Class Struggle" in *Prime-Time American: Life On and Behind the Television Screen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15-26.

[30] For an interesting take on class, masculinity, and education, see Tom Wolfe, "Honks and Wonks," in Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 216-34.

[31] Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," in Peter Biskind, *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture from One of American's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 73.

[32] Ibid., 72.

working class, but he is also a consummate athlete—much of the dumb jock stereotype is clearly fostered in these films, and in a praiseworthy fashion. Represented as a physical being through and through, the macho male is often proudly portrayed as not very talkative, simple-minded, inarticulate, and maybe even a little bit slow. Yet these are qualities to be proud of: they somehow make the hero more moral and true to himself. Through grit and an almost masochistic determination, these tough working class, middle American men not only triumph through physical prowess, they do so often in spite of intelligence and college-educated nerds. In fact, stereotypical nerds in these films are often represented not only as ridiculous comic figures, but as terrible villains, performing the nerd stereotype in some of its most negative incarnations.

As one small example, take the film *One on One* (1977), which not only glorifies its athletic macho male hero, but turns a stereotypical nerd into one of the film's most despicable characters.[33] The hero, Henry Steele (Robby Benson), is a young basketball prodigy from Middle America who gets thrust into the vice of the big city and college life. Yet he stays true to his values and through incredible character, moral fiber, and physical skill, he wins "the big game" in spite of his demeaning coach and all other naysayers. One of Henry's most vicious naysayers is the pretentious scholar Malcolm (James G. Richardson), a young psychology professor, a glasses and sandal-wearing intellectual who brutally mocks Henry for being a dumb jock without provocation.[34] Yes, in this highly conservative film, it is the nerd who is the villainous bully, and it is the poor, beleaguered straight white male college athlete who is the sympathetic victim. Only Henry's tutor, the brainy Janet Hays (Annette O'Toole) understands him—at first, she

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[33] Another cinematic example of heroic young macho male athletes in the late 70s, albeit one with more depth and complexity than *One on One*, can be found in the film *Breaking Away* (1979).

[34] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 345.

was dating Malcolm and was just as dismissive of Henry (and jocks), but by the end of the film, she learns her lesson and for some reason falls in love with our hero, assuming her proper place: not as a young scholar and educated, liberated woman, but as a trophy love interest and supporter in the bleachers. Not only does the film work hard to glorify the masculine, working class, athletic hero, it does so at the expense of women and intelligent nerds.[35]

Of course, if any 70s film encapsulates the working-class macho male athlete hero—and therefore the rising tide of hypermasculinity of the era—it would have to be *Rocky*, perhaps the most popular and iconic films of this genre. The original ethnic "Italian Stallion," Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa is in many respects the quintessential working class ethnic white male hero of the late 70s, an icon of American masculinity of the period. And of course he is the ultimate jock athlete. For much of the film, he comments that he is just a "dumb" bum, a physical being more than a mental one, and the film reinforces that this sort of binary is appropriate for the male gender.[36]

Interestingly, if Rocky is the dumb bum of the movie, it is actually Adrian (Talia Shire), his love interest, who comes closest to representing a nerd in the film.[37] Mousy, meek, and incredibly shy, it takes a long time and much effort on Rocky's part to get her to open up and go out with him. At the beginning of the film, she barely speaks, wears frumpy grey sweaters, and sports very nerdy horn-rimmed glasses—by the end of the

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[35] *One on One*, DVD, directed by Lamont Johnson (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010).

[36] *Rocky*, Blu-ray, directed by John G. Avildsen (1976; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013).

[37] While certainly not a liberated woman, Adrian does offer another example of a female nerd in the long 70s, a type that is examined in chapter 5. While quite unlike Velma, Marcie, or Lisa Loopner, Adrian still seems to reinforce white male hegemony, albeit in a different way. If the inferred failed sexuality of Velma and Marcie (and perhaps even Loopner) references a failed (intelligent/feminist) womanhood to be mocked, then Adrian's submission to Rocky and acquiescence to him as his supporter and cheerleader references a "proper" womanhood: one in humble service to her manly white male superior.

film, she loses the glasses (Rocky actually takes them off for her) and becomes "sexy" seemingly because of the love of a good man like Rocky.[38] Besides being socially withdrawn and somewhat awkward, her brutish brother Paulie (Burt Young) makes it clear that she is, disgracefully, an unmarried, near-thirty-year old virgin who does not go out, a real "loser" who, "if she don't start living, her body's gonna dry up."[39]

To further emphasize Adrian's rather nerdy credentials, during the ice-skating scene where Rocky and Adrian have their first date, the contrast in braininess between Adrian and Rocky is made explicit. Rocky confesses to Adrian that his "old man" used to tell him that he did not have "much of a brain," so he had "better start using [his] body," which prompts Adrian to reply that her mother "said the opposite thing."[40] Adrian explains that her mother "said 'you weren't born with much of a body so you better develop your brain.'"[41] Not only does this exchange represent one of the key moments that bring Adrian and Rocky together, it further reinforces the gender politics of the brain/body binary. It also reinforces the notion that women should be shy, meek, and physically submissive, whereas men should be outgoing, brassy, and a lot brawny. As Rocky says later in the film, this is how a traditional heterosexual couple should "fill gaps" for each other.[42]

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[38] This trope of the man taking off the girl's nerdy glasses to reveal that she is indeed sexy "underneath" is an important one, particularly in the nerdy variations of the Cinderella stories that crop up periodically in American culture, especially in the 90s in films like *She's All That* (1999). These nerdy Cinderella stories tend to be rather misogynistic, suggesting that all a nerdy girl needs is the love of a good, cool man, and that to earn the love of that man, she must shed her nerdiness. In a way, this also happens to Adrian.

[39] *Rocky*.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid*. For a brief, yet solid review of *Rocky I* and *Rocky II* (1979), see Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," in Peter Biskind, *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture from One of American's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 68-71. *Rocky II* is another noteworthy exemplar of the gender contrast between men and women.

It is this sort of gender representation in *Rocky* that gets recapitulated in many of these hypermasculine macho male movies of the late 70s, prescribing a very limited sort of gender performance for both men and women. In contrast to the hypermasculine macho male hero, the women that are eventually paired off with him are developed as somewhat more intelligent and cultured: the lesser nerd to his greater jock. Rather than celebrating female intelligence, however, these couplings consistently place the somewhat nerdy girl in a disempowered submissive role to the macho male hero.[43] Like the aforementioned Janet Hays in *One on One* and Adrian from *Rocky*, these women serve to tame or compliment the primitive in the hero.[44] The woman, whether rendered as intelligent/cultured or not, is still the civilizing force to the hypermasculinity of the macho male hero she must serve. And more often than not, as with *Dirty Harry*, women are excised and notably absent from the narrative altogether, allowing the macho male hero's hypermasculinity full rein.

In summary, these hypermasculine macho male films of the long 70s re-center white masculinity in ethnicity, the working class, and the tough athlete, promoting violent, physical hypermasculinity as the "new" ideal for American men. Importantly, this performance of hypermasculinity was more often than not at the expense of the college-educated and the New Class (as well as women), which promoted anti-

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[43] In many ways, this sadly reflects a prominent male fantasy in 70s America: "conquering" an intelligent (feminist) woman and "putting her in her place."

[44] The character of Stephanie Mangano (Karen Gorney) from *Saturday Night Fever* is another such example of the smart girl/dumb jock pairing in these movies. As Biskind/Ehrenreich write, Stephanie is "a Bay Ridge girl who's had a whiff of 'culture.' She takes ballet lessons, reads books, and wants a career in the big city." (Biskind and Ehrenreich, 66) Another example is Annette (Marilu Henner) in the film *Bloodbrothers* (1979), a character that approximates a "sexually liberated" woman; she tells Stony De Coco (Richard Gere), "there's something more out there besides playing cool, macho, and getting laid. You could even go to college, get a degree," a sentiment at odds with Stony's working class familial roots. (Quoted in Biskind and Ehrenreich, 64.) Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," in Peter Biskind, *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture from One of American's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 51-74.

intellectualism as well.[45] As performed by vigilante heroes like Dirty Harry and working-class athletes like Rocky, these powerful and persuasive models of masculinity had an incredible impact on American culture.[46] As such, they greatly contributed to the notion that intelligence was an impediment to hypermasculinity, and that those who possessed intelligence were in extreme danger of having their manhood called into question. And while failed masculinity has always been a key component of the nerd stereotype, the failed masculinity of the nerd took on even greater importance in the long 70s in light of the mounting social pressures to be a hypermasculine man. More and more, the notion spread throughout the American imaginary that either you were a macho hypermasculine tough guy, or you were an emasculated failure (likely a New Age nerd duped into supporting feminism), with little room in between. One masculinity that attempted to navigate that impossible space between the macho male and the nerd was that of the sensitive new man.

Between Macho and Nerdy: Dustin Hoffman and the New Man

Despite the high-pitched frenzy to depict hypermasculine heroes like Dirty Harry and Rocky Balboa on the silver screen—or perhaps in part as a reaction against such depictions of men—a new figure of masculinity began to appear in American life in the long 70s, albeit in small numbers: the new man. Generally speaking, the new man

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[45] As will be discussed in the next chapter, these anti-intellectual athletes of the late 70s go on to foster the jock stereotype that dominates the 80s.
[46] Besides the hypermasculine hard hats, violent vigilantes, and macho athletes that dominate the 70s popular media, the stereotype of the Southern redneck (namely the "good ole boy") also rises to prominence as a model of masculinity. Much of the same gender and anti-intellectual politics apply to this form of masculinity as well, and can be found in films like *Walking Tall* (1973) and *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). Whenever the image of the redneck rises to popularity in American culture—like the Blue Collar Comedy Tour in the 00s, or the reality show *Duck Dynasty* in the 10s—much can be traced back to these good ole boys. For more on the 70s good ole boy, see Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55-105.

consciously rejected outdated scripts of masculinity, he was a man who leaned liberal and was supportive of racial justice, tended to be anti-violence and, perhaps most conspicuously, was profeminist. He would also freely embrace and express both his masculine and his feminine characteristics. Simply, the new man consciously rebuked the hypermasculine macho man models of masculinity that he saw overrunning popular culture.[47]

The complex nature of the new man is perhaps best understood by the rise of "men's liberation," what Michael Kimmel calls "a curious mixture of a social movement and psychological self-help manual that emerged in the mid-70s."[48] Books like Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1975), and Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (1975) began to critique masculinity and the male sex role in an unprecedented way in American culture. While some of these attempts by these sundry men's movements to "liberate" men retained many anti-feminist and homophobic sentiments, other attempts were more successful at promoting a position that denounced male hegemony without resorting to the exclusion or debasement of women and gays.[49] Interestingly, some of the most successful outcomes of these 70s

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[47] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 176-85.

[48] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 202.

[49] Sorting out all of the various men's movements of the 70s, 80s, and 90s—not to mention their complex and often fraught politics—is a real challenge. From the rather promising and useful profeminist men's movement (now housed primarily in academia) to the somewhat mixed and convoluted politics of Bly's *Iron John* movement (which had its roots in the 70s, yet exploded on the scene in the 90s) to the downright disturbing anti-feminist, right-wing Promise Keepers, parsing out all of the sundry men's movements is a difficult task: one that cannot be done justice here. The main point at present is that the very existence of men's movements in the 70s, some of which at least attempted to be pro-feminist, fostered and reflected the creation of the new man in American culture, as well as the immediate backlash of the "New Age guy" stereotype. For some basic literature on these men's movements and some specific analyses of these movements, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), 202-7; Rob A. Okun, ed., *Voice Male: The Untold Story of the Profeminist Men's Movement* (Northhampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2014); Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Pro-feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990: A Documentary*

men's movements occurred in academia in strong alliance with feminist theory and Women's Studies, again cementing the scholarly, intellectual leanings of feminists and profeminist men alike.[50] In turn, this intellectual connection would further distance the new man away from the hypermasculine macho male and more towards the nerd stereotype.

Perhaps the most iconic new man of the long 70s was actor Alan Alda, best known (perhaps ironically) for his role as Captain Hawkeye Pierce on *M*A*S*H*.[51] As one profile of Alda in *Redbook* stated, "he has the kind of personality that's recently labeled 'androgynous,' combining strengths and values traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity."[52] An outspoken advocate for feminism, Alda came to represent the new man of the 70s, embodying the possibility that men did not have to be hypermasculine, that straight men could be intelligent and articulate and cultured, and that men could support Women's Liberation.

But almost as soon as the figure of the new man began to coalesce, it was unsurprisingly unraveled and promptly subverted—even many of the early figures of the 70s men's movements began to recant and turn to more anti-feminist stances. It seems that the rising tide of ideal hypermasculinity was too great for the new man to survive and

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History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Michael A. Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2000); David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 169-76; R. W. Connell, "Drumming Up the Wrong Tree," *Tikkun* 7, no. 1 (1992): 31-6; and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 281-332.

[50] A solid example of this sort of scholarly material is the work of psychologist Joseph Pleck, such as his 1981 book *The Myth of Masculinity*.

[51] Kimmel briefly addresses the new man retrospectively on pages 212 and 213 of his *Manhood in America*, suggesting that, along with Alda, ex-Beatle John Lennon, Phil Donahue, and Bob Newhart are other popular new man figures. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), 212-13.

[52] Susan Edmiston, "America's Sweetheart," *Redbook*, July 1976, 88, quoted in Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 178.

thrive.[53] One key way in which American dominant culture turned against the new man was by stereotyping him in popular media as some wishy-washy, overly sensitive "New Age guy" with little to no ability to accomplish anything of note, be it in the boardroom or the bedroom. This sudden stereotyping of the new man was very similar to how the feminist was quickly rounded upon by the feminist-as-lesbian stereotype.[54] Overall, the stereotypical new man was mocked primarily on the grounds of action: unlike the very active physical male heroes on the movie screens around him, the new man was deemed too passive, too incapable or cowardly to take decisive action like a "real man" should.[55]

Besides such gross stereotyping, another, more complex means by which the new man was subverted in popular performances was through narratives that placed new man-like characters in a dramatic conflict regarding their masculinity, struggles that gave the new man a deadly serious choice: either become a nerd (and fail as a man) or become a hypermasculine macho male (inevitably the proper and heroic path.) Such mediated struggles situated new man characters precariously between the hypermasculine macho male and the nerd stereotype, suggesting that the new man needed to be broken down and "re-masculinized" in the end. The films, career, and characters of one particular iconic male actor from the 70s, Dustin Hoffman, best exemplify such struggles with masculinity, as well as the complex position and politics of the new man—and therefore the nerd stereotype—during this period.

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[53] By the early 80s, the new man practically did not exist anymore: either he was folded back into hegemonic masculinity or so roundly mocked and ridiculed that any sort of challenge he might have presented was duly erased. He would become, if anything, the much-denigrated "wimp" of Reagan's overtly masculinist 80s. For more on wimps in the Reagan Era, see chapter 7.

[54] See the previous chapter. Another useful analogy for the new man of the 70s is the egghead of the 50s, discussed previously in chapter 1. Just as the egghead was slandered for being too liberal and progressive in his support of black civil rights, the new man was slandered for being too liberal and progressive in his support of feminism.

[55] Schulman, *The Seventies*, 176-85.

The cover of the July 11, 1969 issue of *Life* magazine and the companion photo spread inside its pages clearly contrast two very different cinematic actors: the manly old war horse John Wayne and the young newcomer Dustin Hoffman.[56] The editor's note and the brief corresponding article to the photographs celebrate the talents of the featured actors, but markedly describe two very distinct individuals. The piece portrays John Wayne with a conservative Western mythic sort of masculinity, and "Dusty" as a plain and diminutive everyman, a younger, newer sort of male movie icon.[57] As the article describes, "Dusty Hoffman's characters, beginning with *The Graduate* in 1967, are […] uncertain, alienated, complex and, by any familiar standard, losers," conspicuously antithetical to the "traditional qualities" projected by the image of the Duke.[58] Even off the screen, the magazine asserts, the two men are quite different, Wayne preferring rural California while Hoffman's life "is much more that of a New York artist-intellectual."[59]

In many ways, the *Life* article is spot on: Hoffman was, to a degree, embodying through his movies and his characters a new sort of masculinity, one quite different than the traditional icon of the Duke. Many of the major films that grace Dustin Hoffman's impressive résumé, especially those in the long 70s—from *The Graduate* (1967), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Marathon Man* (1976), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), and *Tootsie* (1982), to name a few—undoubtedly deal deeply with issues of masculinity. Whether or not Hoffman was a new man himself, his iconography as an actor and a large majority of his characters may be seen as variations of and commentaries on the new man. In fact, if Hoffman is indeed often the loser—the antihero

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[56] John Dominis, "Dusty and the Duke," *Life*, July 11, 1969, 36-45.
[57] Needless to say, the nickname "Dusty" comes across as especially infantilizing and feminizing throughout the *Life* article when placed squarely in contrast with "the Duke."
[58] Dominis, "Dusty and the Duke," 36.
[59] Ibid., 38.

of these films—it is often because the sensitive, indecisive new man in him needs to be debased and cast aside. Only when his character "toughens up" and finds it within himself to take decisive, manly action, does he win the day. In short, he is feminized in order that he may retrieve his masculinity: he starts the film too nerdy, but ends a macho male hero. Importantly, part of this "remasculinization" process that Hoffman's characters must undergo involves a shedding of his associations with intelligence. Much like the ennui-ridden college student Benjamin from *The Graduate*, many of Hoffman's films find college education to be a waste, an impediment to heteronormative masculine action.[60]

Take *Straw Dogs* (1971), a rather brutal statement on masculinity from director Sam Peckinpah. In this movie, Hoffman plays a nerdy new man character by the name of David, a very meek mathematician and intellectual who has attempted to flee from the violence of America for the quiet English countryside, the very place where his lovely wife Amy (Susan George) grew up. The consummate intellectual, he spends his days locked indoors with his chalkboard full of equations while the real, working class men fix his roof for him (see Figure 7 in the Appendix). He is passive and demure, preferring to work on his book, a work that somehow combines both computers and astrophysics, two of the most nerd-centric fields possible. Moreover, he is unmanned and mocked by his own frustrated wife (to say nothing of the local rednecks), a signal that he is an overly sensitive new man kowtowing to an overly assertive woman. Through this stereotypic depiction of Hoffman's character as effete intellectual and sensitive new man, the film's gender politics are clear: "Intellectuality and cultivation of the mind," confirms Mellen,

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[60] Joan Mellen mentions that Dirty Harry Callahan "is the opposite of small, dark Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, so justifiably suspicious of the world of uniformed force." (295) See Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 295.

"are insidious and repellent to Peckinpah, depriving modern man of the full completion promised by his male hormones."[61]

Only at the film's conclusion does Hoffman's David, pushed to the edge, finally redeem himself, casting away his intellectual pretensions and turning into a violent man of brutal physical action. Like Dirty Harry, David, too, must take the law into his own hands and mete out bloody punishment. When the local roughnecks who have been taunting him—and who also raped his wife—try to break into David's home, they have gone too far, and all end up brutally killed by the films conclusion. During his killing spree, David must even take a moment to backhand his hysterical, nagging wife—to set her straight and remind her who's the boss, of course. In the end, Peckinpah would have his audience believe that David had finally lived up to a true sense of masculinity. Hoffman's character may start out a tortured loser, an effeminate and passive nerd, but by the film's conclusion, through violent action, he has regained what was clearly necessary, smiling as he drives away from the bloody spectacle of his "heroism."[62] In short, by casting away his nerdy characteristics and finding his rightful hypermasculinity, the new man figure learns to transition away from being a nerd and toward being a Dirty Harry, a transition that is celebrated by the film's narrative.

Many of these same themes appear again in a pronounced fashion in Hoffman's later film *Marathon Man*. This time Hoffman plays a young man named, diminutively, Babe, a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University studying history. He is brilliant enough to know the right answers to his professor's tough questions, but too shy (or humble?) to share them aloud. At the film's beginning, he is portrayed yet again as a meek and

[61] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 302-3. Joan Mellen gives a thorough analysis of *Straw Dogs* on pages 301-5.
[62] *Straw Dogs*, DVD, directed by Sam Peckinpah (1971; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1998).

effeminate intellectual, barely capable of action. True, he runs and is training for a marathon, which would normally mark him as athletic, but he is more often than not shot as being passed on the trail by a much more capable and manly runner. Importantly, he is awkward and incompetent in his attempts to pick up a girl (Marthe Keller), something on which they both comment. In this respect, he happily lets the woman take the lead in the relationship, marking him as a new man. Sadly, it is later revealed that she was a plant to spy on him, so in the end, he never really successfully picked up a girl after all. Even his Puerto Rican neighbors in his sketchy neighborhood mock him from across the street. It is his older brother Doc (Roy Scheider), a secret CIA operative, who is the tough guy, not Hoffman's passive, nerdy new man Babe.[63]

Much like David from *Straw Dogs* before him, Babe must learn to cast away his nerdy intellectual pretensions and become a violent man of action to gain his true masculinity. Accidently caught up in his murdered brother's dangerous affairs, Babe is captured (rather easily) and brutally tortured, a spectacle emphasizing his weakness and passivity.[64] After his torture and the corrupt CIA's betrayal, he is on his own and finally must take real action into his own hands. And it is not his brilliant mind that allows him to escape the evil ex-Nazi Szell (Laurence Oliver) and his thuggish cronies, but his hobby

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[63] Joan Mellen also gives a solid analysis of *Marathon Man* on pages 305 and 306. See Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 305-6. It is worth pointing out that Babe's brother was, in the original source material, a gay lover of William Devane's character: that part was left out when the story came to the screen. It seems the brother had to be "straightened up" and masculinized to further accentuate through contrast the effeminacy of Babe alone. This elimination of gay characters was still very common in the 1970s, but primarily when the character was meant to be heroic. In a certain fashion, gay characters appeared much more often in American cinema in the post-Stonewall, Gay Liberation years, but never as the upstanding hero: more often a villain or comedic figure. For more on this topic, see Vito Russo *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 226.
[64] To say nothing of the fact that this horrific torture is perpetrated upon him orally by another man.

of distance running.[65] With the CIA seemingly in league with Szell, it is up to Hoffman to again dish out some violent vigilante justice. All of the bad guys done away with—including his own back-stabbing girlfriend—Hoffman's character tracks down and faces off with Szell and emerges victorious.[66] It is now Babe tormenting Szell, forcing him at gun point to eat the diamonds he had stolen or to watch Babe fling the diamonds irretrievably way. It is Babe who is now the tough masculine man, and, no longer needing to sprint to prove anything, he casually and confidently strolls down the paths he used to run. Any mention of his intelligence, Ph.D. dissertation, or studious work at Columbia from the beginning of the film are absent and duly forgotten. Hoffman's Babe is no nerdy new man anymore, but a confident tough guy.[67]

Like David and Babe, Dustin Hoffman played many other notable new man characters, a majority of which struggled with their emasculation, their intellectual natures, and their lack of proper masculinity. As such, many of Hoffman's characters only emerged victorious when they discarded any new man values (non-violence, sensitivity, supporting women, etc.), most particularly intelligence, and embraced a more traditional masculinity. This is essentially a variation on the "reformed nerd" trope that often appears in many stereotypical nerd narratives: the nerd, sick of being a nerd, tries to banish all of his nerdy characteristics and adopt an inauthentic new style, usually involving a makeover and a new outfit. Usually it never works out for the poor nerd. Interestingly, this "reformed nerd" trope is often portrayed comically, and in the end the

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[65] Even the two alliterative words that comprise the film's title make it clear what makes a "*Man*," and it is certainly not "*Ph.D. Candidate Man*," or "*Historian Man*."

[66] Like so many other 70s violent vigilantes, Babe finds that a woman, a love interest, merely gets in the way of his masculinity. Manliness may only be retrieved in these films through physical combat with another man. This is a marked difference with the promiscuous playboy masculinity of the previous decade.

[67] *Marathon Man*, Blu-ray, directed by John Schlesinger (1976; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013).

nerd reverts back to his original nerdy lifestyle. Yet in the 70s, as evidenced by films like

Straw Dogs and *Marathon Man*, the treatment is very different, much darker and more

dramatic, and the transformation is highly celebrated—the new man is successful in his

endeavor to change, happy, and better off for rejecting his past nerdy self. In this way,

these films encapsulated the deepest male anxieties of the long 70s. The characters played

by Hoffman often wrestled with deep, conflicting inner struggles with their sense of both

masculinity and femininity, and yet by the end of each film, a "rewarding" of a traditional

masculinity gave those American men in the audience a gasp of relief they so desperately

craved. Perhaps this speaks partially to Hoffman's immense popularity as an actor during

this era; the constant iteration that Hoffman-as-icon was America's ultimate "everyman"

persisted throughout this phase of the nerd stereotype.

It is imperative to acknowledge that Hoffman also embodied a conspicuous

Jewishness, particularly given his physical look and type.[68] It is likely no accident that

many of the nerdy new man cinematic portrayals scattered throughout the long 70s were

embodied by Jewish actors like Hoffman. "The enormous success of *The Graduate*,"

write Hoberman and Shandler, "elevated Hoffman to stardom and ushered in the brief

period of the ethnic Jewish matinee idol and youth icon in the forms of George Segal,

Elliott Gould, Richard Benjamin, Charles Grodin, and Gene Wilder."[69] It seems as

though certain "white ethnicities" (like the working class Italian) could embody a mythic,

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[68] For a brief but useful appraisal of Hoffman's iconography, one in which he is referred to as a "schlimazel," see David I. Grossvogel, *Vishnu in Hollywood: The Changing Image of the American Male* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 174-5. For another brief appraisal that emphasizes Hoffman's Jewishness, see J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 198. Hoberman and Shandler even mention a journalistic spat that unfolded in the *New York Times* post-*Graduate* regarding Hoffman's Jewish iconography.
[69] J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 198. One may also associate this "explosion of Jewishness" on the silver screen with the work of Mel Brooks as well as, of course, Woody Allen, who is discussed below.

glorified hypermasculinity, whereas others, like the middle class ethnic Jew could embody an anxious, troubled masculinity.[70] Through iconic actors like Dustin Hoffman and the troubled, angst-ridden characters he often portrayed in the 70s, there is a clear conflation of the ethnic Jew, the new man, and the nerd.[71]

In a chapter entitled "Flaunting It: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's 'Nice' Jewish (Bad) Boys," J. Hoberman explores this brief period of heightened Jewish representation, what he calls the Jewish "new wave," which roughly stretches from 1967-1973. Not coincidently, I would argue, this new wave corresponds with the heyday of Gay and Women's Liberation, as many of the Jewish men that populate this genre are depicted as neurotic antiheros coming to grips with their sexuality and their masculinity (not to mention their Jewishness), thereby reflecting the gender anxieties of the time. Henry Bial explores similar themes and representations in his *Acting Jewish*, particularly in his chapter "How Jews Became Sexy, 1968-1983." Focusing on the films and iconography of Barbra Streisand and Woody Allen, two of the most prominent and popular Jewish icons of the long 70s, Bial posits that this period was a time of transition,

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[70] Hoberman suggests that these popular neurotic ethnic Jews of the early 70s competed with representations of the black male stud (i.e. Shaft,) which I would suggest may embody some of the conflicts and contentions between the African American and Jewish communities that arose during this period. Hoberman also suggests that these nebbish Jews essentially get supplanted by the macho ethnic Italians of the late 70s—although the figure does not disappear entirely, but rather gets "subsumed into the persona of Woody Allen." (Hoberman, 243) This shift may well encapsulate the steady rise of white hypermasculinity throughout the 70s and the subsequent decline of the new male. J. Hoberman, "Flaunting It: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's 'Nice' Jewish (Bad) Boys," in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 243.

[71] It is fun to point out that Hoffman's long relationship to the new man is such a foundational aspect of his iconography that decades later in the 2004 film *Meet the Fockers*, he can playfully recapitulate this new man figure in his portrayal of Bernie Focker, Greg's (Ben Stiller's) father. It is no accident that Hoffman's Bernie is contrasted with Robert De Niro's Jack Byrnes, Greg's über-tough father-in-law: De Niro himself recapitulating the violent tough guy poses that he himself helped to popularize in the 70s (i.e. *Taxi Driver* in 1976). It is also worth noting that Greg's mother, Rozalin, is played by another notable Jewish actor popular in the 70s, Barbra Streisand. See David Buchbinder, "Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2008): 227-45.

where "Jewishness came to be perceived (at least in part) as sexually appealing in American popular entertainment."[72] While it may be debatable how "sexy" the general American public found someone like Woody Allen (a traditional matinee idol, he was not), what cannot be argued is that he certainly rose to great popularity throughout the long 70s, further suggesting a complex new relationship with masculinity and sexuality. In a decade increasingly dominated by a hypermasculine ideal embodied by characters like Dirty Harry and Rocky Balboa, there also existed this other figure of masculinity, a markedly less masculine sort of male wrestling with his sexuality, striving—but unlike Dustin Hoffman's new man characters, failing—to be like the tough guys that populated the silver screen. This figure was more often than not embodied as Jewish, and even more specifically, as a Jewish schlemiel.

Woody Allen and the Nerdy Jewish Schlemiel

If the figure of the new man was essentially treated in popular media as a type of medial masculinity, someone who could—and should—doff their nerdy characteristics and embrace the hypermasculinity of the macho male hero, the stereotypical Jewish schlemiel was the irredeemable nerd, a nerd so emasculated and neurotic that he was doomed to be a loser for all of his days. And as the nerd stereotype already had its roots in Jewishness (see chapter 2), it should be no great surprise that the Jewish schlemiel is one of the most resonant variations of the nerd stereotype.

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[72] Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 87. While my focus here is white male nerds, I should point out that Barbra Streisand is a fascinating Jewish icon of the long 70s worth examining further as a representative female nerd—*The Way We Were* (1973) and perhaps even the later *Yentl* (1983) being two potentially intriguing examples.

As Ruth R. Wisse examines in her *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, the schlemiel is a Jewish stereotype with, a long history in Jewish culture.[73] Essentially, the schlemiel is a Jewish male who is a born loser, a clumsy fool, an ineffectual victim, an awkward and socially inept pipsqueak. He is the opposite of cool, the flip side to the admirable *mensch*.[74] At his core, the schlemiel is a failed Jewish masculinity.[75] Furthermore, as David Biale attests in his *Eros and the Jews*, the schlemiel figure was adapted by American culture in more recent times in order to incorporate a pronounced component of sexual failure and neuroses. Accordingly, the American version of the schlemiel is what Biale calls a "sexual schlemiel," the stereotypical image of "the impotent American Jew," that fosters "the myth of Jewish erotic neurosis."[76] Biale's sexual schlemiels are often rendered as not "merely impotent; they are also highly erotic."[77] In other words, the sexual schlemiel tries desperately to get laid, but inevitably fails. More specifically, he lusts for the gentile woman, the *shiksa*, that woman seemingly above him and just outside of his grasp.[78]

This relationship to women is an exceptionally important trope for consideration in this study, for as we have already seen the male nerd is often represented as either 1) entirely asexual and oblivious to his libido, or 2) a horny and hypersexual-wanna-be who

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[73] Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[74] A mensch is, generally speaking, a good and upstanding person.

[75] For more perspectives on the schlemiel, stereotypes, and failed Jewish masculinity, see Robert Leslie Liebman, "Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Superman? Jewish Identity in Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 195-201; Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000), 301-3; and Maurice Berger, "The Mouse That Never Roars: Jewish Masculinity on American Television," in *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 93-107.

[76] David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 205, 206.

[77] Ibid., 206.

[78] As Robert Leslie Liebman attests, Jerry Lewis' Professor Kelp from *The Nutty Professor* is also a "a schlemiel in the extreme." (196) See Robert Leslie Liebman, "Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Superman? Jewish Identity in Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 196-7.

lusts for the pretty popular girl and, much like the sexual schlemiel, is doomed to (comic)

failure. In fact, it is fair to say that the nerd stereotype perpetuates this very trope from

the Jewish sexual schlemiel during this period.[79] Add the long-standing hyperintelligent

aspects of Jewish stereotypes prevalent in previous American decades (see chapter 2),

and all the necessary ideological ingredients are in place to render the schlemiel and the

male nerd as practically one and the same.[80] The nerd stereotype, the sexual schlemiel,

and even the medial new man figure all arise simultaneously in American culture of the

long 70s; each different, but united by a common discourse.[81]

It is unsurprising, then, that many of the popular Jewish characters that populated

the new wave of Jewish films from Hollywood in the late 60s/early 70s were mainly

nerds/sexual schlemiels. As Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass suggest in their *Let*

There Be Laughter!, even Hoffman's definitive and influential Benjamin Braddock from

The Graduate "bore an uncanny resemblance to a ubiquitous character in Jewish folk and

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[79] From the 40s up until the late 60s, I have tended to observe stereotypic representations of male nerds as isolates, quirky "weirdos" very much existing on an individual basis, who if they end up with anyone, usually accidently, it is with other nerds. These nerdy men never really go after the girl—even Lewis' nutty professor would not have ended up with the girl if not for the intervention of his alter ego. The script flips if the nerd is a girl: like Zelda Gilroy, she aggressively pursues her potential love interest, Dobie Gillis. In both cases, these representations likely play on the simple trope that men are supposed to pursue women: by doing the opposite, both nerd boys and nerd girls are misperforming their gender. However, once the sexual schlemiel bursts on the scene in the late 60s/early 70s, the male nerd stereotype in particular takes on the trope of "lusting out of your league" to a much greater degree, which manifests quite often from this period forward, present in a multitude of representations ranging from the film *Weird Science* (1985) to the reality TV show *Beauty and the Geek* (2005-2008).

[80] For more on stereotypic Jewish hyperintelligence, see Sander L. Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). Gilman's final chapter, "The End of Another Century: The Image in American Mass Culture," pages 173-206, is particularly helpful.

[81] In his essay "Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television," Buchbinder also makes similar connections: he groups "male subjectivities" such as "nerds, geeks and dorks […]" under the general category of the schlemiel." (230) See David Buchbinder, "Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2008): 227-45.

literary imagination—the schlemiel."[82] Another influential sexual schlemiel of the era

was the character Alexander Portnoy from Philip Roth's 1969 popular and controversial

novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel later turned into a film in 1972.[83] Almost across the

board, many of these nerdy sexual schlemiel characters found themselves grappling with

not only being losers, but sexual neurotics desperately searching for their masculinity in

an age of liberated women.

As such, the stereotype of the Jewish sexual schlemiel, so popular in the long 70s,

is a full embodiment of the American nerd, a continuation and development of the Jewish

greasy grind from the 50s.[84] But as the grind was a subtly anti-Semitic configuration, the

sexual schlemiel of the 70s was more ambiguous: a figure to be laughed at, sure, but also

potentially a sort of identifiable sexual respite to those rare few who rejected the

hypermasculine heroes of the era.[85] If vigilante violence, superstar athletic prowess, and

working-class machismo were not viable options for performing one's masculinity, the

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[82] Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter! Jewish Humor in America* (Chicago: Spertus Press, 1997), 67, quoted in J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 223.

[83] *Portnoy's Complaint* is full of many Jewish stereotypes beyond the sexual schlemiel, such as the overbearing JAM or Jewish American Mother stereotype and even to a lesser degree the gold-digging JAP or Jewish American Princess stereotype, both of which also became prominent in the 70s. For more on these gendered Jewish stereotypes, see Riv-Ellen Prell, "Rage and Representations: Jewish Gender Stereotypes in America," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 248-68; and "Riv-Ellen Prell, "Why Jewish Princesses Don't Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar American Jewish Culture," in *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 74-92.

[84] See chapter 2. Jewish representations in popular American culture, generally speaking, tended to wane in the early 60s, especially the Jewish schlemiel character. While there are a number of potential reasons behind this occurrence, one contributing factor is the rise of the "tough Jew," figure in the late 50s/early 60s, an archetype/stereotype that attempted to assign Jewish men a sort of hypermasculinity. The best and perhaps most impactful example of this trend is Ari Ben Canaan, the manly hero from *Exodus*, Leon Uris' 1958 best-selling novel. For more on these "tough Jews," see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 204; and Paul Breines, *Tough Jews* (New York: BasicBooks, 1990).

[85] In a complex way, I feel this ambiguous reception contributed to the popularity of the Jewish sexual schlemiel in the long 70s. While many clearly enjoyed laughing at the emasculated Jewish neurotic in the long 70s (and undoubtedly there were many who disliked such characters), a few avid fans actually identified with him, which likely contributed to his select reception as "sexy" as suggested by Henry Bial above.

American male could possibly find a kindred spirit in the nerdy Jewish schlemiel—or if not a kindred spirit, at least someone else to laugh at for being fully, ridiculously unmasculine.[86]

If there is any Jewish male celebrity that embodies the nerdy schlemiel stereotype, it is actor, writer, and director Woody Allen. As David Biale avers,

> Besides Roth, no one has mined this stereotype [the sexual schlemiel] more than the filmmaker and writer Woody Allen. He gets a lot of the credit for disseminating many of the popular stereotypes of the Jewish male, his sexual self-doubt and obsession with gentile women. From *What's New Pussycat?*, the first movie he wrote and acted in, he portrayed what was to becomes a stock figure, the little man with the big libido and the even bigger sexual neurosis, a character comically unable to consummate his desire.[87]

Woody Allen—or rather, the Woody Allen persona—is the ultimate representative of the schlemiel during the late 60s/early 70s and well beyond. Allen cultivated this nebbish image from the very beginning of his cinematic career, most especially during his early period, roughly stretching from *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) to *Love and Death* (1975), which, it should be noted, spans not only Hoberman's Jewish "new wave," but also the height of popular awareness of the Women's Movement. "Woody Allen's anxious, bespectacled punin has become something of a national icon," writes Sanford Pinsker, "he is the 'beautiful loser' par excellence, the man whose urban, end-of-the-century anxieties mirror—albeit, in exaggeration—our own."[88]

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[86] If nerdy Jewish men were potentially posing a model, albeit troubled, for a new sort of masculinity, that model was particularly white. In many ways, this echoes the model minority Asian male stereotype that was also popular in the discourse at the time. If model Asians might serve as docile models for violent Blacks, then perhaps nebbish Jews might present models of white masculinity—and ways in which to deal with overbearing liberated women. As stated before, however, white American men eventually turned away from these possibilities by the late 70s and the early 80s, when hypermasculine ideals became the dominant model, from macho working class Italians to super jocks and lone wolf warriors.

[87] Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 206.

[88] Sanford Pinsker, "Woody Allen's Loveable Anxious Schlemiels," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 1. Pinsker's chapter is especially useful, examining Allen's persona as a schlemiel and his complex connection to intellectuality.

The Woody Allen persona embodied and popularized the nerdy Jewish sexual schlemiel, incorporating the image, the intellect, and the troubled masculinity that typifies its construction. The physical image of Woody Allen needs little comment. "The style of Woody Allen," summarizes Grossvogel, "derived from a spare small body supporting a thin, Jewish face whose owlish eyes behind heavily rimmed glasses bespoke innocence and confusion while suggesting intellectual topics."[89] Allen naturally sports the look of the nerd stereotype (see Figure 7 in the Appendix).

The relationship to intelligence is a bit more complex. Certain commentators find much of the intellectual in Woody Allen-as-auteur, like Irving Howe, who suggests that Woody Allen "was a reincarnated Menashe Skulnik, quintessential *schlemiel* of Yiddish theatre, but now a college graduate acquainted with the thought of Freud and recent numbers of *Commentary*."[90] Others, however, like Mark Shechner, find Allen to be posturing as an intellectual with a sort of "high-school essentialism."[91] Allan Bloom, in his pungent *The Closing of the American Mind*, finds Allen to represent the worst sort of nihilistic anti-intellectualism, "doctrinaire" and disappointing.[92] Regardless of Allen's actual intellectual credentials, the witty style and intellectual-oriented subject matter of his films and his persona, as Pinsker suggests, "perpetuates the mythos of a sensitive New

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[89] David I. Grossvogel, *Vishnu in Hollywood: The Changing Image of the American Male* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 192.

[90] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 571.

[91] Mark Shechner, "Woody Allen: The Failure of the Therapeutic" in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 232.

[92] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 144.

York egghead."[93] Whether inauthentic or not, Woody Allen's characters are consistently

bound up in a discourse of intellectualism, making his characters quintessential nerds.

Along with the image and the intellectuality of the nerd stereotype, the Woody

Allen persona also inherently performs a conspicuous type of failed masculinity—a

masculinity just as convoluted as the portrayal of intellectualism. Do Woody Allen films,

through humor, tend to satirize gender and sexual relations, critiquing hypermasculinity?

Or are the films rather essentialist doctrines reinforcing misogynistic and masculinist

views? Likely, it is a bit of both, depending primarily on what the audience member

wishes to take away from their film-watching experience: such is the dual nature of

comedy. The Woody Allen persona, regardless, decidedly performs a failed masculinity,

a man who, in practically all of his characters, is emasculated for comic effect.[94] What is

perhaps most poignant in terms of the unmanly nature of Allen's persona is how more

often than not this emasculation is derived from "liberated women," potentially revealing

a rather sexist set of politics as well as grounding Allen's films—and his persona—as a

reaction to the gender politics of the period.

To better navigate how the nerd stereotype is performed by the Woody Allen

persona—as a sexual schlemiel, (pseudo)intellectual figure, and emasculated male

failure—a brief look at a handful of his early films from the long 70s is in order. First,

take the mock-documentary *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Allen's first complete

feature film.[95] The movie follows Virgil Starkwell (Woody Allen), a bumbling criminal

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[93] Pinsker, "Woody Allen's Loveable Anxious Schlemiels," 4.
[94] For more on the complex and often contradictory performances of masculinity in Woody Allen's movies, see Andreas G. Philaretou, "Learning and Laughing about Gender and Sexuality through Humor: The Woody Allen Case," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 133-44.
[95] For various perspectives on *Take the Money and Run*, see Sanford Pinsker, "Woody Allen's Loveable Anxious Schlemiels," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 6-8; Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New

who, despite having a "high IQ" back in school, cannot seem to do anything right.[96] From the beginning of the film, young Virgil is depicted as a bullied nerd, where seemingly everyone, peers and adults alike, take turns pulling off his horn-rimmed glasses and stomping on them: an act of emasculation. Later, Virgil attempts to join a gang in order to "prove his manhood," but when he tries to open his switchblade, the blade shoots out.[97] As Yacowar confirms, Virgil's "'manhood' is deflated in an image of premature ejaculation."[98]

Virgil is also rendered a sexual schlemiel, depicted as inept at properly wooing a woman. When he accidently stumbles upon his beautiful love interest Louise (Janet Margolin) and romance blossoms, Virgil confesses in voice-over "I don't know how to act with girls. You know, I'm shy, I'm just nervous around women. I have a tendency to dribble."[99] And despite marrying Louise and having a son, Virgil often finds himself unmanned by his wife: in one scene, having escaped a chain gang with some fellow convicts in tow, Virgil brings the men to his home. Louise proceeds to emasculate him in front of the guys, forcing him to be sweet and contrite while the gaggle of tough guys around him chuckle derisively.

Near the end of the film, as part of its genre parody, its *faux cinéma-vérité*, mock-documentary style,[100] there is a random interview with a "woman on the street" that a

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Expanded Edition (New York: Continuum, 1991), 120-8; and Foster Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: The Films of Woody Allen*, Updated Edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).
[96] *Take the Money and Run*, DVD, directed by Woody Allen (1969; Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2004).
[97] Ibid.
[98] Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Continuum, 1991), 123.
[99] *Take the Money and Run*.
[100] A style of documentary filmmaking, *cinéma-vérité* (French for "truthful cinema") was quite popular in the 60s, when Woody Allen chose to parody the style.

caption names as Kay Lewis (Louise Lasser).[101] This woman goes on to say that she is

impressed and surprised that Virgil is a criminal, especially because she always found

him to be an exceptional idiot, saying "Everyone just thought that he was such a

schlemiel and it turns out that he's a criminal."[102] Not only is he emasculated by his wife,

even random women on the street find Virgil to be a consummate schlemiel.

Many of these basic elements of the nerd stereotype are expanded upon in the

1971 film *Bananas*.[103] Again, Woody Allen performs his sexual schlemiel/nerd persona,

but now as the bumbling products tester Fielding Mellish, who through mischance and

wacky happenstance becomes the president of a Latin American country: San Marcos.

Despite being rendered as a college dropout—he was in a "Black Studies program," and

laments that if only he had stayed "by now I could have been black"—Mellish is still

often rendered as a pseudo-intellectual of sorts.[104] The San Marcos dictator that Mellish

eventually overthrows refers to him as "an American intellectual," and later, when on

trial for treason, a witness says of Mellish "He's a bad apple. A commie. A New York

Jewish intellectual communist crackpot. I mean, I don't want to cast no aspersions."[105]

Even if Mellish, like the Woody Allen persona overall, is not a true intellectual, he is

inextricably linked with intelligence.

With regards to being a nerdy, emasculated schlemiel, Mellish's bizarre journey is

importantly instigated by his falling in love with Nancy (Louise Lasser), a college student

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[101] Louise Lasser is interestingly enough one of Woody Allen's ex-wives.

[102] *Take the Money and Run*.

[103] For various perspectives on *Bananas*, see, Sanford Pinsker, "Woody Allen's Loveable Anxious Schlemiels," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 9; Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Continuum, 1991), 129-35; and Foster Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: The Films of Woody Allen*, Updated Edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).

[104] *Bananas*, DVD, directed by Woody Allen (1971; Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000).

[105] Ibid.

who knocks on Mellish's door to get him to sign a petition.[106] This first meeting scene is a vital one: Nancy, a CCNY student activist, is petitioning against the San Marcos dictatorship. Mellish is so smitten with Nancy that he would do anything for her, even blindly partake of her political causes. Importantly, to establish her character, Nancy says she has a meeting with her "Women's Liberation group," which inevitably makes Mellish ask if she hates men: this in turn brings up the inevitable subject of "castration."[107] Yet despite Mellish's physical aversion to the very word "castration," he falls head over heels in love with Nancy. However, the relationship is brief. Despite participating in political rallies with her—and perhaps because he is so inept at making love to her, as one silly bedroom scene attests—Nancy coldly and brutally dumps Mellish. Saying that "there's something missing" from their relationship, Nancy states that she needs "a very strong man. I need a leader."[108] She goes on to say that he is "immature," particularly "emotionally, sexually, and intellectually."[109] By the end of the break up scene, in spite of Mellish's assertion "I'm like a cat: I'll always wind up on my feet," he immediately begins to sob.[110] Leaving him weeping, Nancy performs the stereotype of the castrating, emasculating women's libber which, as discussed previously, was well-established and popular by 1971. Interestingly, she also performs this particular scene wearing glasses.

After becoming the leader of San Marcos, Mellish returns to the U.S. and, after a ridiculous courtroom battle, he is deposed and cast back down to being an ordinary U.S. citizen and overall loser. But since Mellish has had a turn at being a "leader," he and

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[106] Again, it is worth emphasizing that Allen would cast Lasser again as a female character that thoroughly emasculates his onscreen persona.
[107] *Bananas*.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

Nancy somehow get back together and even marry. But even in marriage, she continues to emasculate him. The final sequence of the film has sportscaster Howard Cosell announcing their wedding night consummation as a confrontational boxing match. Mellish thinks he performed well, but Nancy makes it clear that she was not too impressed with his performance. The women's libber continues to emasculate the sexual schlemiel, even in marriage. This emphasis on the object of the male nerd's doomed affections is an important one: in previous phases of the nerd stereotype, the fault of being a nerdy, emasculated male falls either entirely on the nerd himself or his parents, who did not raise him to be properly manly. Now in the late 60s and early 70s, thanks to the performance of the nerdy Jewish schlemiel, the fault of being nerdy now begins to emphasize the culpability of the woman for whom the nerd pines away. If only she was not so independent and educated—in other words, a feminist—then perhaps the nerdy sexual schlemiel might have an easier time affirming his manhood.

This theme of the emasculated sexual schlemiel/nerd stereotype being a vital facet of Woody Allen's persona continues in his performances, such as in the film *Play It Again, Sam* (1972). This movie, based on Woody Allen's own 1969 full-length Broadway play, is perhaps his most direct examination of American masculinity in particular.[111] Film critic, writer, and aspiring intellectual Allan (Woody Allen) has been

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[111] For various perspectives on *Play It Again, Sam*—both as a play and as a film—see Wes D. Gehring, "Woody Allen and Fantasy: *Play It Again, Sam*," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 89-99; Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Continuum, 1991), 51-9; Foster Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: The Films of Woody Allen*, Updated Edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001); Robert Leslie Liebman, "Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Superman? Jewish Identity in Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 197-8; Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 92-4; Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 336-9; and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), 209.

brutally dropped and divorced by his emasculating, liberated ex-wife, Nancy (Susan Anspach).[112] A nerdy film buff, Allan is an obsessive fan of the film *Casablanca*, and fantasy images of masculine idol Humphrey Bogart (Jerry Lacy) appear to him, coaxing him to essentially act like a proper man. Urged on by the opposing fantasy images of his castrating ex-wife Nancy and his masculine champion Bogie, Allan attempts to get back on the horse and find his manhood by reentering the world of dating. Inevitably most of his attempts end in disaster and humiliation: one example being when he and a date end up in a rough bar being accosted by some big manly toughs. Humiliated and emasculated in front of his date, the roughnecks call him "shorty" and "creep," whereas all Allan can do is ask if they have seen the recent production of *The Trojan Women*.[113]

That said, Allan does make a romantic and sexual connection with his friend Linda (Diane Keaton), who also happens to be the wife of his best friend Dick Christie (Tony Roberts).[114] In the end, despite the passion of his affair with Linda, Allan makes a *Casablanca*-like self-sacrifice to keep Dick and Linda together, realizing that he does have a bit of the Bogie-swagger, telling the imaginary Humphrey Bogart "I guess the secret's not being you. It's being me. True, you're not too tall and kind of ugly, but, what the hell, I'm short enough and ugly enough to succeed on my own."[115]

In terms of the portrayal of masculinity, *Play It Again, Sam* is at best problematic. Sure, on one hand, it allows the nerdy Allan a degree of self-acceptance at the end, even if the nerd protagonist does not end up with the girl. In certain ways, the film tries to

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[112] It is intriguing that Allen would name the two castrating women for both *Bananas* and *Play It Again, Sam* the same: Nancy.

[113] *Play It Again, Sam*, DVD, directed by Herbert Ross (1972; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2006).

[114] This is Allen's first film with Diane Keaton, with whom he would go on to make a number of important films, forging an important cinematic pairing.

[115] *Play It Again, Sam*.

celebrate and humanize the nerd. But as Joan Mellen points out, the film, "far from reassessing Bogart's style of manliness, actually insists that a Woody Allen can do what a Bogart did, if with his tutoring, and win the woman of his dreams before, in the heroic manner of *Casablanca*, sacrificing their love to a higher ideal."[116] Similar to Joan Mellen, Michael Kimmel finds that *Play It Again, Sam* offers an "eerily negative portrayal of contemporary manhood."[117] He further suggests that in this movie, "Woody Allen presents us with the first in a series of films about the revenge of the nerds, as yet another bespectacled wimp confesses that 'most men are secretly tortured by not being Bogart.' So Bogart returns as fantasy construction and imparts a series of lessons in manhood for Allen-as-nebbish-Everyman to follow. Men needed to reclaim their manhood; all they needed was the right role model."[118] So despite some of the positive facets of *Play It Again, Sam*, it still seemed to rely on and recapitulate the mythic ideal masculine American hero. Perpetuating the hegemonic dynamic of the nerd stereotype, all Allan really wants is to be manly and to get the girl, deep down.

Finally, one of Woody Allen's most successful films, *Annie Hall* (1977), continues in much the same vein as his previous films, further cementing Allen's persona as that of the nerd stereotype.[119] Woody Allen portrays Alvy Singer—still very much a

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[116] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, 336.
[117] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 208.
[118] Ibid., 209.
[119] For just a few of the various perspectives on *Annie Hall*, see Devin Brown, "Powerful Man Gets Pretty Woman: Style Switching In *Annie Hall*," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 112-22; Thomas Schatz, "*Annie Hall* and the Issue of Modernism," in *The Films of Woody Allen: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 123-32; Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Continuum, 1991), 171-85; Foster Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: The Films of Woody Allen*, Updated Edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001); Robert Leslie Liebman, "Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Superman? Jewish Identity in Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 199-200; Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

physically unimposing sexual schlemiel in thick black horn-rimmed glasses—and the
movie charts the rise and fall of Singer's relationship with Annie Hall (Diane Keaton).
More so than in Allen's previous films, the character portrayed by Allen in *Annie Hall* is
marked as particularly Jewish and intellectual. When dining with Annie Hall's WASP
family, Alvy sees himself as what he assumes the family sees: a Hassidic Jew in
traditional black garb.

As for the intellectual and cultural pretensions that Alvy entertains and manifests,
there is a fantastical moment where Alvy, while waiting in line to see a film at the New
Yorker, is stuck overhearing a boorish pedant drone on and on critiquing Fellini. Alvy
then magically pulls intellectual Marshall McLuhan out of thin air to put down the
boorish man and shut him up.[120] This sort of intellectually-oriented humor is peppered
throughout the film. Another witty quip that relies on this sort of learned humor is when
Alvy jokingly tells one of his ex-wives "I heard *Commentary* and *Dissent* had merged
and formed *Dysentery*."[121]

It is not only the jokes that are nerdy and oriented around intellectuality. The very
relationship between Alvy and Annie is also framed as one that waxes, then wanes on
intellectual terms. In Pygmalion fashion, Alvy takes a boorish, Midwestern gentile gal
and sets her down a path of becoming more intelligent and cultured.[122] In the end, she has
outgrown him, and in the climactic scene of the film she refuses to get back together with
him and return to New York, opting instead to stay in L.A. "What's so great about New

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Press, 2005), 97-9; and David I. Grossvogel, *Vishnu in Hollywood: The Changing Image of the American
Male* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 196-7.
[120] Canadian public intellectual Marshall McLuhan specialized in media theory and popular culture.
[121] *Annie Hall*, Blu-ray, directed by Woody Allen (1977; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home
Entertainment, 2011).
[122] According to the Greek myth, Pygmalion fell in love with a statue that he had carved himself. In Shaw's
play *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins "sculpts" Eliza Doolittle only to see her become her own woman with a
mind and will of her own, a trope recapitulated in *Annie Hall*.

York?" Annie asks him, "It's a dying city. You read *Death in Venice*," to which Alvy replies, "You didn't read *Death in Venice* until I bought it for you."[123] This "(mis)education" for Annie also takes on highly feminist tones. Annie becomes an intelligent liberated woman by film's end, which in certain ways is celebrated. However, from Alvy Singer's—and the films—point of view, there is also a bitter, heart-wrenching loss of a love that might have been. While perhaps not as flagrantly emasculating as previous women from Allen's earlier, more farcical films, the liberated feminist is still constructed as an impediment to a man's happiness and masculinity. No image from *Annie Hall* best sums this up than Annie sitting up in bed reading *The Second Sex* while Alvy gazes upon her wistfully. The intelligent, liberated woman emasculates the nerdy effeminate man and renders him a sexual, masculine failure. Here again we find how the white male nerd stereotype of the long 70s associates the source of his failed performance of masculinity with self-sufficient women.

Taken all together, Woody Allen's early films like *Take the Money and Run* and *Bananas*—roughly spanning the late 60s/early 70s—tend to emphasize the Jewish sexual schlemiel/nerd stereotype as a ridiculous figure in reaction to what was likely to be construed by many American men at the time as a ridiculous Women's Movement. This likely also contributed to the popularity of various filmic incarnations of the aforementioned Jewish new wave as well. Generally speaking, analogous to how the myth of the model minority Asian arose in the late 60s/early 70s as a means for white Americans to subvert the unruly Black Power movement (and Civil Rights more generally), the popularity of the Jewish sexual schlemiel during the same period was a

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[123] *Annie Hall*.

means for white male Americans to subvert the Women's Movement by pocking fun at those men feminists would surely emasculate.[124]

But when Women's Liberation proved to be more than just a temporary fad in American culture by the mid to late 70s, things seemed a bit less funny to those supporters of white male hegemony, and the heightened period of Jewish representations began to dissipate. "With the end of the Jewish new wave," suggestively writes Hoberman, "the urban neurotic antihero disappeared as well. Or, rather, this figure was subsumed into the persona of Woody Allen—at least until he resurfaced, a less abrasive wise guy, in the TV sitcoms of the 1990s."[125] The broader nerd stereotype—via Woody Allen's persona—surpassed the specific Jewish sexual schlemiel in popularity in the mid-70s and would dominate the late 70s and all of the 80s until, as Hoberman points out, things began to shift again in the 90s.

Woody Allen's later films and performances from the mid-70s forward (*Play It Again, Sam*, *Annie Hall*, and well on into the 80s) became more "serious" and "mature" in kind, utilizing the nerd stereotype to tap into the mounting white middle-class masculine anxiety of the time. As Biskind and Ehrenreich posit, "Woody Allen, more than anyone, articulated the sense of victimization men felt in the grip of the mid-seventies masculinity crisis: looking plaintive as Diane Keaton reads *The Second Sex* in bed (*Annie Hall*) or trying to "rescue" his son from Meryl Streep, his lesbian ex-wife (*Manhattan*)."[126] For certain audience members, particularly those of a more liberal and

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[124] For more on the model minority stereotype, see chapter 8.

[125] J. Hoberman, "Flaunting It: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's 'Nice' Jewish (Bad) Boys," in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 243.

[126] Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," in Peter Biskind, *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture from One of American's Most Incisive Writers* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 54.

intellectual persuasion, Woody Allen became the darling of the cultured set, a talented

Academy Award-winning auteur who captured the zeitgeist of the culture.[127] For pretty

much the rest the country—who much preferred *Rocky*—Woody Allen remained a

quintessential nerd.

The Long 70s White Male Nerd: Neurotic, Anxious, and Disturbed

It is rather telling how *Rocky* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1976,

and then *Annie Hall* won the same award in 1977: both films speak to a very particular

cultural discourse regarding white masculinity—one idealized, one debased—in U.S.

popular culture in the late 70s. The confident hypermasculine macho white male hero had

become the ideal model of masculinity and the stereotypical nerd, most conspicuously the

Jewish sexual schlemiel, had become his neurotic antithesis. As for any potential new

men caught in the middle—let alone the majority of American men that fell between

these two extremes on the spectrum masculinity—a pressure to perform an overt

hypermasculinity was certainly growing throughout the era.

In accordance with this mounting trend of hypermasculinity, the white male nerd

stereotype of this period, while still a masculine failure as in previous phases, is

particularly inflected with a sense of neuroses and despair—compare the wacky

redemption of *The Nutty Professor* with the bittersweet treatment of *Annie Hall*. This

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[127] It is partially because Woody Allen becomes one of the lone representations of the nerd stereotype as a sort of sympathetic figure in a veritable sea of tough guys, especially in *Annie Hall*, that makes him "sexy" and attractive, as both Henry Bial and Robert Leslie Liebman rightfully attest. In this way, many Woody Allen films, *Annie Hall* most especially and conspicuously, become a sort of "nerd favorite," a type of media that many nerds seem to latch onto and develop a strong fan affinity with. These sorts of nerd fan favorites, while still problematic in terms of identity politics, can be seen as a sort of rare escapist pleasure for a decidedly nerdy audience. In other words, even when the popular media is overpopulated with macho hypermasculine heroes, every once and a while a work will come along that will, in some capacity, speak to the limited nerd audience. As we will see in later chapters, the 80s possess many examples of these nerd fan favorites.

shift in tone in nerd performances, as I have posited throughout this chapter, not only reflects the mounting anti-intellectual and neoconservative sentiment of the period, but the idealization of a particular, culturally specific form of white hypermasculinity as well. Much like neoconservatism itself, this hypermasculinity was a direct response to the social movements that challenged white masculine hegemony in the late 60s/early 70s. Accordingly, we witness not only a popularization of the nerd stereotype during this third phase, from 1968 to 1980, but also a shift in tone. The nerd was a wacky antihero, a loveable dupe, a wacky sidekick in the 60s, and his intelligence, while emasculating, was tolerable because it was useful. By the late 70s, the nerd was an anxious, neurotic, self-hating failure, and his intelligence was not only useless, but a serious impediment to his masculine identity. In turn, these neurotic nerd performances of the 70s more effectively performed the heteronormative dynamic of the nerd stereotype, making nerdiness an even less attractive option for American men, and therefore promoting the new surge for hypermasculinity as the ideal—and this dynamic perhaps best explains why the nerd stereotype proliferated as it did during this third phase.

Chapters 5 and 6, in summary, have examined how, concordant with the growth of neoconservatism and the mounting backlash against feminism (and LGBTQ folks as well), both anti-intellectualism and the pressure for men to conform to the "ideal" of hypermasculinity grew drastically in the long 70s. And as we shall see in the next two chapters, these trends only continued, leading to the highly masculinist, highly conservative, Reagan-dominated 1980s. It is no surprise, then, to find numerous instances of the nerd stereotype in American culture in the decade that follows its propagation in the 70s. If the nerd stereotype grew in popularity alongside this broader cultural trend for

white male hypermasculinity in the 70s, the 80s saw the nerd stereotype put to thorough and widespread use in order to constantly and obsessively reiterate what failed masculinity looked like, albeit in a new, overdetermined fashion that emphasized white male entitlement. Yes, morning had come to America in the 80s, shining a light on the figure of the nerd—not to celebrate it or promote it, but rather to humiliate American men into properly performing their gender, to keep women and non-whites in the dark, and to give a stark new emphasis on white male power.

Part IV: 1978 - 1989

Chapter 7: Hard Body Jocks and Nerdy White Male Wimps in Reagan's America

Hypermasculinity and White Male Entitlement in the Reagan Revolution

If the nerd stereotype rose steadily in popularity throughout much of the long 70s,

it reached a sort of zenith in the popular culture of the 1980s. Suddenly, it seemed like

stereotypical nerds were everywhere: in real life and certainly all over popular media.

The nerd stereotype had truly arrived, perhaps best evidenced by the simple fact that the

very word "nerd" appeared in the title of a now-famous film: *Revenge of the Nerds*

(1984), which is discussed in the following chapter.[1] Roughly covering the years from

1978 to 1989 (the fourth phase of the nerd stereotype), this chapter will examine a few of

the most popular and preeminent examples of the nerd stereotype in its heyday.[2] This

time span essentially runs from the aforementioned *SNL* Nerds, Todd and Lisa (see

chapter 5), up to (yet not including) the appearance of our first truly prominent black

male nerd, Steve Urkel from the television series *Family Matters* (see the concluding

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[1] Interestingly, the title "Revenge of the Nerd" was used for a little known episode of an after-school special: the *CBS Afternoon Playhouse* (which later became *CBS Schoolbreak Specials*). The episode aired in April of 1983 (season 5, episode 1). However, apparently due to the major film's subsequent release, the title of the episode was changed to "Battle of the Bullies." Regardless, the episode remains a fascinating early example of the nerd stereotype, especially one involving computers. For more on this episode, see "Revenge of the Nerd," IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0297766/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (accessed December 23, 2016); Tom Berges, "Battle of the Bullies a.k.a. Revenge of the Nerd – 1983," Retroist, entry posted January 2, 2016, http://www.retroist.com/2016/01/02/battle-of-the-bullies-a-k-a-revenge-of-the-nerd-1983/ (accessed December 23, 2016); and "Battle of the Bullies a.k.a Revenge of the Nerd 1983," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdSN27eoQYQ (accessed December 23, 2016). It should also be noted that there was a famous play by Larry Shue called *The Nerd* as well. It was first performed at Milwaukee Rep in 1981, then in England in 1982. Interestingly, it did not premiere on Broadway until 1987, both after Larry Shue's death and the explosion of the nerd stereotype. While the nerdy character of the title, Rick Steadman (played on Broadway by Robert Joy), does not truly qualify as a full-fledged nerd in the text (he is really more an extremely annoying putz, lacking the major indicators of intelligence or love of technology), production photos reveal that the costume design (by Deborah Shaw) captured the stereotypical nerd image perfectly: black horn-rimmed glasses, short sleeve white button-down shirt with a black tie, pocket protector, etc. And as a small side-note for *Star Wars* fans, Mark Hamill played the lead role, Willum Cubbert, for the Broadway production, the "normal" guy much pestered by the obnoxious nerd throughout the play. See Larry Shue, *The Nerd* (Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, 1984).

[2] As noted in the introductory chapter, this date range loosely covers the apotheosis of Reagan Era neoconservatism.

chapter).[3] And as we shall see, perhaps even more importantly, this time span essentially

covers the highly conservative Reagan Era.

However, as popular as the nerd stereotype became during this period, nerds

remained anything but: still the objects of ridicule, still the antithesis of cool. In fact, one

of the key characteristics that delineates the nerd stereotype in the 80s from previous

performances in preceding phases is how flagrantly nerd characters were humiliated and

debased. Even in the long 70s (as examined in the previous chapter), as the general

treatment of nerd characters "deteriorated" over time, there was at least an attempt to

humanize and complicate nerds—the medial nature of the new man and the relative

popularity of Woody Allen allowed for a slight, albeit highly problematic sympathy for

certain nerd characters. Then, during this fourth phase of the nerd stereotype, nerd

performances took a decidedly severe and often malicious turn.[4]

Yet despite this characteristic debasement of the late 70s and 80s nerd—more

specifically, the white male nerd—there is also a peculiar, almost paradoxical emphasis

on white male entitlement associated with these nerd characters as well. In a highly

complex and contradictory fashion, many 80s nerd characters are brutally humiliated for

their intelligence and lack of hypermasculinity, and yet their status as hegemonic straight

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[3] The character Steve Urkel (Jaleel White) first appears in season 1, episode 12 of *Family Matters*, which aired on December 15, 1989. What was supposed to be a one-off character struck a chord with the American public, and Urkel instantly became one of the most famous and important nerds of the 90s. See, as one example, Diane Haithman, "Nerd Power: Is Uncool Urkel the '90s Answer to the Fonz?," *Los Angeles Times*, January 04, 1991, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-01-04/entertainment/ca-7948_1_family-matters (accessed December 21, 2016). See the concluding chapter for more on Urkel and black male nerds.

[4] It should be mentioned that as the nerd stereotype thrives in this particularly pernicious manner in the 80s, it seems as if real life anti-nerd sentiment does as well (although more research is necessary to confirm this phenomenon). Picking on anyone who vaguely embodied the nerd identity became especially pronounced and vicious in the late 70s and the 80s. This can be seen in a number of ways: from bullying trends in high schools to the culture's predilection to vilify geeky fans—making fun of *Star Trek* fans and the association of Dungeons & Dragons with Satanism being two prime examples. As this phenomenon is more related to the nerd identity than the nerd stereotype, I intend to study it separately in future work.

white males conspicuously reified. The biased sentiment that these nerds promulgate is that, yes, these nerds may be utter failures of white masculinity worthy of vicious derision, but at least they are still entitled white males. Any power that these characters may possess does not come from their intellect, but from their white male privilege.

With this characteristic shift in the portrayal of stereotypical nerds from 1978 to 1989 as the focus, this chapter will commence by first briefly examining the triumph of neoconservatism, anti-intellectualism, anti-feminism, and hypermasculinity that typifies this period. While these same discourses were rising to prominence in the long 70s, they took on a new sense of dominance, an exceptional and often exaggerated sort of intensity in American culture during the 80s, which in turn necessitated the new, subtle shift in nerd performances suggested above. Then the chapter examines the particular trope of the nerd/jock binary, which not only embodies the aforementioned neoconservative identity politics, but also took on a pointed new meaning and new prominence during this fourth phase of the nerd stereotype with regards to white masculinity. Finally, this chapter investigates key cinematic representations of the nerd stereotype, focusing mainly on the failed white masculinity *and* white male entitlement depicted in the John Hughes movies *Sixteen Candles*, *Breakfast Club*, and *Weird Science*.[5]

The Dominance of Reagan Era Anti-Nerd Neoconservatism

As already suggested in previous chapters, the rise of neoconservatism (and the Religious Right) fostered the rise of the nerd stereotype. And so it should be no surprise

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[5] John Hughes had a profound effect on popular American youth culture, and his work, as a cultural phenomenon, not only reflected, but also helped establish, define, and disseminate our readings of "the nerd" not only in the 80s, but even to this day.

that the nerd stereotype flourishes in the right-wing "Reagan Revolution."[6] While much

can (and has) been said regarding this tumultuous and controversial period of American

history, I would like to briefly emphasize how the ascendance of anti-intellectualism,

anti-feminism, and hypermasculinity in the Reagan-infused, right-leaning culture of the

late 70s/80s worked to enable the cultural prominence of the nerd stereotype. While these

discourses have always been foundational to the nerd stereotype since the late 40s/50s,

their peculiar hegemonic dominance during this period bears further examination.

As I suggested in the introductory chapter, Hofstadter indicates three major

contributing factors to anti-intellectualism in American culture: anti-rationalism, anti-

elitism, and unreflexive instrumentalism.[7] With these factors in mind, three of the

"telltale warning signs" of a strong anti-intellectual sentiment in our culture, broadly

speaking, are religious fundamentalism/evangelicalism, political populism, and the

narrowly practical economics of ruthless capitalism. And as all three of these cultural

indicators were not only present, but rather pronounced in the Reagan years, it is not

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[6] There are many resources on the Reagan Revolution and 1980s culture—too many to list
comprehensively. Some of the most useful works on the 80s in general include Bob Batchelor and Scott
Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007); Gil Troy and Vincent Cannato, eds.,
Living in the Eighties (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How
Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The
Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991);
Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books,
1989); and David Sirota, *Back to our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live In Now—Our
Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011). For more on Reagan and
Reaganomics, see Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New
York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991); Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: and Other
Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Martin Anderson,
Revolution: The Reagan Legacy (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990); John Orman, *Comparing
Presidential Behavior: Carter, Reagan, and the Macho Presidential Style* (New York: Greenwood Press,
1987); Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan
Aftermath* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment*
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992); and Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, *America: What
Went Wrong?* (Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews and McMeel, 1992).
[7] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). Again, I
borrow much of this thinking and nomenclature from Daniel Rigney's work on Hofstadter. See Daniel
Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter," *Sociological Inquiry* 61, no. 4
(November 1991): 434-51.

surprising to find a strong current of anti-intellectualism dominating the culture. From the

Moral Majority's Reverend Jerry Falwell, to the populist appeals of President Reagan, to

the glorification of cutthroat capitalism on Wall Street, the indicators of rampant anti-

intellectualism are legion in the 80s.[8]

In the related venues of educational reform and trust in science, it again seemed to

that intelligence, for better or worse, was on the outs with Americans, continuing the

trend set in the long 70s and taking it to even new heights in the 80s.[9] In the Reagan

Administration's attempts to dismantle big government, education was one of the first to

be slashed: there were severe reductions in the funding of education, not to mention

attempts to get rid of the Department of Education all together.[10] The highly publicized *A

Nation at Risk* report was released in 1983 by the National Commission of Excellence in

Education, seemingly confirming America's declining educational standards and need for

increased graduation requirements.[11] As for the broad field of pure scientific inquiry, this

was rapidly replaced with the stridently utilitarian concerns of technology, and only the

sort of technology that prioritized the "practical" endeavors of the military and big

business. So while education lost funding throughout the 80s, defense spending increased

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[8] These "telltale warning signs" of a strong anti-intellectualism, I would argue, are also especially present as I write this work in 2017, the beginning of the Trump Era. For more on this topic, see the concluding chapter.

[9] Again, while anti-intellectualism is essentially omnipresent in American culture, there are rare, brief moments and contexts when certain forms of intelligence seem to be fostered—or in other words, where anti-intellectualism slightly loosens its grip on the American imagination. For example, as I argued for the second phase of the nerd stereotype, the late 50s through the mid-60s is one such period. And while more research is necessary, it seems as if a similar cultural phenomenon occurs roughly in the 2000s and 2010s.

[10] Deborah A. Verstegen and David L. Clark, "The Diminution in Federal Expenditures for Education during the Reagan Administration," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 70, no. 2 (October 1988): 134-8.

[11] Maris A. Vinovskis, *From* A Nation at Risk *to* No Child Left Behind*: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 14-7. The sad part about the *A Nation at Risk* report is how little was done to improve education upon its release. In fact, it was ironically often used politically to make the state of education even worse in the United States. This is a marked difference than how, say, in the late 50s and early 60s educational reform improved when Americans felt threatened by Soviet intelligence.

drastically, from $134 billion in 1980 to $253 billion in 1985, much of the funds going

towards military technology.[12] By the end of the 80s, a study by the National Science

Foundation revealed that American corporations had decreased their funding of research

and development by over half, prioritizing short-term gains and deprioritizing scientific

work,[13] and an unsettling report released in 1987 by the National Academy of

Engineering took the U.S. scientific and engineering communities to task for falling

behind.[14] A further reflection of this supposed decline in scientific work was the state of

the NASA program, which had shifted from scientific exploration to practical

militarization and weaponization under Reagan's watch.[15] There is perhaps no greater

indication in the 80s of both the disconnect with scientific understanding and the pressure

to make technology "practical" than the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as

"Star Wars." For years, Reagan and his administration fought adamantly for Star Wars,

despite much of the scientific community's concerns about its fantastical lack of

feasibility.[16]

    One of the greatest cultural indications of the pronounced anti-intellectualism of

the Reagan Era—one that even resonates with the politics of the McCarthy era—is the

supposed "Culture Wars" over the issues of multiculturalism in higher education.[17]

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[12] Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 8.

[13] Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 418.

[14] Ibid., 392. For more on the American public's perception that they were falling behind in science and education, also see pages 392-4. The sad irony here is that although everyone seemed to think education was in crisis and intellectual standards were lax, very little was actually done about it.

[15] H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 199; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 265.

[16] Ibid., 199-203. Franklin highlights useful works on SDI here, and in particular lists important sources on the arguments against SDI in footnote 5 on page 228. Essentially, the SDI was a proposed missile defense system that would somehow provide a "shield" to protect American from nuclear attack.

[17] For a brief review of the multiculturalism controversy in higher education during this period, see Mark Brilliant, "Intellectual Affirmative Action: How Multiculturalism Became Mandatory and Mainstream in

Tracing back to the Supreme Court's decision on *Bakke* in 1978, issues of affirmative

action for minority students as well as curricular changes to reflect multicultural values

became hot button issues in the 80s, as evidenced by cultural conservative William J.

Bennett's 1984 report *To Reclaim a Legacy: Report on the Humanities in Higher

Education*. But the most popular and strident tract on anti-intellectualism and the dangers

of multiculturalism was the highly conservative and problematic 1987 bestseller *The

Closing of the American Mind* by University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom. Bloom's

work seemingly opened up a growth industry in the late 80s/early 90s for attacks on

"liberal" professors, attacks that rendered intellectuals as supposedly dangerous,

subversive, and ironically anti-intellectual. In many ways, the titles of these attacks say it

all: Charles J. Sykes' *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (1988),

Peter Shaw's *The War Against the Intellect: Episodes in the Decline of Discourse* (1989),

Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*

(1990), Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*

(1991), and my personal favorite, Reagan insider Martin Anderson's *Impostors in the

Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our

Students of Their Future* (1992). As noted historian Lawrence W. Levine confirms, "this

jeremiad against the universities and the professoriat" was itself a staunchly anti-

intellectual enterprise, one in which "scholarship and the university [were] being assailed

as they have not been since the 1950s."[18] So in many ways, the subversive, fellow

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Higher Education," in *Living in the Eighties*, ed. Gil Troy and Vincent Cannato (New York: Oxford
University Press, 2009), 98-124.
[18] Lawrence W. Levine, "Clio, Canons, and Culture," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 3
(December 1993): 852, 850.

traveler egghead of the McCarthy Era was reconfigured as the nerdy liberal professor of the Reagan (and Bush) Era.

The pros and cons of multicultural education aside, much of what was driving this rather virulent neoconservative attack on higher education was anti-liberal, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic sentiment.[19] With regards to the rampant misogyny of the era, much of this stems from the anti-feminist backlash that began in the 70s, but grew aggressively to dominate the 80s. By the close of the 80s, neoconservatives and the Religious Right had succeeded in making both "liberal" and especially "feminist" into dirty words and vicious slurs.[20]

In her perceptive and influential *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi examines how the 80s saw

> a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. […] Just as Reaganism shifted political discourse far to the right and demonized liberalism, so the backlash convinced the public that women's "liberation" was the true contemporary American scourge—the source of an endless laundry list of personal, social, and economic problems.[21]

Charting a multitude of widespread examples of this misogynistic backlash, Faludi suggests that this particular instance of aggressive anti-feminism "first surfaced in the late '70s on the fringes, among the evangelical right. By the early '80s, the fundamentalist

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[19] Susan Faludi writes, for example: "Ostensibly about the decline in American education, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* dedicates page after page to an assault on the women's movement." (290) For more on misogyny in Bloom's work and the work of other pseudo-intellectuals, see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 281-332.
[20] The term "feminazi," popularized by neoconservative pundit Rush Limbaugh, stems from the late 80s. And note the shift in tone from using animated cartoon characters like Velma and Marcie (see chapter 5) to mock feminists, lesbians, and female nerds in the recesses of popular culture to the aggressive and highly publicized attacks on feminazis that dominate the late 80s and early 90s.
[21] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), xviii.

ideology had shouldered its way into the White House."[22] Importantly for the nerd

stereotype, Faludi also finds that "by the mid-'80s, as resistance to women's rights

acquired political and social acceptability, it passed into the popular culture."[23]

And while anti-feminist sentiments have long been present in American culture,

this new, aggressive, neoconservative brand of anti-feminism of the late 70s and 80s

certainly did pass into much of American popular culture, from the news media

constantly announcing the death of the Women's Movement and the supposed plight of

the single working woman to the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*.[24] As we shall see, the mid-

80s in particular represents an exceptionally important turning point for the nerd

stereotype in popular culture, primarily due the dominant culture's embrace of anti-

feminism.

It should be unsurprising, then, given this rise of extreme anti-feminist sentiment,

that the idealization of hypermasculinity would also be at an absurd apex in the 80s, as

these discourses are essentially two sides of the same coin. As women were forcefully

being browbeaten to get out of the male workplace and go back to being mothers and

housewives ("family values") in the 80s, men were reminded that extreme,

hypermasculine manhood was their obligation and their privilege. "But the manhood

regained under Presidents Reagan and Bush," notes Michael Kimmel, "was the

compulsive masculinity of the schoolyard bully, defeating weaker foes such as Grenada

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[22] Faludi, *Backlash*, xix.

[23] Ibid. Faludi also notes resistance to feminism was present from the onset in the late 60s and early 70s, but it took on a new sort of viciousness in the late 70s, hence her term "backlash." This turn towards reactionary aggression, I would argue, not only colors the misogyny of the late 70s and 80s, but also the anti-nerd sentiment and the nerd stereotype as well.

[24] The popular movie *Fatal Attraction* is infamous among film scholars as a prime example of the antifeminist backlash of the period. Featuring a homicidal single career woman as its villain, it is not hard to see why. See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 112-23.

and Panama, a defensive and restive manhood, of men who needed to demonstrate their masculinity at every opportunity."[25]

For many 80s American males, performing their masculinity became an extreme and anxious affair, even more so than in the 70s. This phenomenon may be best summed up by the rise of Robert Bly's mythopoetic men's movement, which sought to reconnect men with the "deep masculine" and prevent them from becoming sissies mainly through the exclusion of women. Bly's movement started to take off in the mid-80s, drawing bigger and bigger crowds all the way up to, and beyond, the publication of his book *Iron John* in 1990.[26] Interestingly, there is not only a strong emphasis on the hypermasculine in the mythopoetic men's movement, but also pronounced anti-feminist and anti-intellectual characteristics as well.[27]

Of course, this rush towards extreme hypermasculinity took many other forms in the popular culture of the 80s, as evidenced by the fantasy masculine role models for American men of the time. One major "ideal American man" figure for the 80s male was that of the cutthroat businessman, a white male yuppie that played Wall Street for kicks

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[25] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 211.

[26] For a few interesting resources on Bly and the mythopoetic men's movement, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 229-32; David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 169-76; Michael A. Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 16-24; and Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (And the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer)* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). For more of an insider's perspective, see Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) and Michael Schwalbe, *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[27] For more on the anti-feminist backlash inherent in the mythopoetic men's movement, see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 304-12. For more on anti-intellectualism in the movement, see Michael A. Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 21; Michael Schwalbe, "Mythopoetic Men's Work as a Search for Communitas," in *Men's Lives*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995), 507-19; and Michael Schwalbe, *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

(and insider trading). Inspired by real-life figures like Donald Trump and Lee Iacocca, films like *Wall Street* ("Greed is Good") in 1987 and *Working Girl* in 1988, and novels such as Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), these glorified images of macho men embodied not only capitalist power, but also masculine power—they even had power ties and power suits and power lunches to really drive the point home. Even after the stock market crash of 1987 and the criminal charges brought against junk-bond guru Michael Milken, the image of the manly cutthroat businessman continued (and continues) to thrive.

Another important, stereotypic (white) male image offered as an ideal for Americans was the impossibly brave super soldier. While this long-standing image of the manly warrior[28] lost much of its charm in the 70s—too soon after the Vietnam War, apparently—variants of this masculine figure returned in the highly militarized Reagan Era.[29] From *The A-Team* (1983-1987) to *Top Gun* (1986), or even the popular action figures from the *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* line from Hasbro (released in 1982), military masculinity never looked so fun and cool as it did in the 80s. An intriguing example of this brave super soldier archetype is also found in Tom Wolfe's novel *The Right Stuff* (1979), a portrayal that was further heightened—to much fanfare—in the book's 1983 film adaptation. While the astronauts in the movie are generally portrayed as heroic, it is really the character of Chuck Yeager (Sam Shepard) that is emphasized as

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[28] For the most part, manhood, manliness, and masculinity have relied on the image of the warrior/fighter/soldier for centuries, if not millennia. The point here is that the solider figure of masculinity lost some of its appeal in American culture during the Vietnam War, becoming a problematic figure in the 70s. After all, it took Hollywood until *Platoon* in 1986 to serve up the first popular American dramatic film about the Vietnam War that depicted military success and the soldier hero again. See Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 117-24.

[29] For more on this resurgence of military masculinity during this period, see Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

having the proverbial "Right Stuff," otherwise known as hypermasculinity.[30] Sadly, yet

tellingly, the NASA scientists and engineers of the film are made to look like

"intolerable" fools and jerks, a notable demotion in treatment compared to the "tolerable"

NASA nerd sidekicks of the 60s.[31]

These masculine images of the cutthroat businessman and the brave super soldier

highlight not only a sense of extremity to hypermasculinity in the 80s, but also a

characteristic violence, even a sadomasochistic aggression, along with strong streaks of

anti-intellectualism and misogyny as well. All of these very same qualities are also

echoed in perhaps the most popular and infamous masculine image of the 80s: that of the

muscle-bound action hero so popularized by American cinema, embodied by tough guy

actors like Steven Seagal, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bruce Willis, and perhaps the most

iconic real-life figures: Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. This particular

instantiation of the hypermasculine 80s "hard body" action hero deserves a bit more

attention, as it helps inform one of the most important antithetical relationships involving

the nerd stereotype: namely the nerd/jock binary.

Nerds vs. Jocks: Making the 80s Jock Triumphant

In many ways, the nerd/jock binary goes back much further into the past than the

time period under examination in this current project.[32] This is likely due to the

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[30] For more on masculinity and Sam Shepard's portrayal of Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, see David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 161-3.

[31] When asked for his reaction to the film, astronaut Walter Schirra was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying "They insulted the lovely people who talked us through the program—the NASA engineers. They made them like bumbling Germans." From Elisabeth Bumiller and Phil McCombs, "The Premiere: A Weekend Full of American Heroes and American Hype," *Washington Post*, October 17, 1983.

[32] I also mention the nerd/jock binary—or at least the stereotypical figure of the jock in relation to the stereotypical nerd—sporadically in previous chapters. After all, as will be addressed momentarily, nerds, jocks, and their supposedly antithetical natures did not suddenly appear out of nowhere during the late

longstanding mind/body binary in Western civilization. One might even go as far back to Socrates and Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*,[33] or perhaps, as Dyer ably suggests about the mind/body binary in *White*, to the rise and influence of Christianity during the medieval era and thereafter.[34] A bit more recently, in the 1800s, we also see this nerd/jock binary in various works such as Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (lanky schoolmaster Ichabod Crane/stunt rider Brom Bones) and Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown's School Days* (brainy George Arthur/athletic Tom Brown).[35] Even in previous chapters covering the decades before the 80s, we have seen jocks paired with nerds, such as Merlin Jones and Norman (see chapter 4).

Yet what is interesting is that more often than not, these mismatched pairs, these foils seemingly set in opposition to one another, are not always or inevitably pitted against each another. Sometimes, they are even friends. Or in the very least they are both rendered as foolish extremes, with "normality" situated somewhere between the two. The nerd stereotype and the jock stereotype, therefore, are two excessive sides of the same coin, more often than not working in tandem to ensure that a person (again, usually a white male) is not too effete and hyperintelligent, *nor* too coarse and hyperphysical; too

70s/80s. What I hope to emphasize is that the nerd/jock binary took on a particularly strong emphasis during this phase, as well as shifting in terms of its dynamic and, therefore, its representations.

[33] While we may never know if the Ancient Greek sophist Thrasymachus is really a jock or not himself (he was likely more of the intellectual persuasion), it is this contentious character from *The Republic* that famously suggests that justice is the advantage of the stronger, which Socrates then goes about refuting, suggesting that an intelligent, wise philosopher king would be better to rule and foster justice and the general good.

[34] Dyer's emphasis on the mind/body binary as a key facet of the embodiment of whiteness is especially interesting with regards to white masculinity, for he finds that searching for the impossible balance between the mind and the body is a key facet of white masculinity, and the conflict between the two is a source of much racial and gendered anxiety. See Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1-40.

[35] For more on *Tom Brown's School Days* and the nerd stereotype, see Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 33-5.

overcivilized *nor* too undercivilized. In short, the nerd and the jock are not inherently

antagonistic, nor have they always been consistently represented as such.[36]

For much of the nerd stereotype's early history, from the mid-40s up to the late

70s, nerds and jocks tended to receive similar debasing treatment and were both the

source of much humor. They also tended to be put together as friends. One such example

is the geeky Walter Denton (Dick Crenna) and the dim-witted athlete Stretch Snodgrass

(Leonard Smith) from *Our Miss Brooks* (on radio from 1948 to 1952, then television

from 1952-1956), who were represented as close buddies. Another example is found in

the second episode of the first season of *Mister Peepers* (1952-1955), "The Chess

Match," in which the nerdy science teacher Mister Peepers (Wally Cox) and the brawny

gym teacher Charlie Burr (David Tyrell) help each other out. Burr helps the scrawny

Peepers put on some muscle, and Peepers, acknowledging that they both "show marked

tendencies for being an extremist," advocates culture for Burr.[37] And returning to the

Archie Comics universe, nerdy Dilton Doiley is the best friend of the meathead jock,

Moose Mason. Even in the markedly anti-intellectual American culture of the 1950s, the

nerd and the jock were usually paired as friends.

Something different happened in the 80s. Rather than representing both the nerd

stereotype and the jock stereotype as two friendly extremes—with the supposedly normal

all-American male in the middle—the pendulum swung so far afield that the

hypermasculine muscle-bound jock became the idealized norm, the average all-American

became questionable in his manhood, and the nerd became the most extreme and

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[36] Of course, there are older representations that do play up this antagonism, such as the jock that stuffs nutty Professor Kelp up onto a shelf. That said, these representations are much less prevalent before the late 70s/80s.

[37] David Swift and Jim Fritzell, "The Chess Match," *Mister Peepers*, season 1, episode 2, directed by James Sheldon, aired July 17, 1952 (Sherman Oaks, CA: S'more Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

ridiculous of outliers. Building on the hypermasculine macho male heroes lauded in the late 70s, the even more extreme jock figure of the Reagan years took masculinity even further. So in many ways, the inimical nerd/jock binary that we think of today stems primarily from the late 70s and 80s, making the jock triumphant masculine ideal, and the nerd an even more extreme laughingstock.

This ascendance of the hypermasculine jock from demeaning stereotype to ideal male role model manifested itself in a variety of ways in American culture of the time, often simultaneously strengthening its connections with misogyny and anti-intellectualism. One example is the massive workout craze that dominated the 80s, which affected both men and women, albeit in slightly different ways. Women were generally encouraged to lose weight (and wear tight leotards) in order to take up less space—consider the popular cardio workout videos put out by Jane Fonda, or even Olivia Newton John's hit song "Physical."[38] Men, on the other hand, were especially encouraged to put on some serious muscle so they could really throw their weight around, "retreating to the gym to jog and to power lift in clubs outfitted with new Nautilus training equipment."[39] As such, men had not been so interested in working out—and more specifically, bodybuilding—since the turn of the century and the days of Teddy Roosevelt and Eugen Sandow. Much of this popularity for muscle stems from a 1977 documentary on bodybuilding, George Butler's film *Pumping Iron*, which also featured and helped launch the career of Arnold Schwarzenegger, that prominent model of

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[38] If any fitness guru best exemplified the association of aerobic workouts and effeminacy, it was probably *Sweating to the Oldies* figure Richard Simmons.
[39] Batchelor and Stoddart, *The 1980s*, 95.

manliness in the 1980s.[40] Between *Pumping Iron*, the rise of Ironman Triathlons, and the

launch of *Men's Health* magazine in 1987, sculpting the masculine body to reflect male

power became more than just a metaphor.[41]

Another cultural reflection of the jock stereotype's idealization in the 80s is the

rise of the sports mega-star, like Nike spokesperson Michael Jordan.[42] "The 1980s

broadened the sporting world's hold on the nation as technological innovations, such as

cable television, gave audiences more opportunities to see and hear their heroes," write

scholars Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart. "Television catapulted athletes to new heights

of wealth and fame, because they became national heroes easier by riding the two-headed

monster of cable television and advertising."[43] Turning athletes into celebrities was

especially lucrative for advertisers: less than 10 percent of all ads in the 60s featured

sports stars, whereas in the 1980s, that percentage more than doubled.[44] Strikingly, many

of these new sports celebrities in the 80s used their newfound soapboxes to advocate

Christianity, recapitulating much of the same racial and gender politics found in the

muscular Christianity movement from the turn of the century.[45] This "Jocks for Jesus"

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[40] For more on the figure of the bodybuilder and Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 80s, see Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993). By the late 80s, the figure of the bodybuilder was so popular that it was ripe for parody on *SNL* with the wacky duo Hanz and Franz (Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon, respectively), who promised to "pump… you up." See Michael Cader, ed., *Saturday Night Live: The First Twenty Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 1994), 220-3.
[41] For a bit more on the workout fad of the 80s, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 224-5; and Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 94-6.
[42] Much can also be said about the racial implications of the jock stereotype being so often represented by African American men.
[43] Batchelor and Stoddart, *The 1980s*, 89.
[44] Ibid., 90.
[45] Thriving around the late 1800s/early 1900s, muscular Christianity was an American masculine movement that developed out of Protestant churches, advocating physical education, exercise, and sports as a means to create an ideal sort of Christian masculinity. For more on muscular Christianity, see Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

phenomenon conflates a sort of evangelical, anti-rationalist anti-intellectualism with the jock stereotype.[46]

Bodybuilding fads and super-star athletes aside, this reification of hypermasculinity (and by extension the jock stereotype) is perhaps best exemplified in the muscle-bound "hard body" action hero of the 80s American cinema.[47] In *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Susan Jeffords examines such films as *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Robocop* (1987), and *Die Hard* (1988), arguing that these physically developed heroes with rippling muscles were defined by their hard bodies, and that this "hard body was, like Reagan's own, male and white."[48] No action hero best epitomizes this hard body figure, of course, than Sylvester Stallone's Rambo, who was the featured character in three movies that happen to cover the presidency of Ronald "Ronbo" Reagan: *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and *Rambo III* (1988).[49] In many ways, Stallone's Rambo takes the jock character Rocky from the 70s and pushes him—and his muscles—one step further. Rambo, so often conjoined with Reagan and the 80s, is for better or worse, rightly or wrongly, an iconic figure of the period, as well as the hypermasculine jock archetype.[50]

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[46] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 227. It should also be noted that along with the backlash against feminism and the rise of neoconservatism, there was also the rise of mass spectatorship of male-only team sports, which in the 70s and 80s became an especially powerful and politicized space for hypermasculinity. And of course, this "Jocks for Jesus" phenomenon is still with us today, as evidenced in the popularity of professional athlete Tim Tebow.

[47] It is worth noting that the athletic, hypermasculine jock stereotype is also glorified in popular sports films from the period, such as *The Natural* (1984), *Hoosiers* (1986), and perhaps most complicit in terms of masculine fantasy, *Field of Dreams* (1989).

[48] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 25.

[49] The nickname "Ronbo" arose for Reagan in response to the Rambo movies almost immediately, primarily used by his more liberal detractors, although it seems many Reagan acolytes also embraced the nickname.

[50] For more on the Rambo films and especially their relationship to masculinity, see Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 24-63; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge,

If one takes the second film, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, as an example of the

ascendancy of the character of Rambo in American culture—as well as exaggerated

machismo in general—one may also see certain defining characteristics of the

hyperphysical jock stereotype.[51] "In the first film it was unclear whether his body was

clean or dirty, lawful or unlawful, strong or weak," writes Jeffords, but "by 1985

Rambo's body-strength is indisputable. […] No longer the contemplative figure walking

through the woods at the opening of *First Blood*, Rambo's is now an even more active,

muscular, and hardened body."[52] And while the usually taciturn, mumbling Rambo states

that he "always believed the mind was the best weapon," he is most certainly represented

as a violent, physical, muscular, fighting machine.[53]

With Rambo as a potential epitome of the hypermasculine jock stereotype, it is

perhaps unsurprising to find traces of misogyny and anti-intellectualism in the film as

well. Take for example how notably absent women are from the movie: the one exception

being Co Bao (Julia Nickson), who is inevitably killed off. When she kisses Rambo, even

when she dies moments later in his arms, Rambo is rendered a model of stoic,

unemotional masculine strength—whereas Co Bao is rendered as merely expendable. No,

Rambo's full rage—and his trademark primal scream—is reserved instead for his true

nemesis in the film and, interestingly, his nemesis' beloved bank of computers. It is nerdy

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1993), 91-108; and David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 197-206.

[51] While a jock (more often than not associated with sports in some way) is not technically the same exact thing as an action hero, there is clearly a great amount of overlap. What is especially important here is that both emphasize the hyperphysical, the active male hard body. It is notably the visual representation or performance of that hard body that unites both figures. The more the visual spectacle emphasizes the big, beefy muscles on the jock/action hero, the more the emphasis on hypermasculinity and the hyperphysical, which with regards to binary oppositions, further denigrates the mental.

[52] Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 34.

[53] *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Blu-ray, directed by George P. Cosmatos (1985; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gates Films, 2010).

bureaucratic pencil pusher Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier)—who sports a black tie and keeps his glasses in a pocket protector in his chest pocket—who betrayed Rambo and the Vietnam POWs he was sent to save. And it is an extended sequence of Rambo shooting Murdock's computers that situates itself oddly as the climax of Rambo's journey throughout the movie, creating a sort of "identification," as Yvonne Tasker posits, which "returns us to populist themes, particularly in Rambo's ambiguous alignment with nature and against a technology that is defined as bureaucratic."[54] The film, then, juxtaposes Murdoch and Rambo, the former an amoral, weak-willed, bureaucratic, nerdy bad guy (a feminized soft body), and the latter the epitome of populist jock hero and tough guy machismo.

While the bodybuilding fad, the rise of super-star athletes, and hard body action heroes like Rambo indicate a certain valorization of the jock stereotype, the flipside to this reification of hypermasculinity is the demonization of that which is effeminate in the white male soft body—essentially encapsulating the nerd/jock binary. This, too, manifested itself in a multitude of ways in American culture in the 80s: from the homophobia that accompanied the AIDS scare of the period, to the incessant use of the offensive slander "fag" that permeated the culture.[55] In many ways, this general phenomenon is also reflected in the "great wimp hunt" that arose during the 80s, a phenomenon that included and fostered the proliferation of the nerd stereotype.

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[54] Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 105.

[55] For more on the use of the abundant use of the slander "fag" or "faggot" in cinema in the 80s, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, revised ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). For more on the use of the epithet in youth culture and American schools (albeit well after the 80s,) see C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). And for the conjunction of "fag" and "nerd," see David Anderegg, *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2001).

As Michael Kimmel asserts, with the hypermasculine culture of this period, "we sought out negative models to attack. The wimp, for example, emerged in the early 1980s. A virtual Great American Wimp Hunt repudiated the 'new man' of the 1970s."[56] In short, the term "wimp" (along with "fag") became the epithet *du jour* of the 80s by which to insult a man's lack of masculinity, recapitulating much of the same gender and sexual politics that the term "sissy" embodied in the 50s.

In a piece that Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in 1985 entitled "Wimps," she observes that "it used to be that the worst you could say about a man was that he was a brute, a Neanderthal, and possibly out of touch with his feelings. Then, with the swiftness of cultural change in the microchip age, disapproval shifted to the man who appeared to be too sensitive, soft, and accommodating to the interests of others."[57] In other words, the jock stereotype had triumphed. Noting that the term "wimp" "leaped from obscurity to become the ultimate term of masculine derogation," Ehrenreich also states, "the 1984 presidential race coincided with a peak of antiwimp hysteria."[58] She goes on to posit the following explanation:

> All that is happening is that our collective values are shifting away from the liberal, unisex ideals of the seventies toward something more belligerent. The national wimp hunt, I have concluded, is an attempt to press men into line for the postdetente militarism of the eighties—just as the Salem witch hunt was, among other things, a powerful object lesson in why girls should be good.[59]

The shift towards valorizing the macho tough guy at the expense of the wimp permeated throughout American popular culture. A vivid (if somewhat silly) example is the impact of a short, jokey satire published in 1982 entitled *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*

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[56] Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 212.
[57] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 138.
[58] Ibid., 138, 139.
[59] Ibid., 139.

by Bruce Feirstein, which became an overnight bestseller.[60] Although Feirstein pokes fun

at jocks and wimps alike, the title alone was enough to foster more "antiwimp backlash,"

as Ehrenreich puts it.[61] During the 1984 presidential elections, bumper stickers with

"Mondale Eats Quiche" made it clear that the macho President Reagan deserved a second

term over his wimpy rival. This sort of antiwimp sentiment dominated the decade and

extended well into the 90s, reaching a fever pitch especially during the four years George

Bush Sr. was in office, where even he constantly and anxiously struggled against what

the news media called "the wimp factor."[62]

Needless to say, the wimp and the nerd were practically synonymous, both

conflating liberal white males with profeminist leanings and "sensitive" characteristics

with unmasculine losers like Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis.[63] The winners of the

80s were tough guys, maverick cowboys, hard-bodied heroes like Reagan and Rambo,

and athletes-turned-superstars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jordan.[64] And

much of these representations of masculinity hinged on a highly reductive mind/body

opposition best understood in the 80s as the nerd/jock binary. And jock masculinity, in

Reagan's America, was king.

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[60] For more on *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 214; and Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 86-7.

[61] Ehrenreich, *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, 141.

[62] For more on the antiwimp backlash of the period, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 211-217; and Stephan J. Ducat *The Wimp Factor: Gender Gaps, Holy Wars, and the Politics of Anxious Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

[63] Mondale was the Democratic candidate who lost the presidential election to Ronald Reagan in 1984, and Dukakis lost his Democratic bid for presidency to George H. W. Bush in the 1988 election. Both Mondale and Dukakis were vividly portrayed as unmasculine liberal wimps by their Republican opposition.

[64] It may seem odd that Reagan, who was rather old during his presidency, embodied a hard body masculinity. Yet, as Susan Jeffords attests, "In Reagan's self-promoted image—chopping wood at his ranch, riding horses, standing tall at the presidential podium—his was one of these hard bodies, a body not subject to disease, fatigue, or aging." (25) If anything, the fact that he was shot by John Hinckley Jr. in 1981 and survived seemed to confirm for the American public that Reagan was indeed a tough guy. See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 25.

The triumphant jock stereotype also permeated the youth culture of the 80s, where the jock, along with the preppie, hit the top of the youth style hierarchy.[65] The classic, stereotypic image of the high school-age, football-playing beefy athlete—often rendered a comedic figure much like the nerd stereotype in previous decades (see Donna's son Jeff from *The Donna Reed Show*, or the numskull Norman from *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*) was now often placed at the top of the teenage food chain.

Take the film *Lucas* (1986) as a brief example. *Lucas* focuses on the nerd stereotype as well as the jock stereotype. The movie primarily follows the eponymous nerd of the film who is highly intelligent, enjoys observing insects, and likes classical music. Lucas (Corey Haim) meets the new girl Maggie (Kerri Green) over the summer, and they become friends. However, once school is back in session, Maggie ends up becoming a cheerleader and falling for the chivalrous football player Cappie (Charlie Sheen) much to Lucas' dismay and disappointment. In a foolish attempt to win Maggie's affection, Lucas joins the football team, and in the process, gets seriously injured. In the end, he neither wins the big game nor the love of Maggie, but the denouement (and the final 80s-style "freeze frame") of the film gives a nod to his plucky determination.

What is interesting about *Lucas* is despite the fact that it is, as Timothy Shary accurately writes, "the most earnest nerd depiction of the '80s" and "unique among nerd

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[65] It is worth pointing out that during the 80s, most of the dominant youth styles seemingly embraced a highly anti-intellectual facet to their construction, the jock, of course prominent among them. Two other 80s youth styles that took a similar tack are the "valley girl" and the "metal head." The valley girl was essentially an 80s consumer culture recapitulation of the blonde bimbo stereotype, perhaps best parodied later in the 1995 film *Clueless*. The metal head, in seeming juxtaposition to the popular jocks, preps, and valley girls, was a self-styled rebel who escaped into the Heavy Metal music popularized on MTV. One of the most enduring parodies of the metal head youth style is perhaps the 1989 film *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. What unites both of these youth styles, however—as both *Clueless* and *Bill and Ted's* make abundantly clear—is how both promote a lack of brains as being an asset, how being vapid made you cool. Whether considering the jock, the valley girl, or the metal head, it is clear that stupidity was the new sexy in the 80s, a further reflection of the anti-intellectualism that was rampant during the period. For more on the valley girl and the metal head (as well as the preppie), see Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 31-4.

films," it still exploits much of the same tropes of the nerd stereotype despite its best efforts.[66] Much of the film centers upon the many public humiliations Lucas endures, such as when he is carried onto the stage at a pep rally by a football player, gets ditched before the school dance, or gets hazed by the football players in the locker room. While this garners much sympathy for Lucas, he is also often depicted as bringing much of it upon himself. In true nerd stereotype fashion, Lucas does not end up with Maggie, either. And even though there are many suggestive hints that another outcast, Rina (Winona Ryder) is interested in him, he remains oblivious to this throughout the movie, reinforcing that he is a failure at romantic relationships. In short, Lucas consistently fails at all he attempts in the film; his one redeeming characteristic is his plucky perseverance, which earns him a varsity jacket from the very "noble" football jock bullies that had harassed him.

As for the football jocks themselves, there are those like Bruno (Thomas E. Hodges) who encapsulate the usual traits of the jock/bully stereotype. But Bruno is prominent among those who give Lucas the varsity jacket at the end, indicating a change of heart. And Bruno also gets as much as he gives. For example, in the locker shower scene, Bruno mocks Lucas' penis size. In return, Lucas cites "a study done by the University of Illinois" that suggests "you can tell the fags in a warm shower by who's got the longest dong," implying that Bruno is a "fag."[67] Even Lucas is not above using homophobic slanders, it seems, and this seemingly justifies the brutal comeuppance he

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[66] Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema Since 1980*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 40.
[67] *Lucas*, Blu-ray, directed by David Seltzer (1986; Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2013).

receives from Bruno and his teammates. Later, when the mean-spirited football coach calls Lucas a piss-ant, Lucas retorts in kind by calling him a "dumb fucking jock."[68]

But it is actually Cappie, the popular handsome jock footballer, who epitomizes the jock ideal. Not a bully like Bruno, he sticks up for Lucas throughout the film. He is the one who ends up with Maggie and, more than Lucas, is portrayed as the true hero of the movie. He is both tough and chivalrous throughout, not to mention just the right measure of sensitive (the right measure being just enough to attract women). Case in point: Maggie is so impressed that Cappie got teary when he and his old girlfriend Alise (Courtney Thorne-Smith) broke up. In short, Cappie the jock is the real masculine ideal of the movie, and Lucas is left to bide his time with his jacket consolation prize.

In a pivotal scene where Maggie confronts Lucas about his frustrated feelings for her, Lucas has a sort of sad epiphany, where he finally confronts the fact that he is a nerd loser. When she asks him if he has been crying, he satirically admits "Yeah, so what? I mean, wimps do that. Didn't you know? Just like big strong guys."[69] It is the first time he admits that he is a wimp, an admission instigated by Maggie's rejection of his affections. When Maggie states that they are just friends, and that she cannot help who she loves, she asks Lucas why love works that way: "You know about science, do you know why?"[70] This prompts Lucas to admit to her as much to himself that yes, he does know, citing Darwin's theory of natural selection, resignedly confirming that "the males who demonstrate physical prowess are the most attractive to the females."[71] Accepting that jocks like Cappie are destined to win the girl, and wimps like himself are doomed to

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[68] *Lucas*.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

failure, Lucas himself highlights, if nothing else, that jocks will always take the day, whereas physically frail nerds like himself will simply have to accept this as fact.

In many ways, *Lucas* is like so many of the other films that depict major nerd characters throughout the 80s, not only by rendering Lucas a heteronormative and masculine failure, but namely by pitting him in an adversarial relationship with the jock characters. Furthermore, unlike previous nerd/jock pairings from earlier performances that tended to portray both stereotypes as extreme and ridiculous, the jock is now more often a hero at the nerd's expense. It is namely the jock Cappie who is depicted as a proper model of masculinity worthy of praise and emulation, whereas the nerdy Lucas, at best, deserves only pity.

Perhaps if Lucas would have succeeded at becoming a jock—maybe by winning the football game and becoming a manly hero—than the film might have had a more traditional happy ending. This would have likely made the film more popular at the box office as well. After all, contrast *Lucas* with the highly popular film *The Karate Kid* (1984), where the reformed wimp Daniel (Ralph Macchio) achieves athletic glory by defeating the bully at his karate match, triumphantly winning the tournament and becoming a jock himself. The American public of the 80s loved an underdog story— especially if that underdog was able to transform into a masculine jock winner. A nerdy loser like Lucas, however, was hard for Americans to take too seriously as a protagonist, let alone root for and identify with.

If jocks were the ideal of American manhood, the heroes of 80s cinema, then the nerds were the comic relief, emasculated wimps to be laughed at, beat up, or at best, pitied. While in a general sense this recapitulates stereotypical nerd performances from

the previous phases of the nerd stereotype, exemplifying its heteronormative dynamic, it is worth pointing out that, in the 80s, the performances of these nerds take on a much more derisive tone. In other words, they are emasculated sexual failures, sure, but unlike Professor Kelp from *The Nutty Professor* or Alvy Singer from *Annie Hall*, 80s nerds tend to be more ridiculed, more debased, more stridently humiliated sexually. As such, 80s nerd characters tended to thrive not in dramas, but in wacky comedies, comedies that gave a particularly strong emphasis to the failure of white male teen sexuality.[72] For the most famous—and outrageous—performances of the nerd stereotype in the 80s, it is primarily the over-the-top teen sex comedies to which the American imaginary turned.

John Hughes, Anthony Michael Hall, and the 80s Nerd Stereotype

As stated previously, the nerd stereotype reached a certain zenith of popularity between 1978 and 1989, most especially during the pronounced "antiwimp backlash" of the mid-80s, depicting the nerd primarily as the ultimate white male wimp, the essential masculine failure. More often than not these representations were geared toward youth culture, dominating the medium of American cinema in particular. Nerds were to be found everywhere in youth cinema; a few prominent examples include Sherman (Raphael Sbarge) in *My Science Project* (1985), Kent (Robert Prescott) in *Real Genius* (1985), and Marty McFly's shamefully nerdy father George (Crispin Glover) in *Back to the Future* (1985). Notably, these three examples were not only all released in the same year, they also portrayed nerds in a particularly negative light. Accordingly, nerds also popped up in that other major 80s teen genre: the teen horror film, most prominently in films like Eric

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[72] As Timothy Shary suggests in the quote above, the overly earnest film *Lucas* is an anomaly in this respect. Lucas stands out as one of the very few somewhat sympathetic portrayals of a nerd character— more often than not, 80s nerd performances were to be ferociously mocked.

Weston's *Evilspeak* (1981) and Robert Englund's *976-EVIL* (1988), both of which, as

Kevin L. Ferguson suggests, integrated "technophobia and Satanic ritual," depicting

techno-savvy nerds as truly, demonically evil.[73] Movie genres aside, certain actors also

started to become associated with playing nerdy characters. Actor Rick Moranis played a

number of iconic nerds in the 80s, including Louis Tully in *Ghostbusters* (1984),

Seymour Krelborn in the movie musical adaptation *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), and

Wayne Szalinski in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (1989). Needless to say, none of these

performances of the nerd stereotype are especially flattering. Taken all together, we can

say that the nerd in performance suffered from some of the worst treatment during the

fourth phase of the nerd stereotype.

Of the many intriguing depictions of the white male nerd stereotype in the mid-

80s, a few of the most emblematic will now be considered in more detail, mainly because

they achieved a certain staying power, a special pop culture resonance that made their

nerds, for better or worse, iconic in the American imagination.[74] Furthermore, these nerd

performances also embody the most important characteristics of the specifically Reagan

Era nerd, namely that they are white male teens who curiously embody white male

entitlement while also suffering from a rather vicious sort of humiliating sexual

emasculation. This chapter will therefore conclude by examining the highly iconic nerd

roles made famous by a young Anthony Michael Hall in *Sixteen Candles* (1984),

Breakfast Club (1985), and *Weird Science* (1985). After all, if any batch of movies may

be considered quintessentially 80s, the teen movies associated with director John Hughes

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[73] Kier-La Janisse and Paul Corupe, eds., *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s* (Godalming, Surrey: FAB Press, 2016), 97. For more on both of these intriguing horror films, see pages 97-124.
[74] For an extremely useful overview of nerd characters in teen movies from the 80s forward, see Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980*, revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas, 2002), 36-50.

would likely merit that distinction. Often praised for their depth of understanding of the "real" American teenager, the films of John Hughes would continue to resonate for years to come, remaining cult classics to this day. Interestingly, each of the three aforementioned films contains a prominent, stereotypical nerd character played by actor Anthony Michael Hall. Hall's characters, like all of the teens that populate the Hughes universe, as Catherine Driscoll rightly observes, are mostly "white, suburban, and normatively middle-class."[75] In many ways, the white male middle-class nerds represented in the Hughes films—more than any other films of the 80s—would go on to solidify the image of the stereotypical nerd as "definitively" young, white, male, and (mostly) middle-class.[76]

The film *Sixteen Candles* follows the trials and tribulations of moody teen Samantha a.k.a Sam (Molly Ringwald), who grapples with a kooky family that has overlooked her sixteenth birthday, her older sister's nutty wedding, and, of course, serious boy troubles. Most of the movie follows Sam's crush on the popular and preppie Jake Ryan (Michael Schoeffling), who is very much painted to be the hunky impossible dream out of Sam's reach, already dating prom queen beauty Caroline (Haviland Morris). Jake is another example of the supposedly ideal 80s hypermasculine jock/prep stud that women should idolize and men should strive to become. It is no accident that his first major scene is one of him working out in the gym, chatting with one of his jock buddies.

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[75] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 46.
[76] It is interesting to note in terms of class that the early 80s nerd was just as often represented as poor and working class—like the nerdy Lucas from the self-titled film that lives in a trailer park—as middle class or upper class. But by the late 80s/early 90s, when the image of the super-rich computer entrepreneur (Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, etc.) dominated the culture, the nerd stereotype became almost exclusively—like in most of the Hughes movies—middle or upper middle class. With regards to class, the nerd stereotype to this day still seems to vacillate between these two poles: the jobless, penniless nerd who lives in his mother's basement, and the super-rich computer entrepreneur.

But Sam must also contend with another young man vying for her affections, a nerdy freshman prominently billed in the opening credits not by his name but as "The Geek" (his name is actually Ted, also called Farmer Ted in the movie) played by Hall.[77] The diminutive Geek is, of course, the foil of the attractive and manly Jake (see Figure 8 in the Appendix). We first meet the Geek on the bus, which much to Sam's disgust is populated with freaks, nerds, and weirdoes of all off-putting shapes and sizes. The Geek (who sports braces and a prepubescent squeaky voice) makes a very un-slick pass at Sam, which includes sniffing her. This prompts her to call him both a "wimp" and a "fag" before getting off the bus.[78] Yet like most stereotypical nerds, the Geek remains undeterred in his foolhardy quest to get the girl.

The next major scene with the Geek is at the school dance, where we see him in a line-up of undesirable wallflowers, including his two extra nerdy compatriots Bryce (John Cusack) and "Wheeze"/Cliff (Darren Harris), both of whom sport geeky tech like walkie-talkie headsets and night vision goggles. He boasts to his friends that he will "interface" with Samantha before the night is through, and then proceeds to dance like a maniac in front of her, comically demonstrating his lack of physical prowess and cool.[79] After returning downtrodden to his bemused nerd pals, the Geek bets his friend "a dozen floppy discs" that he will provide them with proof of his sexual success with Sam: her underwear.[80] Although his friends imply a failed sort of homosexuality by pointedly specifying that he must return with "*girl's* underpants."[81]

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[77] *Sixteen Candles*, DVD, directed by John Hughes (1984; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

This sort of constant sexual humiliation persists for the Geek throughout the dance (including a moment where he cowardly freaks out when Jake addresses him, afraid that Jake might beat him up), and even in the semi-humanizing garage scene he demonstrates time and time again his klutzy ineptitude. The deep dark secret he reveals to Sam in the garage is that he's "never bagged a babe."[82] She laughs of course: his nerd virginity is more than assumed. After forging a brief friendly alliance in this scene, Sam confesses her crush on Jake, and the Geek provides information and support to aid Sam in her romantic endeavors. In exchange, she reluctantly gives him her underwear, which he later proudly shows off to a bathroom full of geeky boys.

Later, the Geek and his two socially awkward pals, Bryce and Cliff, crash the party at Jake's house. Again and again, multiple nerd humiliations occur for all three. But an interesting scene occurs after the rowdy house party, where the Geek and Jake bond in an odd sort of way—although this bonding does more to highlight Jake as an ideal guy for even talking to the Geek more than any attempt to normalize the nerdiness of the Geek. Trying to play it cool again, making martinis in an apron and chatting about what women want, the Geek reveals Sam's interest to Jake. When Jake questions whether or not he is telling the truth, the Geek logically says "Jake, would I dick you? Let me put it to you this way. What happens to me if I dick you?"[83] To which Jake replies, "I'd kick your ass." "Right. So why would I lie?"[84] So in exchange for this juicy information about Sam, Jake lets the Geek take his dad's Rolls Royce and drive his passed out, uptight hottie girlfriend home.

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[82] *Sixteen Candles*.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

After some flirtatious antics on the highway with Caroline, the Geek stops over to visit his buddies Bryce and Cliff (who, apart from still sporting geeky tech headgear, are apparently having a "sleep over" together) to show off his good fortune and enlist their assistance in documenting that he has "bagged a babe." After squabbling about how many "tits" an extraterrestrial female has, Bryce and Cliff grab a camera to take a picture of the Geek with his sexy new car and sexy new prom queen.[85] And even though Caroline has passed out drunk (and the picture does not turn out), it is still evident this entire escapade is the ultimate fantasy for the Geek.

The next day, the Geek and Caroline wake up in the scuffed-up Rolls in a parking lot—with the Geek wearing his headgear, no less. Appearances lead them to believe that they had sex, although neither really remembers it well—although, funnily enough, Caroline seems to remember enjoying it. She even admits to liking the feeling of waking up in the Geek's arms, and then they kiss. It seems that the Geek actually "bagged a babe" after all (see Figure 8 in the Appendix). Then in quick succession, this leads to Caroline and Jake separating, which in turn leads to Jake surprising Samantha at the end of the movie, a true romantic happy ending.

In many ways, Hall's portrayal of the Geek is so earnest and well acted that it is almost impossible not to be bemused and charmed by the character. Still, so much of the nerd stereotype remains, no matter how well the Hughes film tries to humanize and complicate the Geek. He is the quintessential horny nerd ridiculously lusting for the woman beyond his reach, and most of the humor of the film is at his expense—or at the expense of his even nerdier friends, Bryce and Cliff. Yes, he does end up losing his virginity and "bagging" the prom queen, but this sort of wacky twist is the essence of

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[85] *Sixteen Candles*.

comedy and the impossibility of farce. Not only does its comic extremity offset the implausibility of the Jake/Sam relationship, it also inadvertently serves to reinforce the most patriarchal aspects of the nerd stereotype: implying masculinity as achieved through sexual conquest, reinforcing the strict rule of compulsory heteronormativity. Thus we have the rather disturbing trope so popular with the nerd stereotype of this period: the white male nerd doffing his nerdiness to become "normal," either through athletic prowess (as Lucas attempts) or sexual prowess. Toss in a few glancing references to technology and computers, and the Geek—as well as Bryce and Cliff—are prime examples of the mid-80s nerd stereotype.[86]

The next major nerdy character that Anthony Michael Hall plays for John Hughes is Brian in *The Breakfast Club*, which in a fascinating and extremely rare way actually somewhat subverts the trope of the nerd desperately trying to become cool via sex or sports. Roz Kaveney, for example, writes that "Brian is at once the least unlikable and the most pathetic" of the Breakfast Club crew of five students in detention, a more "sympathetic" nerd character than in *Sixteen Candles* or *Weird Science*.[87] He is, in the very least, not as ridiculous as the Geek, or the butt of as many jokes. However, given that the film attempts to challenge teen stereotypes and cliques and to redeem all five of the students—"a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal"—a slightly less offensive approach to Brian's character is essentially mandatory.[88] This somewhat more sympathetic portrayal of all of the characters, including the film's nerd character,

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[86] For more on *Sixteen Candles*, see Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from* Heathers *to* Veronica Mars (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 23-7; and Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 48.

[87] Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from* Heathers *to* Veronica Mars (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 16.

[88] *The Breakfast Club*, DVD, directed by John Hughes (1985; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2015).

may well explain part of *The Breakfast Club's* staying power in the American popular imagination.

That said, just by establishing the stereotypes in order to challenge them, the stereotypes are still there and functioning throughout the film. Andrew (Emilio Estevez), for example, plays the jock of the crew, a member of Shermer High School's wrestling team, often depicted with his varsity jacket.[89] He is in detention for bullying another boy, one that Brian knows, apparently. But this jock bully is made sympathetic: he manifests some sincere regret for his violent actions, even though the blame for them shifts to his father. As Kaveney posits, "bullying is part of his social role which he feels obliged to live up to."[90]

Brian ("the brain") remains very much a nerd stereotype as well in many ways. He is an anxious, GPA-obsessed sort of nerd, one who is in the Math Club and the Latin Club and the Physics Club. He is called a "dork," "a parent's wet dream," and oddly "a neo-maxi-zoon-dweebie" by the juvenile delinquent Bender (Judd Nelson), not to mention a "peewee" by the bullying adult figure meant to preside over their detention, vice principal Vernon (Paul Gleason).[91] Brian also confesses to being a virgin, which seems very much like a curse in 80s youth culture, as further evidenced when the rich princess Claire (Molly Ringwald) also reluctantly admits her virginity.[92] Brian's big emotional reveal near the end of the film is that he is in detention for having a flare gun

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[89] In many ways, the varsity jacket is to the jock stereotype what the horn-rimmed glasses is to the nerd stereotype.

[90] Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 15.

[91] *The Breakfast Club*.

[92] It is interesting to point out that in this moment, Brian makes reference to a clearly imaginary girlfriend from Canada, which he recapitulates again in *Weird Science*. This odd little trope of a nerdy guy having a made-up Canadian girlfriend actually pops up again and again in pop culture, like in the musical *Avenue Q* (transferred to Broadway in 2003) which has a song "My Girlfriend, Who Lives in Canada," sung by the nerdy, closeted gay character Rod. Yet again, note the conflation of the nerdy and the gay.

in his locker—a gun he was contemplating using to commit suicide. It seems that Brian is failing shop class (a non-academic sort of class in the usual sense, thus his failure), and the "F" would ruin his GPA. The constant pressure to succeed in academics—especially foisted upon him by his parents—pushed him to the brink of desperation. After all, no one would actually enjoy learning or want to excel at school unless they were forced to do so.

During all of these poignant and emotional admissions at the climax of the film, all of the five teens seem to bond, or at least reach a mutual understanding and appreciation for one another. But it is Claire who reminds them of the stark reality of the high school food chain, most especially that jocks like Andy and nerds like Brian are not meant to mix: "Oh, be honest, Andy. If Brian came walking up to you in the hall on Monday, what would you do? I mean, picture this. You're there with all the sports. I know exactly what you'd do. You'd say hi to him, and when he left you'd cut him all up so your friends wouldn't think you really liked him."[93]

A final interesting moment in the film worthy of mention is that, rather abruptly, the other four characters pair off romantically, leaving Brian alone to write their detention essay. As each of the new pairs kiss, he kisses the rebellious essay paper that he has written on the group's behalf. This moment is rather ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations. Is this an act of pride and personal defiance on Brian's part? A moment where the group collectively trusts him to voice their deepest concerns to the establishment? A rare moment when a nerd is not seen lusting after a girl nor failing to succeed romantically? Or might it be something less idealistic: a moment where other students dump their work on the studious nerd? A moment where everyone but the nerd

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[93] *The Breakfast Club.*

succeeds romantically? A moment where the nerd takes more pleasure in doing his homework rather than pursing a relationship (after all, he does not even get this option in the film's narrative, like the others)? Regardless of how one reads this aspect of the film's ending, it is clear that the various tropes of the nerd stereotype are inescapable.[94]

If *The Breakfast Club* represented at least a partial attempt at subverting the nerd stereotype and making the nerd a more complex, three-dimensional character, the film *Weird Science* reverts back to many of the more outrageous and grossly stereotypical nerd representations found in *Sixteen Candles*. In this movie, two nerd friends, Gary (Hall again) and Wyatt (Ilan Mitchell-Smith), like most stereotypical nerds, are lost in a masculine fantasy and lust after beautiful, unattainable women. Even when Wyatt points out "Nobody likes us. Nobody," Gary replies with "Why are you messing with the fantasy? We know about the reality. Don't ruin the fantasy, okay?"[95] These two hapless nerds dream of throwing parties, being cool, and most importantly, as the Geek from *Sixteen Candles* might say, bagging babes. The desperation of the nerd to get laid, which was the secondary plot of *Sixteen Candles*, takes full stage with *Weird Science*. In fact, scholars Steinberg and Kincheloe aver that, while "the need for high-quality sexual performance is a subject of discussion in all youth films," *Weird Science* is "probably the most blatant example of the obsession with sex."[96]

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[94] For more on *The Breakfast Club*, particularly the character of Brian, see Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from* Heathers *to* Veronica Mars (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 11-23; Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 49-51; Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980*, revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas, 2002), 39-40; and Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 68-71.

[95] *Weird Science*, DVD, directed by John Hughes (1985; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).

[96] Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, "Privileged and Getting Away With It: The Cultural Studies of White, Middle-Class Youth," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 112.

However, while Gary and Wyatt's white masculinity somehow entitles them to obsess over sexual escapades and objectify women, their failure to actually engage in sexual escapades—and hence their status as nerds—insists upon their emasculating humiliation. At the very beginning of the film, for example, their two tyrannical classmates Ian (Robert Downey Jr., billed just as Robert Downey) and Max (Robert Rusler) pull down the nerds' pants in front of a gym full of girls.

To reverse their fortunes, the nerds derive a fantastical plan: use Wyatt's computer to create the perfect woman. When lightning strikes *à la* Frankenstein, it seems their impossible wishes have come true: Lisa (Kelly LeBrock) magically appears, who Kaveney aptly describes as "Mary Poppins as a centrefold model."[97] Interestingly, the use of computers here is less about the weird pseudo-science of the film's title—science has very little to do with this movie, whereas magical fantasy does: Lisa is more a gorgeous wish-granting genie than a cyborg. The computer is really a quick plot device to get things started. That said, it does serve as another clear indication that certainly by the mid-80s, the connection between nerds and computers was assumed as a given.[98]

An even more important assumption in the world of *Weird Science* is that Gary and Wyatt are wimpy sexual novices that need serious help growing up into men. And significantly, just as in *Sixteen Candles*, a beautiful woman is clearly the key to masculinity; and again, much of the humor based on this premise relies on the extreme implausibility of a beautiful woman like Lisa ever getting together with a nerd.

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[97] Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 27.
[98] In fact, as Wyatt is the one with the computer and as he clearly comes from an upper-middle class family, it is also safe to say that the film also reflects the association between computers and higher class status. In contrast, Gary's father is a plumber, and the brief moments in his home shows it to be a staunchly working class background for Gary. It is nice, however, to see two close nerd friends from different sides of the tracks, as it were.

This coming-of-age story is really another story of nerd transformation: If the nerdy white boy could just somehow doff his nerdiness, he will become a real man. And again, sex with a beautiful woman is the key to this masculine transformation. However, *Weird Science* does go a bit deeper than *Sixteen Candles* in this regard. The Geek's story arc ends with his preposterous sexual conquest as a big punchline, whereas Gary and Wyatt's journey actually begins there. Lisa is their sex object from the beginning, even if they do not know what to do with her at first (case in point: the shower scene, which finds them dumbstruck and drenched, still wearing pants with the naked Lisa). Lisa takes them on a longer and more complex journey, one in which she primarily teaches them to loosen up and gain self-confidence. For example, she helps Gary stand up to his parents, and she even magically fabricates a biker gang to threaten their house party so the boys will have to learn how to stand up to bullies like "real men." Lisa even helps them find real girlfriends by the end of the film. Interestingly, these actualized young men, by the movie's conclusion, have also shed themselves of all the markers of their previous nerd status.

So on one hand, Lisa's teaching Gary and Wyatt confidence and how to let loose is a rather ennobling endeavor; on the other hand, they also must shed their nerd personas through masculine acts to become more "normal," acts that include tough guy postures, waving around guns, driving flashy cars, throwing crazy parties, and having pretty girlfriends. Take the climactic scene when the boys finally "man up" and face off against the Mad Max-esque biker punks that crashed their party. It is only when (in true heroic masculine fantasy fashion) the bikers threaten their two yet-to-be-girlfriends that they finally get tough. They call the bikers "bitch" and "faggot," talk serious wise-cracking

shit, threaten violence, and even whip out a revolver like Dirty Harry—although Gary

initially thought it was only a squirt gun.[99] In short, Lisa magically reforms these two

nerdy boys so they can move beyond the humiliation of their emasculated, wimpy past

and assume their birthright of white masculine privilege.

As a final observation, it is worth noting that the most comic character in the film

is the hypermasuline Chet (Bill Paxton), Wyatt's older brother. Very much like the

macho, violent jock/hardy body action hero stereotype, Chet is the primary bully of the

film. He went to military school, it seems, to learn how to be a bully, and at one point he

returns home wearing hunting gear and sporting a rifle and a massive dead bird. The

juxtaposition between the hypermasculine Chet and the feminized Gary and Wyatt is

especially pronounced when Chet finds his younger brother wearing Lisa's panties in the

kitchen. But unlike jocks Cappie, Jake, or Andy from the previous films, Chet is not

represented as a masculine ideal—he gets the most climactic comeuppance in the film

when Lisa turns him into a hideous, frog-like poop monster. So in this sense, *Weird*

Science both perpetuates the nerd/jock binary, yet also makes the jock less appealing of a

masculine archetype, which is unusual for most 80s film of this ilk.[100] In this fashion, the

film, like *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*, somewhat problematizes the

denigrated nerd stereotype, but overall still promotes that stereotype nonetheless.[101]

Taken all together, the various nerds performed in Hughes' *Sixteen Candles*, *The*

Breakfast Club, and *Weird Science*—especially the ones famously portrayed by Anthony

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[99] *Weird Science*.

[100] Although one could argue that the character of Chet almost steals the film, thanks in part to Bill Paxton's performance.

[101] For more on *Weird Science*, see Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, "Privileged and Getting Away With It: The Cultural Studies of White, Middle-Class Youth," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 103-26; Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from Heathers to Veronica Mars* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 27-9; and Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 49.

Michael Hall—firmly established the characteristics of stereotypical nerd performances for decades to come. As such, many of these various characteristics are deeply ingrained with the gendered and racial politics of the mid-80s. These nerds are all young, white, and male, and their popularity likely helped to further reinforce the white male as the predominant subject of the nerd stereotype.[102] More specifically, these young nerds are particularly obsessed with sex (especially losing their virginity), which they pursue vigorously with a pronounced sense of white male entitlement. Despite their lack of hypermasculinity, which renders them as deserving of the most abusive treatment, power is still their birthright as young white men, and women are their rightful sexual objects.

Along with this pronounced sense of white male entitlement, there is also another important characteristic for all of the white male nerds in these Hughes' movies: they are wimps. They are effeminate, masculine failures. While Hughes' nerds may have endured due to their somewhat more redeemable and ambiguous portrayals, they still tend to use the nerd as a stock character for constant comedic humiliation. From the Geek, to Brian, to Gary and Wyatt, the primary emphasis is placed on their sexual failure: they all start out as virgins, and this is meant to be embarrassing and laughable. The Geek and Gary in particular embody the classic nerd stereotype of the lustful nerd desperately trying to get laid. The ultimate joke in both of these films is that the wimpy nerd actually "bags" a beautiful babe. In the Reagan Era, nothing could be more hilarious, more ludicrous, more comically unbelievable and impossible.

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[102] For more on how the nerd stereotype became even more associated with males in the 80s—and the expulsion of the female nerd—see the next chapter.

The 80s White Male Nerd Stereotype: Neither Rad nor Radical

The nerd performances in the films of John Hughes—and by extension almost all of the major 80s nerd representations, most of which are even grosser and more offensive—exemplify how the nerd stereotype of the fourth phase conspicuously ridiculed failed masculinity while simultaneously promoting white male entitlement. Furthermore, the treatment of these Reagan Era nerds took on a decidedly aggressive, insistent tone, viciously debasing and humiliating the white male nerd as well as anxiously, even angrily insisting upon the infallibility of white masculine hegemony. Whether the pitiful Lucas or the outrageous Geek, these stereotypical nerd characters of the 80s performed both the heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics with a pronounced fervor fueled by the dominance of neoconservative sentiment in American culture. One could argue that the 80s nerd performance took the extreme and exaggerated 60s nerd performance, stripped it of any sort of intellectual redemption, and combined it with the sexual neuroses of the 70s nerd to make it even more extreme, comically emasculating, and sexually desperate.

From 1978 to 1989—most especially in the mid-80s—this peculiar version of the white male nerd stereotype flourished, particularly in the popular and powerful medium of American cinema. As I have argued in this chapter, this was due primarily to the cultural need to have a new sort of 50s-era sissy, someone to mock as part of the "great wimp hunt" that started during the 80s. In order to promote an ideal jock archetype, a militant and tough hypermasculinity for American men during the highly conservative, anti-intellectual, anti-feminist Reagan years, a feminized scapegoat was needed. And the nerd stereotype was pressed into service. And as we shall see in the next chapter, by

especially emphasizing the whiteness and the maleness of this wimpy nerd of the 80s, a number of other vitally important racial and gendered discourses occurred as well, new discourses that also become foundational for the nerd stereotype that are still with us today.

Chapter 8: Asian Nerds Arrive and Geek Girls Go in the 80s

The Nerd Stereotype and Othering in Reagan's America

As discussed in the previous chapter, given the social, political, economic, and cultural background of the highly neoconservative 80s, it is fitting that the stereotypical image of the humiliated, and yet entitled white male nerd flourished during this fourth phase. After all, many straight white men in America were beginning to (re)assert the power and privilege they associated with their white masculinity in a more conscious and retaliatory fashion, and lashing out at nerdy "liberal wimps" was one way by which this reassertion occurred. Another extremely important way hegemonic white males reasserted their privilege was by attacking feminists, dismissing LGBTQ peoples, and, by declaring a "War on Drugs," inner-city crime, and "welfare queens," engaging in a battle that disproportionately targeted African Americans and other people of color. In accordance with this new sort of othering fueled by the growing sense of angry, white male entitlement, the 80s nerd stereotype also shifted in its treatment of the nerdy Other.[1]

As the flourishing nerd stereotype ridiculed the wimpy and effeminate white male for not being the preferable hypermasculine jock (see chapter 7), it simultaneously reinforced the notion that intelligence was not attributable to the Other, but solely the providence of males and those considered to be white or, importantly, "not quite" white. This neoconservative perception of intelligence in the 80s manifested in two particular ways. First, the nerd stereotype essentially expelled the female nerd, who up to this point actually had a small yet substantial number of nerd representations. After the mid-80s,

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[1] For more on the figure of the angry white male—a figure that is still vitally important in our culture today—see Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

the nerd girl nearly disappeared from the popular media for about a decade. Second, the

model minority Asian fabricated in the late 60s/early 70s gets fully incorporated into the

nerd stereotype in the early 80s, prompting a number of conspicuous Asian nerd

representations. This chapter will examine these two phenomena in detail, and then move

on to an examination of *Revenge of the Nerds*, a film that, in many ways, not only sums

up these racial and gendered politics, but which also arguably serves as highly

representative vehicle of the 80s nerd stereotype in general.

The Computer Geek… And the Erasure of the Female Nerd

A rather curious phenomenon takes place regarding the nerd stereotype in the

mid-80s—the nerd becomes more male-oriented than ever before. Simply, the nerd

becomes resolutely male, and female nerd representations dwindle down to the point of

being almost imperceptible within popular, mediated culture. Roughly speaking, it would

be another decade or so (late 90s) until prominent female nerds began to reappear.[2] And

pivotally, when this handful of female nerd representations does begin to surface again, it

is in an atmosphere that denies the existence of "authentic" female nerds, in which real-

life female nerds must struggle to claim a nerd identity.[3] During this brief interregnum

spanning from the mid-80s to the mid-90s, then, the nerd stereotype not only denies

female nerd representations, it essentially disavows and subverts the female nerds of the

past—something that ahistoricizing stereotypes often do.

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[2] Timothy Shary writes "that nearly no female nerds were the protagonists in youth films until the mid-'90s." Furthermore, he suggests that "the adherence to a beauty standard explains the less common depiction of female nerds in youth films, as the industry promotes appearance over intelligence, and conformity over individuality, much more for girls than boys." Surely, this gender-biased beauty standard plays a part in the nerd stereotype as well. See Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema Since 1980*, revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 46.

[3] For more on this issue of female nerd exclusion, see the conclusion. Also see, for example, the NrrdGrrl! movement in the 90s. Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999), 276-9.

As we have already seen throughout this work, there have been many

representations of female nerds—and relatively prominent ones at that. From Dora in an

episode of *Father Knows Best*, to Zelda in *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, to Velma

from *Scooby Doo* and Marcy from *Peanuts*, and even the highly prominent Lisa Loopner

from *SNL*, there is actually a long, under-recognized history of female nerd

representations.[4] This long line of highly prominent female nerds, however, begins to

disappear in the mid-80s.[5] This erasure (or diminishing)[6] of the female nerd (or geek girl)

contributes to the pop culture myth that arose at that time that "girls can't be nerds," a

false notion that still resonates in our society today—and one that this research endeavors

to rectify. In this instance, by attempting to make the nerd stereotype a "boys only"

clubhouse, female exclusion from nerd representations may be read as highly

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[4] One potential female nerd that I did not discuss from the late 50s/early 60s is the popular eponymous heroine of *Gidget*, for whom I feel a solid case can be made that she, too, at least starts out as a geek girl. There are in fact many female nerd performances throughout the period of 1945-1985, too many to examine each in detail here. The challenge is that these female nerd performances are usually smaller in size and scope than their male counterparts, and therefore challenging to find and examine. For more on Gidget as a possible female nerd, see Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 38-42.

[5] The last few semi-prominent female nerds we see in the mid-80s cinema include Ellie Sawyer (Danielle von Zerneck) in *My Science Project* (1985) and Jordan (Michelle Meyrink) from *Real Genius* (1985). And I believe it says something that neither of these films—and their female nerd characters—achieved the success and staying power of the male nerds portrayed in *Sixteen Candles*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, or *Weird Science*. It is almost as if these girl nerds did not register, and the process of erasure was already well underway. Perhaps the best example of the declining prominence of female nerd characters is the short-lived CBS series *Square Pegs* (1982-1983), created and produced by Anne Beatts, who also helped create Lisa Loopner for *SNL*. This series primarily follows two nerdy girls, Patty Greene (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Lauren Hutchinson (Amy Linker), as they try to become popular at Weemawee High School. While this television series with its female nerd characters did not get past its first season, the Hughes films and their ilk would catapult male nerd characters to the forefront of the national imagination in the years to follow. See *Square Pegs: The Complete Series*, DVD, (1982, 1983, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2014).

[6] I use the term "erasure" not to imply that female nerds disappeared *entirely* (there are still some solid examples between the mid-80s and the mid-90s, such as Lisa Simpson from *The Simpsons* [1989-present] or possibly even Belle from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* [1991]), but instead to imply that the rather sudden and extreme reduction in the number of female nerd characters—especially when considered alongside the concurrent rapid growth of male nerd character—was not an accident or chance, but very much a social action with a deliberate political purpose. Also, I would argue that it was not until later when American culture, looking back, came to fully recognize (let alone appreciate) the nerdiness of Lisa and Belle.

misogynistic.[7] While not being stereotyped as a nerd may seem like a positive on the surface for women, the effect is paradoxically the opposite—both inclusion *and* exclusion from a stereotype has deleterious consequences. Just as the rejection of African Americans from the nerd stereotype up to this point is evidence of the exclusionary dynamic that separates intelligence from blackness, the rejection of women in the 80s from the stereotype may be seen as functioning to separate intelligence from women. This erasure of women exemplifies how the nerd stereotype is a contradictory double-edged sword: both inclusion and exclusion comes with a price.

The question then becomes why did this exclusion of women take place via the nerd stereotype during the mid-80s? One of the most prominent contributing factors is surely the overall anti-feminist backlash of the period, which, as Faludi suggests, became especially pronounced when it resurged into popular culture and was disseminated via mass media in the mid-80s.[8] Likely emboldened by Reagan's reelection in 1984 and his even more conspicuous misogynistic politics thereafter, the overall anti-feminist sentiment in America, despite essentially being omnipresent since the inception of feminism, was especially high during this time, particularly in terms of excluding women from avenues of power.[9] This was also further fostered by the apprehension created by the recession of the early 80s, the subsequent fad of downsizing, and the all-too common

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[7] This erasure of the female nerd—which acts to separate women from intelligence and the life of the mind—between the mid-80s and the mid-90s resonates with the infamous release of *Teen Talk Barbie* in 1992, whose "talk" included the controversial phrase "Math class is tough!"

[8] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), xix.

[9] The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 80s and infamous figures like Phyllis Schlafly likely paved the way for such politics. And in 1984, the Reagan administration, through spokeswoman Faith Whittlesey, gave its only major speech on women's issues, aptly titled "Radical Feminism in Retreat." See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 258, 508.

restrictions of female advancement in business that became especially pronounced at this time.[10] Simply put: the glass ceiling became a good deal thicker in the mid-80s.

I would also add that there was another major contributing factor to this expulsion of the female nerd from prominent representations: namely, there was a concurrent cultural shift to segregate women from computers, video games, and computer science. In other words, just as the nerdy computer programmer (see chapter 3) came to dominate the nerd stereotype in the early 80s, both constructs (despite their long associations with women and the feminine,) began excluding women from representation. Now not only could girls not be nerds, they were now no longer allowed to enjoy computers and videogames as well. This specific phenomenon deserves special attention, as it embodies both the linkage of nerds and computers, as well as the expulsion of women from computer related cultural fields.

As noted previously in this work, the image of the awkward "computer geek" extends well back into the late 50s and stretches through the 60s.[11] Then with the supposed "software crisis" of the late 60s, the computer programmer figure was rendered as particularly troublesome and strange, a notion that continued throughout the 70s.[12] And while the nerdy computer programmer was essentially always configured as a lesser known type of nerd, in the late 70s/early 80s the nerd and the computer programmer stereotypes essentially became more and more intertwined, just as they both were rising into mainstream culture. From the early 80s forward, the affiliation with computers came

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[10] Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *The 1980s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 14-7.
[11] Again, for more on the nerdy computer stereotype and its genealogy, see chapter 3.
[12] As one small example, take the Homebrew Computer Club, that informal group of early computer enthusiasts that began meeting in 1975 that in many ways helped to make Silicon Valley what it is today.

to dominate representations of the nerd stereotype.[13] As Caroline Clarke Hayes writes in *Gender Codes*, "Early in computing's history the general public was not particularly aware of what computer programming was, nor what people in that profession were supposed to be like. […] However, by the early 1980s, the increasing popularity and success experienced by computer science also increased media attention and public awareness of computer science stereotypes."[14]

Before this turning point in the early 80s, as discussed in previous chapters, nerds were more likely to be associated with chemistry (see both *The Nutty Professor* and *The Absent-Minded Professor*), math, books, chess, etc. Even the *SNL* nerds of the late 70s, Todd and Lisa, for all their extreme exhibitions of nerdy characteristics, are never really prominently associated with computers. But by *WarGames* (1983), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), and *Weird Science* (1985), there could be no turning back: the nerd was a computer nerd: and a male one at that. During the early 80s, the American public started obsessing over these new computer-related stereotypes: kids that played too much Atari and arcade games, these scary new "hackers" that people started fretting over, and then the rise of cyberpunk. From movies like *Tron* (1982) and *Blade Runner* (1982), to the publication in 1984 of both William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* and Steven Levy's *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, there was a lot of new interest in (and trepidation over) computers in the popular culture, which in turn manifested new stereotypical images of the odd people who liked these unsettling new devices.[15]

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[13] Thomas J. Misa, ed., *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 268-9.

[14] Ibid., 269.

[15] For a bit more on hackers (especially before they become of interest to the popular culture at large) and cyberpunk, see Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976); Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005); Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of*

The most obvious contributing factor to this correlation between the nerd

stereotype and computers was the advent of the personal computer (PC) in the late 70s.

What once was relegated to chilly, isolated mainframes in corporate offices began to

invade the private sphere of the home, and for much of the American public this was an

uneasy prospect.[16] After the appearance of the Altair 8800 in 1975, the personal computer

roughly came to the attention of the general public around 1977, but it was not until IBM

got into the game in 1980 when things really started to take off.[17] In the years that

followed the 1981 release of the IBM Personal Computer (running Microsoft's MS-

DOS), this device became the industry standard. By January of 1983, *Time* magazine

announced that the Man of the Year was actually the Machine of the Year: the personal

computer.[18]

But it was really not the hardware that was driving the rise of the personal

computer as much as the development of its software. As Martin Campbell-Kelly and

William Aspray suggest, the software industry shifted from a sort of open field "gold-

rush era" into another phase around 1983.[19] This new phase, "following the

standardization of the personal-computer market around the IBM-compatible PC, was a

the *Computer Revolution* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010); Eric S. Raymond, *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, third edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997); Thomas J. Misa, ed., *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 172-4; and John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 310-38.

[16] It may be hard for us today to understand, as computers are so "user-friendly" and ubiquitous in our culture at present, but the 80s was a conflicted time for computers in terms of their public reception. While a handful of people loved their computers and idealistically viewed them as apparatuses that were destined to usher in a utopian age, much of the general American public still exhibited a good deal of technophobia, and viewed computers with anxiety and trepidation. It really wasn't until the mid-90s, after graphical user interface (gui) software and the rise of the internet, that computers really flipped to being highly popular with a majority of the American public. In many ways, this public anxiety over computers was not finally, fully overcome until after the so-called Y2K crisis, that turned out to be no crisis at all.

[17] Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine*, second edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 220, 225.

[18] Ibid., 229.

[19] Ibid., 232.

period of consolidation in which many of the early firms were shaken out, new entrants required heavy inputs of venture capital, and a small number of (mainly American) firms emerged as global players."[20] In short, it was around 1983 when the personal computer software industry became "Big Corporate Business," and was starting to be managed as such. Gone were the slew of two- or three-person software start-ups, and much of the 80s would be dominated by the supposed battle between competing monopolies IBM and Apple. Importantly, "significant barriers had been erected to entry into the personal-computer software business" at this time.[21] And according to Campbell-Kelly and Aspray, perhaps the greatest of these barriers "was access to distribution channels," and how "a huge advertising expenditure" was now required if a software company was to surmount this barrier.[22] An example of this new push to mass market computers is perhaps one of the most famous advertising campaigns of the decade, the television ad that Apple aired during the 1984 Super Bowl for the upcoming release of their Macintosh computer.[23]

What is fascinating to point out here is that this crucial early 80s turning point for both the computer and the nerd stereotype is not because the personal computer had finally succeeded in winning over the American home. The consumer market for personal computers was not yet fully present, and it would have to wait until the graphical user

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[20] Campbell-Kelly and Aspray, *Computer*, 232.
[21] Ibid., 233.
[22] Ibid., 233-4.
[23] The "1984" ad, alluding to Orwell's novel, depicts a female athlete running through a dystopic, futuristic setting with a sledgehammer, chased by the police. A mass of human drones stare at a massive talking head on the screen, giving them a speech on conformity. And the woman heroically throws the hammer into the screen, which shocks the crowd. Very much an attack on IBM's culture of conformity, the ad paints the Apple Macintosh as a sexy new rebellious device for empowered free-thinkers, not drones. The ad struck a cord and had a large impact on American audiences, one of the first major computer advertisements to do so. For an interesting overview of both computer advertising in the 80s as well as an analysis of Apple's "1984" ad, see Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 102-20.

interface in the late 80s (and the popularization of the internet in the early to mid-90s) to be widely accepted in the larger American culture. Instead, this crucial turning point coincides with the cultural moment when computers became big business, heavily marketed to the individual user.

Part of the major shift that occurred was that the personal computer and software industry had to start relying on massive advertising campaigns designed to create a consumer market demographic, and given the overall gender politics of the 80s (as well as how advertising agencies operated in the 80s), it is perhaps not surprising in hindsight that such advertising campaigns (and the popular media in general) constructed the ideal personal computer consumer as white and male. Coupled with the conservative pressures of corporate professionalism that had been building up for decades, the decidedly white male-oriented advertising campaigns for PC's and software served to link in the public's imagination the notion that computers were for toys for boys, and not for girls.[24]

Interestingly, a similar phenomenon was also occurring in the video game industry. The video game crash in 1983 necessitated a paradigm shift in how the video game industry was run, and part of that shift in the early 80s—especially encapsulated by the release of the highly successful Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and its concordant marketing strategies—contributed to the notion that video games were for boys and boys alone. Nintendo's marketing approach of selling its console as a *toy* for young boys (instead of merely a game for the family) coincides roughly with what was occurring with PC's in the early 80s. Due to this change in approach, it is not surprising

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[24] For more on the impact of advertising on making computers masculine products, see Thomas J. Misa, ed., *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

that by the late 80s/early 90s, there was an especially pronounced masculine bias to the games as well as the gaming industry as a whole.[25]

Thus, the popular media (and advertisers in particular), continued to further the mythology that computers and video games were the domain of men and boys. Accordingly, this massive cultural campaign, due to its gender-biased (and often sexist) nature, ostracized women and erased female presence and representation in high-tech spheres. Add to this phenomenon the highly unattractive hacker/cyberpunk images and a generally misogynistic culture demanding that women return to the pretty homemaker image of the 50s, and it is no wonder that women supposedly "lost interest" in computers in the mid-80s. In the early 80s (as this highly gendered mass marketing trend for computers and video games was just beginning to take off), the number of women in computing education and the computing workforce was actually rising steadily along with growth in the field. Yet "despite these early successes," as Thomas J. Misa writes, "something unprecedented in the history of the professions hit computing in the mid-80s: not merely did women stop entering computing in large numbers, but the proportion of women studying computing actually began falling—and it has continued to fall, steadily, all the way through to the present."[26]

It is important to note that of the many possible contributing factors for this strange, sudden, and pronounced decline of women in computing, the "male-dominated

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[25] For more on gender and video games, particularly addressing this gender-biased paradigm shift in the early 80s, see Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998); Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, eds., *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); and the highly useful Tracey Lien, "No Girls Allowed: Unraveling the Story Behind the Stereotype of Video Games Being for Boys," *Polygon*, Vox Media, posted December 2, 2013, http://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed [accessed January 1, 2017].
[26] Misa, ed., *Gender Codes*, 5.

'nerd' culture," as Caroline Clarke Hayes states, "is often blamed for chasing women out of computing."[27] Yet as Hayes points out, recent evidence suggests that this is not as major a factor as anticipated, and that the culture of computer science is no more "hostile to women" than other STEM fields.[28] After all, in fields like physics and engineering—also bastions of male-centric nerd culture—the number of women continues to grow steadily. Something different and more specific was occurring in the field of computer science. Importantly, as Hayes and the other contributing authors of *Gender Codes* argue, what shifted in the early to mid-80s is the "increased media attention and public awareness of computer science stereotypes."[29] "Thus," Hayes summarizes, "what has changed is the public awareness of computing stereotypes. We suggest that negative male-centered media images may have turned increasing numbers of women away from computing careers."[30] While more research is needed here, it is a strong indication how the erasure of women from the nerd stereotype that occurred in the mid-80s—especially through mass media and advertising—contributed to the misogynistic ostracizing of women from all things related to computers and video games.[31]

A brief look at the pivotal film *WarGames*, released in 1983, highlights many of these gendered issues in computing. In this immensely popular and impactful movie, young teen hacker and nerd David Lightman (Matthew Broderick), in an attempt to hack

[27] Misa, ed., *Gender Codes*, 267.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 269.
[30] Ibid.
[31] For more perspectives on women (and men) in computing, see Thomas J. Misa, ed., *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005) (in particular, see Turkle's useful chapter 6, "Hackers: Loving the Machine for Itself," pages 183-218); Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher, *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); Allan Fisher and Jane Margolis, "Unlocking the Clubhouse: The Carnegie Mellon Experience," special issue, "Women in Computing," *Inroads, SIGCSE Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (2002): 79-83; and Lenore Blum and Carol Frieze, "The Evolving Culture of Computing: Similarity Is the Difference," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26, no. 1 (2005): 110-25.

into some fun new videogame software, accidently hacks into NORAD and almost sets off nuclear Armageddon. Interestingly, this film is one of the first realistic mainstream depictions of the internet, introducing the general American public not only to modems, but also the figure of the stereotypical young teenaged gamer/hacker. *WarGames* also thoroughly invaded the cultural conscious at the time, referenced in multiple news magazines and news programs, not to mention impacting governmental policy regarding internet regulation.[32] Very quickly, Broderick's David became one of the most notable nerd performances of the 80s.

The character of David, in many ways, embodies both the promise and the problems embodied by the stereotypical image of the hacker nerd in the early 80s: On one hand, he almost starts a nuclear war, yet on the other, he also heroically succeeds in saving the world. He also embodies the image of the precocious young video gamer: David is first introduced in the film—and as a nerd—at an arcade playing *Galaga*, and he accidently hacks NORAD thinking it to be a new video game. This gamer aspect to his character ties in to his penchant for playful pranks. David is revealed to be a bit of an amoral troublemaker at the beginning of the film, talking back to his biology teacher, changing grades in the school computer, and knowingly committing illegal acts against the phone company (phreaking).[33] When his friend Jennifer tells him that he can "go to

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[32] For an excellent analysis of *WarGames* and its impact on American culture, from news media to government policy, see Stephanie Ricker Schulte, ""The *WarGames* Scenario": Regulating Teenagers and Teenaged Technology (1980-1984)," *Television & New Media* 9, no. 6 (November 2008): 487-513; and Stephanie Ricker Schulte, *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 21-54.

[33] As also mentioned in chapter 3 (see footnote 109), while the nerd is generally portrayed as overcivilized, obsequious, and too deferential to authority, the nerdy computer programmer, due to its unique history, is usually depicted as the opposite: a bit of a troublemaking rabble-rouser and a free spirit. When the nerdy computer programmer type essentially comes to dominate the nerd stereotype in the late 70s and early 80s, this particular trait is also seen much more often in nerd performances. In fact, it may be this trend to

jail for that," he cleverly asserts, "Only if you're over 18."[34] Clearly some of these troublemaking traits trace back to his two rather ineffectual parents, both of whom work, making David a classic example of a Reagan Era latchkey kid, lacking proper parental supervision. Needless to say, David is also portrayed as young, white, male, and upper-middle class.[35]

While much can be said about the character of David as a representative of the nerd stereotype, it is actually his friend and love interest, the un-nerdy Jennifer (Ally Sheedy), that reveals much of the gender politics of the period. Jennifer, interestingly, seems to be David's only friend and extended social interaction, barring his two hacker acquaintances that he visits briefly only once in the film.[36] In a certain fashion, Jennifer serves as David's foil, for even though she is portrayed as a young, pretty, average American girl, she is still marked as more masculine than David. More often than not, Jennifer drives David around on her scooter, him hugging her from behind. And importantly, she is often portrayed engaging in physical activity like jogging or exercising throughout the movie, whereas David is usually resigned to his bedroom or the arcade before his quest gets truly underway. It is even revealed when Jennifer suggests they swim a great distance to get off an island that David cannot swim. In an intriguing twist, Jennifer is portrayed, to a degree, more as a masculine jock to juxtapose David as

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portray computer geeks as a little rebellious that, in a way, tangentially fuels the white male entitlement aspect to the white male nerd discussed in the previous chapter.

[34] *WarGames*, DVD, directed by John Badham (1983; Beverley Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008).

[35] For an excellent analysis of *WarGames* and the youthful "technomasculinity" of David, see Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 115-49.

[36] These two nerdy hackers that David visits in the film for advice, Jim (Maury Chaykin) and Malvin (Eddie Deezen), are two quintessential stereotypical representations of nerd/hackers/computer programmers. Professor Falken (John Wood) also possesses many characteristics of the nerd stereotype as well, as does the smaller role of Richter (Irving Metzman), the main computer technician depicted at NORAD.

the feminine nerd. As for any romantic chemistry between them, simple and subtle though it may be, Jennifer more often than not initiates any physical connection: the wimpy David does not. For example, Jennifer initiates their first little kiss on the ferry, and, funnily enough, mainly as a way to comfort the emotionally distraught David. On one hand, these sorts of complex gender reversals are rather touching and heartening to see in a Hollywood film. Yet it also further contributes to the stereotypical feminization of the hacker/gamer nerd.

As for Jennifer, sadly her juxtaposition to David makes it clear that the young male is the active hero, and the female is a mere sidekick. David kicks off the story and also saves the day, whereas Jennifer seemingly contributes little to the plot. Paul N. Edwards sums up this aspect of Jennifer's gendered construction best:

> The stereotyped, helping-hand role assigned to David's friend Jennifer typifies closed-world gender constructions. She assists David in important ways but does nothing crucial herself. Despite a number of female secondary characters, the world of *War Games* [*sic*] is a male world, a hacker world, which women may observe from a distance but never truly enter. Jennifer—a dancer, swimmer, runner, animal-lover, but not a scholar—represents physicality and sexuality against David's pale-skinned nerdhood. Jennifer's powers, however, play only a minor role in David's victory. He wins, instead, with logic and good hacking.[37]

I would also add that by marking David as the archetypal teenaged hacker nerd that truly knows how to use a computer, the film also marks Jennifer as the girl who knows nothing about computers, resigning her to the role of mere onlooker as she watches David play his games as well as save the world. Even in the brief scene where David goes to visit his two hacker compatriots, he tells Jennifer to hang back while the boys talk computers. Even the shots frame her as a lone, distant onlooker overhearing the three nerd boys talk shop, cinematically excluding her from the world of computing and hacking. Instead of

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[37] Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 330.

being written and played as a fellow hacker herself, Jennifer is instead just the normal, ignorant girl outside the male world of computers.[38]

While there are some endearing, even progressive, aspects to the relationship between David and Jennifer in *WarGames*, one aspect is clear: whether construed as powerfully destructive or playful and infantile, for better or for worse, interest in computers is constructed as the province of men. Young girls like Jennifer—either to be spared the indignity of being an unattractive, nerdy amoral hacker and/or to be deprived from the power that computers began to represent—were constructed as mere onlookers of the burgeoning computer revolution. In this fashion, *WarGames* reflects a cultural discourse that was starting to dominate by the early to mid-80s: computers and video games were for boys only. And shortly thereafter, the nerd stereotype was entirely construed as male, and nerd girls, sadly, were essentially erased.

The Asian Nerd: Re-scripting the Model Minority Stereotype

Ironically, as prominent (white) female nerd stereotype performances began to disappear in the mid-80s, stereotypical representations of Asian male nerds were added to the nerd repertoire—and in great abundance. To best understand the specifics behind the inclusion of the 80s Asian nerd/Asian "whiz kid," it is important to go back and briefly

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[38] For more on *WarGames*, see Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 115-49; Stephanie Ricker Schulte, ""The *WarGames* Scenario": Regulating Teenagers and Teenaged Technology (1980-1984)," *Television & New Media* 9, no. 6 (November 2008): 487-513; Stephanie Ricker Schulte, *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 21-54; Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 328-31; Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 173; Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11-2; Andrew Britton, *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, Barry Keith Grant, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 123; and Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 72-6.

trace the long and complex history of Asian American stereotypes more generally—most especially the model minority stereotype—and how they relate to perceptions of intellect as well as historically specific racial, gender, and sexual politics.

The stereotype of the Asian model minority, while of great importance to the racial politics of the 60s and 70s, actually has a much longer history, one that extends back to the previous century. In the 1870s, for example, white workers exerted pressure on politicians to enact anti-Chinese laws primarily because they resented what they perceived as the "industriousness" of the Chinese immigrant workers, who often worked for lower wages and in much more dangerous conditions. This pressure not only eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it also fostered a racist discourse that assigned to the Chinese (and, in part, other "Asian Americans"[39]) the characteristics of passivity, docility, industriousness, and importantly, intelligence—all of which was primarily a rhetorical effort to claim that "'servile coolie" Chinese labor undercut "'free white' labor."[40]

As Lisa Lowe states in her *Immigrant Acts*, "Orientalist racializations of Asians as physically and intellectually different from 'whites' predominated especially in periods in which a domestic crisis of capital was coupled with nativist anti-Asian backlash, intersecting significantly with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization

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[39] For the most part, the model minority myth in the U.S. tends to focus on Chinese and Japanese Americans, albeit in different degrees in different contexts. This is not to say that others, like Korean, Filipino, Southeast Asian, etc. are entirely excluded from this discourse. As one of the detrimental effects of the model minority is to erase differences between the many "Asian Americans" in a universalizing and totalizing fashion, each of the various groupings deserves more in-depth examination than can be provided here.

[40] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5. Also see Mari J. Matsuda, *Where Is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race Gender and the Law* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 158n10.

of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934."[41] Accordingly, the 20s/30s were also a period in U.S. history that saw an aggressive racial discourse on "the modern introjection of Asia into the American imaginary,"[42] when, especially during the years spanning the 1924 National Origins Act and the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act (both of which sought to curb immigration), anti-Asian prejudice in America was at its height.[43] In particular, expression of the racist ideology of the "yellow peril" during the 20s and 30s—especially associated with the Chinese, who through sheer numbers were suspected of being a threatening "mass" of immigrants—created anxieties in white Americans that the Chinese (and the Japanese as well) might possess certain superior characteristics that would undermine white hegemony.[44]

During this period, Asians (again, primarily the Chinese and Japanese) became particularly associated with hyperintelligence, which is perhaps the next "logical" step for such "industrious" peoples—working too hard at the job being akin to working too hard at school and therefore a threat to those who "deserve" those jobs/good grades. Even the social scientists of the age seemed convinced that the Chinese and Japanese were, to their surprise, as smart (almost) as their white benefactors. As David Palumbo-Liu examines in *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, the questionable "science" of comparative race—primarily through intelligence tests—viewed the Chinese and the Japanese as nearly as intelligent as whites, and, importantly, much more intelligent than

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[41] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4-5.
[42] David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 17.
[43] Ibid., 18. For more on these immigration acts in their historical context, also see Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991).
[44] Ibid, 36.

the other races. Palumbo-Liu quotes a 1931 "scientific" study by Thomas R. Garth that

reports the following:

> The racial I.Q.'s are, by way of resume: whites, 100; Chinese, 99; Japanese, 99; Mexicans 78; southern Negroes, 75; northern Negros, 85; American Indians, full blood, 70. If one says that what is fair for one is fair for another, then regardless of environmental difficulties, the Chinese and the Japanese score so nearly like the white that the difference is negligible. Certainly they possess a quality which places them in a class beyond the Negro, the Mexican in the United States, and the American Indian, whatever that is. Perhaps it is temperament which makes the latter groups unable to cope with the white man's test.[45]

Not only does the supposedly high I.Q. of the Chinese and Japanese place them in a

"close-but-not-quite" relationship with whites, the findings are already being put to use

denigrating the intellectual abilities (and "temperament") of blacks, Hispanics, and

Native Americans. And much like the American Jew, their reported intelligence is at

once threatening (because it makes them crafty, untrustworthy, etc.) and a characteristic

that "whitens" them either racially or ethnically.

The history of late nineteenth/early twentieth century Asian immigration to the

U.S. not only reveals an association with the characteristic of intelligence, but also with

effeminacy. Lisa Lowe states:

> From 1850 until the 1940s, Chinese immigrant masculinity had been socially and institutionally marked as different from that of Anglo- and Euro-American "white" citizens owing to the forms of work and community that had been historically available to Chinese men as the result of the immigration laws restricting female immigration. The Page Law of 1875 and a later ban on Chinese laborers' spouses had effectively halted the immigration of Chinese women, preventing the formation of families and generations among Chinese immigrants; in addition, female U.S. citizens who married an "alien ineligible to citizenship" lost her own citizenship. In conjunction with the relative absence of Chinese wives and family among immigrant "bachelor" communities and because of the concentration of Chinese men in "feminized" forms of work—such as laundry, restaurants, and other service-sector jobs—Chinese male immigrants could be

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[45] Thomas R. Garth, *Race Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931), 71, 75f, 83f, quoted in David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 151.

said to occupy, before 1940, a "feminized" position in relation to white male citizens and, after 1940, a "masculinity" whose *racialization* is the material trace of the history of this "gendering."[46]

Accordingly, Asian American men have, in the general American imagination, long been associated with a non-normative (or queer) sexuality, often construed as either asexual, sissy, gay, or all of the above.[47] Here again we see the intimate link between intelligence and effeminacy.

Both the characteristics of intelligence and queerness already associated with Asian Americans by the 20s/30s manifest themselves in the popular culture of that day, especially in the stereotypic representations of Asians that appeared in the mass media. Two of the most (in)famous representations were Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, both of whom came to embody two primary Asian male stereotypes in the 20s/30s and well beyond. Fu Manchu, a fictional character created by British writer Sax Rohmer, became incredibly popular in the U.S. during the period through Rohmer's novels and subsequent filmic adaptions like MGM's controversial *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932). Essentially the yellow peril personified, Fu Manchu was a conniving evil genius much like the common mad scientist stereotype.[48] Charlie Chan, a detective character invented by American author Earl Derr Biggers in the 20s, presaged the model minority myth, a supposedly "positive" portrayal of a good Asian created to counter the image of Fu

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[46] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 11-2.

[47] For an excellent piece on the emasculation of the Asian American male from a psychoanalytical point of view, see David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). For another perspective from the queer theory point of view, one that emphasizes asexuality over homosexuality, see Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145-68.

[48] For more works on "yellow peril" as presented in theatre, film, and television, see Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993); and Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Manchu. Also, Charlie Chan, like Fu Manchu, was particularly popular in the 20s and the 30s via Bigger's novels and the number of movies starring the popular character, albeit usually played by a white actor in yellowface.

In many ways, the Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan stereotypes are different: for example, Fu Manchu is a frightful figure out to destroy the world (especially white, western society), whereas Charlie Chan is especially subservient and helpful to his white superiors, an amusingly harmless figure. But it is important to observe that both characterizations and their stereotypic constructs associate the Asian male (more specifically, the Chinese male) with hyperintelligence as well as ambiguous, effete asexuality. These characteristics not only dominated the portrayal of Asian characters during this period (and beyond), but they would also become well-established characteristics of the yet-to-come nerd stereotype.

In Rohmer's novel *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, for instance, the character is described as follows:

> Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government—which, however, already has been denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.[49]

Fu Manchu's hyperintelligence is of the worst sort: that immoral kind that challenges white hegemony. As for his sexuality, Jachinson Chan suggests that the "stripping away of any sensuous qualities in this character reduces Dr. Fu Manchu's model of masculinity to that of an asexual rapist who uses force to capture his women in order to breed

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[49] Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (New York: McBride, 1913), 25-6.

superior offspring."[50] Desexualized and impotent, Fu Manchu is represented as a dangerous and failed masculinity—one that resonates with the nerd stereotype.[51]

As a preeminent early representation of the model minority myth, however, the character of Charlie Chan is an even more important precursor to the Asian nerd stereotype. As the model minority functions to model "ideal" behavior for non-white races, Chinese Americans throughout the 20s and 30s were seen as modeling ideal assimilation, especially for Japanese immigrants, who were often viewed as too unruly. Jachinson Chan writes that "Charlie Chan's popularity provided a convenient way to justify growing anti-Japanese sentiments while masking a broader-based xenophobia by being ethnically specific."[52] This discursive function of the model minority myth would also become important in later incarnations.

Charlie Chan provided a model Asian for others to emulate: a family man who upholds the law and humbly serves the American upper middle-class. Represented as very intelligent, Charlie Chan not only helps to solve the crime at hand, he also rounds off pseudo-Confucian nuggets of Asiatic wisdom in his trademark pidgin English. And like Fu Manchu, he also possesses a rather asexual, effete demeanor: Chan is described by Biggers as "very fat indeed, yet he walked with the light dainty step of a woman. His cheeks were as chubby as a baby's, his skin ivory tinted, his black hair close cropped, his

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[50] Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 44.

[51] For more on Fu Manchu and the stereotype he represents, see Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 27-49; Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1999), 113-7; and Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 8.

[52] Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities*, 52.

ember eyes slanting."[53] Consistently portrayed as physically inept and totally

unthreatening in any way, Charlie Chan is both infantilized, emasculated, and

desexualized. Despite the fact that Charlie Chan has a massive brood of children, "his

non-sexualized image undermines the sexual agency usually associated with virility. In

short, Charlie Chan is reduced to an emasculated breeder. Charlie Chan's model of

masculinity links asexuality with a stereotypical cultural stoicism that promotes a

submissive male identity that is content in spite of systemic racial discriminations."[54]

Portrayed as a child-like, intelligent, physically weak, and asexual Chinese man, Charlie

Chan possesses many of the key characteristics of the future Asian nerd stereotype.[55]

WWII would, of course, disrupt many of the social, economic, and political

structures involving the American perception of Asians. The post-war period up to the

mid-60s also marks an important shift, due in no small part not only to the wars in Korea

and in Vietnam, but also to the massive reversal in U.S. immigration policy when, as Lisa

Lowe describes, the "Asian *alien* [transformed] into the Asian American *citizen*."[56] The

1965 Immigration and Nationality Act is an important historical marker which,

abolishing the national quotas and exclusions on a wide number of Asian immigrants,

fostered a new wave of Asian immigration and, accordingly, a new wave of American

discourse on the implications of Asians in U.S. society. These changes also altered the

types of Asians present in the country, primarily "Asian-born rather than multiple

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[53] Earl Derr Biggers, *The House Without a Key* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925), 76, quoted in Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 55.
[54] Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities*, 53.
[55] For more on Charlie Chan and the character's concordant stereotype, see Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 51-72; and Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 18.
[56] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 10.

generation, and new immigrant groups from South Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan."[57] As one might expect, then, the mid to late 60s, like the 20s and the 30s, became a period when national concern arose over these (newly termed) "Asian Americans": who were all of these different peoples and who should be granted citizenship? And accordingly, the mid to late 60s is the period when the model minority myth formally came into being.

In the *New York Times Magazine* published on January 9, 1966, social demographer William Petersen published an article, "Success Story, Japanese American Style," which first articulated the model minority myth, an important first step towards popularizing the image of the Asian model minority stereotype.[58] Later that same year, the *U.S. News and World Report* published a comparable article praising Chinese Americans in a similar vein. And as Keith Osajima writes, these "1966 articles marked a significant turning point in the public's perception of Asian Americans," and the formation of the model minority stereotype.[59] From this point forward (and in a sudden and sharp contrast to the "evil Asian" prefigured by the yellow peril) the Asian model minority would enter the American imagination, spawning books, articles, and various mediated representations.

These articles and their inevitable kin publicized and lauded Asian Americans' (supposed) high median family incomes, high educational achievement, low crime rates, and lack of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems. Rather than thoroughly

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[57] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 7.
[58] Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 174.
[59] Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and the 1980s," in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects of Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 166.

examining the long and problematic historical stereotype of the Asian American as

intelligent, industrious, and meek as a possible source of ascription of these celebrated

characteristics, the articles instead created an explicit and direct connection "between

traditional Asian cultural values and subsequent achievement in education and

occupations."[60] In a fashion similar to how American culture imagines all Jews as being

intelligent due to some innate or "cultural" appreciation of reading and education,

traditional Chinese and Japanese values were also thought to be the source of their

success and their compatibility with American middle-class norms and the Puritan

ethic.[61] Chinese "Confucian" cultural values were often linked to the essentialized

characteristics of loyalty, obedience, and respect for authority just as Meiji norms, such

as "obligation, modesty, sensitivity to the wishes of superiors, adaptiveness, and

advocacy of the least line of resistance" were found to be the roots of Japanese American

success.[62]

    In many ways, what the journalists like Petersen (he would go on to write a book

on the Japanese model minority in 1971) and the subscribers to the model minority myth

were truly celebrating was not so much the success of Chinese and Japanese Americans

per se, but rather their perceived passive obedience to the powers that be—their supposed

success was merely confirmation that obedience was indeed the proper response to

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[60] Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and the 1980s," in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects of Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 166.

[61] The essentializing nature of this line of thinking is especially problematic and rather ridiculous. It would be like arguing that all white folks of European descent appreciate intelligence and excel at education (a dubious notion at best) because of our long cultural roots extending back to Socrates and the philosophers of Ancient Greece. I would guess that very few people would find that assertion to be true, and yet analogous arguments seem to somehow apply to the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Jews.

[62] Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 306n10.

institutional authority.[63] Not only does this resonate with the various cultural discourses (computer programmers should obey their managers, youth should obey their parents, etc.) of the mid to late 60s, it is also a clear example of how hegemony operates to create consent. But clearly of all the cultural discourses of the period, the sudden popularity of the Asian model minority myth is deeply indebted to its utility as racial modeling for blacks and, as Peterson mentions in his article, "problem minorities."[64] As historian Sucheng Chan effectively summarizes, the upsurge of publicity regarding the model minority "served an important political purpose at the height of the civil rights movement: proponents of the thesis were in fact telling Black and Chicano activists that they should follow the example set by Asian Americans who work hard to pull themselves up by the bootstraps instead of using militant protests to obtain their rights."[65] Sucheng Chan goes on to point out that "those who depict Asian Americans as the model minority believe that American society is indeed an egalitarian one, with opportunities for all individuals who make the necessary effort to achieve a measure of material well-being. If someone or a certain group 'does not make it,' at least part of the fault lies with that person or group."[66] It is no coincidence, then, that the Asian model minority stereotype became so prominent during the increasingly aggressive Civil Rights Movement, and particularly in the years shortly following the Watts Riots. As Ellen D. Wu states, before the model minority myth of the 60s, Asians were marked as "*definitively not-white*," but afterwards, were "distinct from the white majority, but

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[63] For a useful overview and analysis of Petersen's work on the model minority, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 174-81.

[64] William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 1966, 20-1.

[65] Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 167.

[66] Ibid., 171.

lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not-black*."[67] And while the model minority stereotype would be critiqued throughout the 70s (see Frank Chin's controversial essay "Racist Love," for example, or the first sustained scholarly critique by Bob H. Suzuki in 1977), the model minority would quickly become a permanent fixture of American culture.[68]

While there are a multitude of social, political, and cultural effects and implications that arise from the model minority myth in the late 60s/early 70s, a few key points are worth pointing out regarding the nerd stereotype.[69] First, the model minority myth tends to focus on Asian males and, as such, continues to perpetuate the enduring association of both intelligence and effeminacy with Asian males that older "yellow peril" stereotypes had also fostered.[70] In this respect, the parallels with the nerd

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[67] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

[68] Frank Chin is an exceptionally provocative example, and much of his works like "Racist Love" (co-written with Jeffery Paul Chan) aggressively combat Asian male stereotypes, albeit from a rather heteronormative and masculinist perspective. See Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, "Racist Love," in *Seeing through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 65-79. For another form of critique that specifically challenges the model minority myth, see the work of Bob H. Suzuki, starting with his first article: Bob H. Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the 'Model Minority' Thesis," *Amerasia Journal* 4, no. 2 (1977): 23-51.

[69] For more background on the rise of the model minority myth, also see Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1999), 145-79; David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 149-81; Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 177-80; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), 474-84; and all of Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[70] Asian women—like so many women, unfortunately—are often stereotyped primarily as highly sexualized objects, as either the submissive Lotus Blossom Baby or the nefarious Dragon Lady. This of course does not preclude Asian women from the overall model minority myth, nor representation as Asian nerds. But the primary focus on the model Asian *male* in the overall cultural discourse is pronounced. While this may well be just good old-fashioned misogyny in action, it may also be due to the fact that the model minority myth came into being in order to placate unruly, aggressive, violent—in other words, hypermasculine—black men, essentially countering an Asian alternative masculinity with a black hypermasculinity. For more on stereotypes of Asian women like the Lotus Blossom Baby and the Dragon Lady, see Renee E. Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," *in Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 308-17.

stereotype are clear: both represent a failed masculinity and a queer sexuality conjoined with hyperintelligence. Second, certain Asians are racially constructed in the American imagination no longer as an extreme racial Other, but like an "honorary white," often described as either "almost but not quite white" or even "whiter than white," which is especially problematic as it tends to make "white" synonymous with "successful." Certainly, they are constructed as opposing blackness. Regardless, despite the fact that these model Asians are not even construed as racially white, they can still be seen as being, odd though it may seem, hyperwhite. As such, much like the Jew, the "near-white" Asian is included in the nerd stereotype so as to be excluded from the upper echelons of society.

So the model minority of the intelligent and studious Asian (namely Chinese and Japanese) American coalesced in the mid to late 60s under rather extreme and peculiar circumstances. The shift in perception of Asians was a drastic one: from yellow peril to model American. As the *New York Times* reported in 1970 in an article problematically titled "Orientals Find Bias Is Down Sharply in U.S.," "The old stereotype […] has undergone a metamorphosis. The pig-tailed coolie has been replaced in the imagination of many Americans by the earnest, bespectacled scholar."[71]

Contrary to what one might expect, however, very few notable performances of the model minority Asian stereotype arose in the specific performance mediums of cinema and television in the late 60s/early 70s. In other words, while magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction texts obsessed over the image of the studious and intelligent Asian, very few mass-mediated representations of the model minority Asian appeared

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[71] "Orientals Find Bias is Down Sharply in U.S.," *New York Times*, December 13, 1970, 1, 70.

through *embodied* performance during the late 60s and the 70s.[72] There are likely many

reasons for this phenomenon. First, this lack of performances may reflect the notion that

U.S. culture was less interested in representing Asian Americans than in denigrating

African Americans: the mere *idea* of smart, hard-working, docile Asians was all the

hegemonic cultural discourse required, not actual human beings. A second contributing

factor includes how infrequently Asian actors are cast in substantial roles in American

popular media, a phenomenon that sadly continues to this day. A third possibility

includes the sudden popularity of martial art films in the U.S. in the 70s, and the

iconography of the singular major Asian male star of the time, Bruce Lee. If taken as a

sort of primary representation of the Asian male in the American imaginary in the 70s,

the muscular, highly physical (more jock-like) Bruce Lee tends to counter any nerdier

representations along the mind/body binary.[73] It seems more important in the 70s to have

yet another physically hyperviolent masculine icon like Dirty Harry and Rocky than it

was to mock nerdy Asians. Finally, another possibility for the lack of concurrent

performances of the model minority in the 60s and 70s may be that the need to directly

denigrate Asian Americans was not of primary concern to American culture of the time.

Focused as it was on other domestic racial politics (primarily African Americans, of

course), frankly the need to represent the model minority—and denigrate Asians—was

seemingly not as pronounced during this period.

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[72] One might reference the short-lived attempt by Hanna-Barbera to resurrect Charlie Chan with their 1972 cartoon *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan*, but the series did not prove very successful or demonstrate much staying power in the popular consciousness. One might also attempt to make a case for The Green Hornet's faithful valet Kato (Bruce Lee) in *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967) TV series, but the same lack of prominence applies, not to mention that Bruce Lee would go on to a different sort of iconographic persona in the long 70s.

[73] The iconography of Bruce Lee and the reception of martial arts films in the 70s is a fascinating study, especially in terms of the complex anxieties over masculinity, effeminacy, sexuality, and race that typify the period. For more on Bruce Lee, see Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 73-95.

However, by the early 80s, things changed. Suddenly, the need to poke fun at Asians (and more specifically Asian Americans) via the model minority stereotype apparently became more necessary in American culture, further necessitating their representation in popular performance media. Again, numerous potential factors might account for this shift. First and foremost, beginning in the early 80s and growing throughout the decade (and well into the 90s) was the notion that overseas economic competition—from Japan especially—was threating American industry and American jobs. As Robert G. Lee writes in his *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture,*

> In the early 1980s, the mounting trade deficit with Japan, driven in no small part by the preference of American consumers for Japanese automobiles, prompted some American business and labor leaders, especially in the auto industry, to accuse Japan of waging an undeclared trade war. In 1984, Lee Iaccoca, a former president of the Ford Motor Company and self-styled populist maverick, elaborated on this theme of invisible war and elite betrayal in his immensely popular autobiography.[74]

Simply put, Asians were now *too* good for their own good, a sentiment that circulated widely throughout the 1980s. "Many Americans have come to see Asians in their midst as *too* successful," suggests Ellen D. Wu, "outwhiting the whites yet again and again. In the 1980s, social observers warned that Asians were poised to infiltrate, if not supplant, the ranks of the nation's elite."[75] Perhaps the most vivid reminder of this pronounced anti-Asian sentiment was the murder of Vincent Chin in 1985. Chin, a Chinese American automotive engineer, was beaten to death in Detroit by two furloughed autoworkers, who taunted him as a "Jap" that had stolen their jobs.[76] This sort of racist cultural anxiety,

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[74] Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1999), 203. For more on Lee Iaccoca's perspective on Japanese threats to American business, see Lee Iacocca, *Iacocca, An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 315.
[75] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 253.
[76] For more on the murder of Vincent Chin, see the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, Internet (Alexander Street), directed by Christine Choy (1987; New York: Filmmakers Library, 1990).

fostered by perceptions related to economic decline in the U.S., allowed the model minority stereotype to flourish in the 80s.[77]

A further reflection of how the model minority myth coincided with anti-Asian sentiment in the 80s—one especially important in terms of the nerd stereotype—was the cultural notion that Asian American youth were immensely better students than their non-Asian counterparts, especially in science and math. In many ways, a number of Asian American students were indeed outperforming their peers—however, in a racist, essentializing fashion, this notion of super-smart Asian children was seen as either biologically inherent or, as much of the media suggested at the time, due to the cultural norms and conservative family values fostered by Asian cultures, which was only one small, generalized facet of the larger story. In actuality, the perception that Asian American students were "better" than their classmates had more to do with their immediate economic backgrounds. After all, the Immigration Act of 1965 "enacted a preference system favoring the admission of white-collar workers, scientists, and artists of 'exceptional ability' to encourage the nation's evolution from a manufacturing- to a knowledge- and service-based economy."[78] And as Wu further argues,

> All told, the post-1965 Asian "brain drain"/US "brain gain" has led to a marked shift in the socioeconomic composition of Asian American communities, tilting away from their historical roots in agriculture and labor. Today's perception of Asian Americans as highly educated and affluent can be traced directly to these selective immigration policies.[79]

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[77] Another intriguing popular cultural marker of this racial and economic anxiety of Japanese business is the 1986 film *Gung Ho*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Michael Keaton as well as Gedde Watanabe.
[78] Wu, *The Color of Success*, 251.
[79] Ibid.

Therefore, roughly from the mid-60s to the mid-70s (the first major wave of the model

minority stereotype), the majority of Asian immigrants to the U.S. were educated middle-

class professionals.

It is then unsurprising that these middle-class Asian American families who

arrived in the late 60s and 70s would go on to raise highly educated children in the 80s

(the second wave of the model minority stereotype.) Again, as Robert G. Lee confirms,

> In addition to their immediate integration into the professional, technical, and
> managerial sectors of the work force, the large proportion of middle-class
> immigrants among Asian Americans resulted in a second generation of children
> who were academically advantaged. Thus the "brain drain" from Asia in the
> 1970s resulted in an Asian American population that was already highly
> educated.[80]

However, many Americans—and much of the American media—continued to attribute

this seeming "explosion" of hyperintelligent Asian American youth in the 80s to vaguely

Asian cultural factors (namely their conservative "family values") rather than palpable

historical, material, and economic factors, allowing the model minority myth—and the

stereotype of the young Asian nerd—to flourish during the Reagan Era as well as

thereafter. Perhaps the penultimate popular media example of this particular fascination

with the young Asian nerd appeared on a 1987 cover of *Time* magazine, which featured a

group of talented Asian youth heralded as "Those Asian-American Whiz Kids."[81]

It is therefore during the 80s and the second wave of the model minority

stereotype that the related, but distinctive Asian nerd stereotype (or Asian whiz kid

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[80] Lee, *Orientals*, 188.
[81] For both the cover as well as the cover story, see David Brand, "The New Whiz Kids: Why Asian-Americans Are Doing so Well, and What It Costs Them," *Time*, 31 August 1987, 42-6, 49-51. For more on the American news media's take on the model minority in the 80s, see Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1999), 184-7; and Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and the 1980s," in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects of Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 165-74.

stereotype) fully came into being.[82] While this stereotype of nerdy Asian youth often

appeared laudatory on the surface, the practical politics of the stereotype did more to

limit the success of young Asian Americans and further foster the anti-Asian sentiment of

the period. A 1984 *Newsweek-On Campus* article "A Drive to Excel," for example,

mentions the growing resentment from threatened white students regarding the increasing

number of Asian students on college campuses. This article relates how white students

would drop classes if, in the words of the students interviewed, there were "too many

Oriental faces," and how college students would joke that MIT stands for "Made in

Taiwan."[83] And importantly, there was the concurrent controversy regarding admissions

quotas for Asian students in the 80s as well. "In the middle of the decade," Wu writes,

"the Asian American Task Force on University Admissions discovered that a number of

the nation's top universities had deliberately admitted 'over-represented' Asian American

applicants at lower rates than other racial groups to preserve white access to these

institutions."[84] In a fashion that is eerily similar to the admission quotas imposed upon

hyperintelligent Jewish nerds in the 50s, the Asian nerds of the 80s found themselves

facing similar educational (and hence occupational) restrictions.[85]

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[82] While the model minority stereotype and the Asian nerd stereotype have much in common, I do see them as being somewhat separate and distinct. Whether one chooses to argue that model minority myth combined with the prevalent nerd stereotype of the 80s to yield the Asian nerd stereotype or that the Asian nerd is merely one manifestation of the model minority myth, what is important here is that the two stereotypes are inextricably linked, and the cultural context of the 80s serves as the foundation of the Asian nerd.

[83] "A Drive to Excel," *Newsweek-On Campus*, April 1984, 4-8, 12-3; quoted in Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and the 1980s," in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects of Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 171.

[84] Wu, *The Color of Success*, 253.

[85] For more on these Asian admissions quotas, see Dana Y. Takagi, *The Retreat from Race: Asian-American Admissions and Racial Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); and Don T. Nakanishi, "A Quota on Excellence? The Asian American Admissions Debate," in *The Asian American Educational Experience: A Source Book for Teachers and Students*, ed. Don T. Nakanishi and Tina

With the overall resurgence of the model minority myth in the 80s and the

peculiar anxieties over the studious Asian American "whiz kids" that were supposedly

depriving white students from educational and occupational opportunities, it is

understandable that the figure of the stereotypical Asian nerd would flourish at this time.

Unlike the model minority Asian stereotype in the 60s and 70s, however, the Asian nerd

of the 80s did merit a number of embodied performances in American popular media.

Unsurprisingly, given the aforementioned attack on female intelligence of the period,

these Asian nerd representations were predominately male. What is most prominent about

these Asian nerd performances is the extreme *youth* of the characters, which seemingly

emphasizes the national obsession with the education of young Asian American whiz

kids in schools rather than the successes of their parents.

Three of the most prominent Asian nerd performances of the 80s are Long Duk

Dong (Gedde Watanabe) from *Sixteen Candles* (1984), "Ick" Ikagami (Mark Kamiyama)

from *Real Genius* (1985), and Data (Ke Huy Quan, later Jonathan Ke Quan) from the cult

classic *The Goonies* (1985).[86] The quirky Long Duk Dong, while not directly associated

with whiz kid intelligence, is certainly represented as a young, socially awkward, Asian

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Yamano Nishida (New York: Routledge, 1995), 273-84. For more on earlier Jewish admissions quotas, see chapter 2.

[86] Even when not explicitly marked as a full-fledged Asian nerd/whiz kid, the youthful Asian male as subservient and clever comedic sidekick more generally construed became a dominant trope in American popular culture in the 80s, most especially in the cinema. The most famous example of this figure is Short Round (Ke Huy Quan, later Jonathan Ke Quan) from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). Much like his predecessor Charlie Chan, Short Round is the very helpful sidekick to the masculine white male hero: Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford). Like many of the subservient Asian sidekicks and henchmen before him, he offers a strong contrast to the white male hero as well as some wacky comic relief. Unlike many of his more taciturn predecessors, however, Short Round is a veritable chatterbox, witty and clever more than physically imposing. He is also extremely young in comparison to Indy, marking another subtle yet important change in 80s cinematic representations of Asians and Asian Americans.

geek.[87] Another character from John Hughes' *Sixteen Candles* (see chapter 7) that

complicates Sam's life, Long Duk Dong is a eccentric foreign exchange student brought

along by Sam's grandparents to stay in Sam's house during the course of her sister's

wedding. Forced to take him along to the school dance, Sam is upset to find that Long

Duk Dong is much luckier in love than she is: in no time at all, he immediately finds a

girl at the dance. Much of the humor revolving around this subplot and Long Duk Dong's

character is that the polite and acquiescent young Asian boy from the family dinner scene

goes on a crazy all-night bender with his "new-style American girlfriend."[88] His new love

is meant to be a comedic variant of opposites attract: Marlene (Deborah Pollack) is an

extremely tall, white, big-breasted jockish girl called "Lumberjack."[89] Whether the much

shorter Long Duk Dong has his face buried in her chest during the dance or, later at

Jake's house party, sits awkwardly in her lap as she exercises vigorously on a funny

thrusting exercise machine of some sort, the contrast between the two is plain to see. The

massive, masculine tomboy Marlene offsets and feminizes Long Duk Dong, rendering

him yet another manifestation of what David L. Eng might refer to as the "racial

castration" of the Asian male in American culture.[90]

The teen comedy *Real Genius* centers mainly on the young, brilliant, and nerdy

Mitch Taylor (Gabe Jarret) getting recruited to Pacific Tech University to work on a

special laser project along with his new roomie and science *wunderkind*, Chris Knight

(Val Kilmer). While building the laser for their elitist and immoral Professor Hathaway

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[87] It is interesting to note that the actor Gedde Watanabe was actually around the age of 29 when he played the supposedly high-school aged Long Duk Dong, a testament to his youthful appearance and character type.
[88] *Sixteen Candles*, DVD, directed by John Hughes (1984; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).
[89] Ibid.
[90] David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

(William Atherton) (who intends to give the laser to the government for nefarious purposes), Chris teaches Mitch to lighten up, party with hot girls, and pull all sorts of crazy pranks: in other words, how to not be so nerdy. After Chris has a brilliant scientific breakthrough and gets the laser to work, he shortly finds out that Hathaway took the laser and intends to demonstrate it as a deadly weapon. So Mitch and Chris enlist the help of their three nerdy friends to stop Hathaway: Ick, an Asian nerd; Jordan (Michelle Meyrink), one of the last semi-prominent female nerd characters of the period; and the older Lazlo Hollyfeld (Jonathan Gries), who epitomizes the socially awkward computer programmer/hacker, literally hiding in their basement.

This group of five brilliant nerds collectively embody many facets of the nerd stereotype.[91] Chris, the most brilliant of them all, is a reformed nerd who is clearly the ideal role model for the rest: someone who has learned that pranks and parties are more important than working too hard. As he says, he doesn't want others to think he's "all brain, no penis."[92] Mitch is the young uptight nerd that Chris takes under his wing. And when Mitch finally loosens up, then he finally gets a girlfriend, the fast-talking, hyperkinetic tomboy nerd Jordan.[93] But first and foremost, the movie is about two heroic white boys, Chris and Mitch, and the others are regulated to more token sidekick

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[91] I find it very interesting that in the rare instances when popular narratives represent nerdy young protagonists, it is usually in groups, a tight circle of quirky nerd compatriots working together like *Real Science*, *The Goonies*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, etc. This stands in an intriguing opposition to the macho lone vigilante heroes of the period. This trope of "nerd groups" can also be traced in later nerd representations as well, from TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the J. J. Abrams film *Super 8* (2011), and the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-).

[92] *Real Genius*, DVD, directed by Martha Coolidge (1985; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007).

[93] Not accidently, in a party scene where Mitch is trying to flirt with the tomboyish Jordan, she awkwardly blurts out that she is not gay—the assumption being that a nerdy girl like herself must be. The feminist-as-lesbian-as-nerd stereotype from the 70s was still very much present in the 80s.

positions.[94] Jordan is there more as a love interest for Mitch than for anything else.

Unlike the rest, however, Ick does not have many standout scenes or comic moments, nor

does Ick contribute much to the plot. If anything, he is portrayed primarily as Chris'

rather quiet sidekick, lending a helping hand with his scientifically oriented pranks, like

when Ick freezes the dormitory so Chris can use it as a skating rink. Of the five nerdy

friends in the group, Ick is by far relegated to the subservient sidekick role. Unlike the

real life Asian whiz kids that seemingly threatened the prosperity of white students in the

80s, Ick does not detract from the "real genius" of white youth like Chris and Mitch, but

rather helps them unobtrusively to achieve their own amazing scientific successes. In this

manner, Ick embodies many of the key characteristics of the 80s Asian nerd: he is young,

male, and a supportive sidekick who uses his nerdy intellect and technological know-how

to assist the white protagonist.

Another highly prominent young Asian male nerd character in the same vein is

whiz kid Data from the film *The Goonies*.[95] Data continues the trend of the young Asian

sidekick to the white male lead.[96] *The Goonies* follows a group of quirky kids on an

adventurous treasure hunt for One-eyed Willie's pirate booty.[97] Their main leader and

protagonist of the film is Mikey (Sean Astin), a somewhat frail young white boy who

must use an asthma inhaler throughout the film, marking him as rather wimpy and nerdy.

[94] It should also be noted that Professor Hathaway embodies the most elitist and classist aspects of the snooty intellectual nerd stereotype. And his obsequious graduate student and lackey Kent (Robert Prescott) may actually be one of the biggest nerds in the entire film, braces and all.

[95] Data was played by the same young actor that portrayed Short Round in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. See footnote 86 above.

[96] Jonathan Ke Quan would also go on to play Jasper Kwong, another nerdy Asian character in the ABC sitcom *Head of the Class* (1986-1991). As this series focused on a class full of honors students in a New York high school—almost the flipside of *Welcome Back, Kotter*, in a way—it is full of many nerdy characters, such as science geek Arvid Engen (Dan Frischman) and computer whiz Dennis Blunden (Dan Schneider).

[97] If any aspect of *The Goonies* emphasizes that this is a masculine coming-of-age story for Mikey in particular, his rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, it has to be his obsessive quest to find his "One-eyed Willie." Seldom has the phallus been less subtle.

To reinforce his nerdiness, Mikey is placed in contrast with his older brother Brand (Josh Brolin), who is performed as a weight-lifting jock, albeit (in true 80s fashion, as discussed in the previous chapter) a sensitive and supportive jock. Mikey is also joined by his misfit pals Mouth (Corey Feldman), Chunk (Jeff Cohen), and of course Data, who appears to be Mikey's next-door neighbor and closest friend.[98] Accordingly, Data serves mainly as Mikey's comic sidekick throughout the adventure, assisting Mikey along the way.

Not only is Data a prime example of the young Asian male sidekick, he is also a consummate inventor and engineer, marking him as a science/tech type of nerd. Data's penchant for creating wacky technological gadgets—from his spring-loaded toy teeth grappling hooks to his oil slick sneakers—not only renders him scientifically-inclined but also sets him up in comparison to Q from the James Bond films (see Figure 9 in the Appendix). In fact, in his first scene, the Bond theme plays under Data's stunt as he zip-lines into Mikey's house. Like the Asian whiz kids of the 80s popular imagination, Data is clearly obsessed with science, math, and technology. However, as both a comic figure and a sidekick to a more prominently featured white male hero, Data is rendered as non-threatening. He may dream of being the next Bond, but clearly Asian nerds like Data are to be relegated to the role of helpful Q in 80s American popular culture.

Taken together, Long Duk Dong, Ick, and Data exemplify the inclusion of the Asian American (male) into the nerd stereotype. Drawing on the characteristics of the model minority stereotype and the second generation of Asian whiz kids that so perturbed

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[98] With regards to the geeky misfit Chunk (and his famous "Truffle Shuffle"), it is worth pointing out that most stereotypical nerd representations before the 80s tend to embody the nerd as skinny and scrawny, whereas the overweight nerd really seemed to take hold at this time. Perhaps it was a further manifestation of marking the nerd as the antithesis of the ascendant 80s muscular jock stereotype. It may also be worthwhile to point out that Chunk is subtly marked as Jewish in the film.

the American imaginary in the 80s, these Asian nerds were most often rendered as young, male, and subservient sidekicks to the white heroes they assisted with their scientific know-how. On one hand, showing a friendship and camaraderie between young white and Asian characters can be construed as positive. Yet from another perspective, by rendering Asian American youth as nerdy comic sidekicks to their more successful white peers, such cultural scripts were enacting a sort of coping mechanism for white audiences, allowing them to dismiss those up and coming whiz kids. These same scripts also reminded those Asian whiz kids of their place in American culture: they may have been out whiting the whites, but they would always remain not quite white. In this fashion, Asian Americans were marginalized via the exclusionary dynamic by their inclusion into the nerd stereotype as Asian nerds.

Revenge of the Nerds: *80s Nerd Stereotypes Star on the Silver Screen*

If there was one pop cultural artifact that best encapsulated the nerd stereotype and its many manifestations in the Reagan Era—emasculating white male wimps (while reinforcing their entitlement), downplaying female nerds, and promoting Asian nerds—it would have to be the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew. The title of the film alone would go on to become a common phrase in the popular American lexicon.[99] But beyond the title, the movie itself would also permanently and prominently become associated with the nerd stereotype in the American imagination for decades to come.

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[99] For a bit more on the media's usage of the phrase "revenge of the nerds," see Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999), 274-6. While it is impossible to keep track of how widely the phrase is used, it is clearly still used in recent times: The September 29th, 2014 issue of *People* magazine, as one small example, could not resist using "Revenge of the Nerds!" as its cover headline when describing the successful comedy series *The Big Bang Theory*.

The film follows two young white male nerds, Gilbert (Anthony Edwards) and Lewis (Robert Carradine), during their first year at Adams College, apparently one of the best schools for computer science. When the Alpha Beta fraternity—populated by popular, brutish, football playing jocks—burns down their frat house thanks to their own destructive drunken antics, they oust all the male freshmen out of the men's dorm and take it over for themselves. These degraded freshmen are forced to sleep on cots in the gym, but are allowed to apply to fraternities for housing purposes. Not all of them make the cut, however, and the leftover rejects, the campus weirdoes—including nerds Gilbert and Lewis—are left to live in the gym. These rejects band together to rent a house and eventually attempt to form a fraternity of their own. Funnily enough, the only fraternal organization that is willing, albeit begrudgingly, to give them a probationary trial is Lambda Lambda Lambda (or the Tri-Lambs), an all-black fraternity. Throughout the first half of the film's plot, the ragtag group of misfits are generally ridiculed, tortured, or mocked by the Alpha Beta jocks as well as the pretty cheerleaders of Pi Delta Pi (or simply the Pis). However, the nerds enact their own "revenge" and turn the tables on all the popular kids: first they invade the Pis' house on a panty raid, where they also set up cameras to spy upon them. Then they put burning chemicals in the Alpha Betas' jock straps. This pranking escalates back and forth, culminating in a campus competition to see who will be the fraternity/sorority in charge of the Greek Council. After a series of contests, the nerds of Tri-Lamb emerge victorious, and in retaliation the Alpha Betas destroy their house. This prompts Gilbert and Lewis at the end of the film to give an impassioned speech at the homecoming pep rally, calling for an end to "nerd persecution."[100] The music swells (Queen's "We Are The Champions"), the crowd joins

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[100] *Revenge of the Nerds*, DVD, directed by Jeff Kanew (1984; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox

the Tri-Lambs, and the inspired Dean gives the Alpha Betas' house to the nerds, who it seems have now gotten their true revenge.

Revenge of the Nerds relies heavily on consciously flipping the jock/nerd binary so prominent in the 80s by making the jocks the bad guys and the nerds the heroes of the film. It may be hard for us today to see, but the entire comic premise of the plot and the title itself is meant to be a ridiculous reversal.[101] Despite this inversion, however, the film continues to perpetuate stereotypes of both jocks and nerds. Take Lewis for example. When we first see him enter Gilbert's room at the beginning of the movie, he is dressed as the stereotypical nerd: He is wearing a short-sleeve button-down shirt with a black tie, a slick conservative looking haircut, the horn-rimmed glasses, has slightly buck-teeth, and a pocket protector. Lewis also greets Gilbert's mom politely and unctuously, exhibiting a meek deference to parental authority. He has also calculated the travel time to Adams College down to the second, having also factored in ARVs—Average Restroom Visits. From the very start, both Lewis and Gilbert are visually coded as nerds. Later, when Ogre (Donald Gibb) sees them from afar on a balcony, he instantly recognizes them as nerds, chanting the word at them as they scurry away. If Lewis and Gilbert are not depicted playing with their calculators—which are often shown in their belt holsters—they are building and programming a robot or working with computers.

From the beginning, the movie accentuates their failed masculinity as male nerds. Lewis comes across as the hypersexual nerd lusting for woman out of his league like the

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Home Entertainment, 2007).

[101] This phenomenon is analogous, I feel, to the play *Lysistrata*. Today, we often see it performed as a piece of feminist empowerment. But it is quite likely that back in Aristophanes' day, the idea of women being intelligent, politically active, and capable of such a sexual revolution would have been as comically preposterous as talking frogs. I feel that, in hindsight, some might today see the ending of *Revenge of the Nerds* as sincerer than its audiences likely received it back in the 80s. That said, with computers infiltrating the home and growing into big business, perhaps the film might be construed as an early example of the massive shift the nerd would later undergo in the 90s/00s.

blonde Pi Betty Childs (Julie Montgomery), whereas Gilbert comes across as the generally meek and shy wimp. When Betty dupes them to go and try to join the Alpha Betas, they are subjected to a humiliating initiation ceremony that completely emasculates them. Before being rejected and sent home tarred and feathered, Lewis and Gilbert are seen stripped down to their underwear in a shower room being interrogated as if they were in a prison. Off-screen voices yell at them "Have you ever made love to a woman?" and when they splutter and say "no" and "yes" back and forth at the same time, the voices scream out "Liars!" and douse them with water.[102] This exposure of two nerds in their underwear recapitulates the same humiliation and emasculation captured in the opening sequence of *Weird Science*, where Wyatt and Gary have their pants yanked down in the gym.

The major comic premise of the film is that these nerds both succeed at "getting the girl" by the end of the film: Gilbert eventually starts dating a fellow nerd named Judy (Michelle Meyrink), and Lewis surprisingly ends up winning over the beautiful cheerleader Betty. In this sense, both Lewis and Gilbert somewhat redeem their failed nerd masculinity through romantic and heterosexual conquest, which is supposed to be humorous. It is also worth pointing out that it is only when the Tri-Lamb nerds begin pulling offensive pranks—much like the Alpha Betas—that they "redeem" themselves in the eyes of both the audience and U.N. Jefferson (Bernie Casey), the imposing head of the Lambda Lambda Lambda fraternity. U.N. finally officially agrees to let the nerds be Tri-Lambs after hearing about the pranks, saying that he is "glad to see you ner—you guys finally fought back."[103] So ironically, by acting less like actual nerds and more like

[102] *Revenge of the Nerds*.
[103] Ibid.

the jocks of Alpha Beta, Lewis, Gilbert, and their companions find success and redemption. In this way, the film, which tries to redeem nerds to a degree, still falls prey to the pitfalls of the nerd stereotype.

Beyond being placed in binary opposition to the jock stereotype and performed as a form of comic failed masculinity, nerds Lewis and Gilbert are also conspicuously rendered as male and white. Like many other teen sex comedies of the 80s—*Porky's* (1981)*,* for example—*Revenge of the Nerds* primarily takes white masculine privilege as its subject, albeit with potentially different implications.[104] True, the Tri-Lamb nerds are not as macho as their jock counterparts, but they are still rendered resolutely male, primarily through their questing for heterosexual conquest. Women, be they the Pis or the less popular (and supposedly less attractive) Mus, are shunted to the side of this narrative, essentially present only to be love interests or, more often than not, sexual objects. This is most apparent when the Tri-Lamb nerds, using their technological wizardry, set up secret cameras during their panty raid on the Pis. An entire scene focuses approvingly on these horny teenage boys indulging in extreme and extended bouts of voyeurism, confirming their performance of heterosexual male identity.

Another, even more disturbing scene in the film in terms of gender politics is the sex scene between Lewis and Betty in the funhouse. When Lewis sees the beautiful cheerleader go into the funhouse alone, he swipes her boyfriend's mask, dons it, and

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[104] For more on *Revenge of the Nerds* within the genre of teen sex comedies, see Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, "Privileged and Getting Away With It: The Cultural Studies of White, Middle-Class Youth," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 103-26; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 215-7; William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 206-28; William Paul, "What Rough Beasts: Confessions of a Gross-Out Maven," *Film Comment* 30, no. 6 (1994), 80-4; David Greven, "Dude, Where's My Gender? Contemporary Teen Comedies and New Forms of American Masculinity," *Cineaste* 27, no.3 (Summer 2002), 14-21; and Lesley Speed, "Loose Cannons: White Masculinity and the Vulgar Teen Comedy Film," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 4 (2010), 820-41.

follows after her. Not correcting her when she assumes he is her boyfriend, the two

proceed to have sex. Afterwards, when he is unmasked and her initial shock wears off,

she admits that he was "wonderful," asking him "Are all nerds as good as you?"[105]

Replying in the affirmative, he explains that it is because "all jocks think about is sports.

All we ever think about is sex."[106]

This sort of "nerd rape scene"—which was meant to be highly comic—was

surprisingly prominent in the 80s: this scene between Lewis and Betty and the scene

between the Geek and Caroline in *Sixteen Candles* (see previous chapter) being the two

prime examples.[107] The set up to the joke is simple: the only way a male nerd, inherently

undesirable, could ever get laid is to trick or take advantage of an unwilling girl, to get

her drunk or to wear a mask. The funny punchline for such scenes was that the pretty girl,

beyond all belief, actually enjoyed having sex with the nerd, rather than wanting to press

charges for rape. Not only does the nerd rape scene embody the worst of misogynistic

rape culture that was especially pronounced in the 80s, it also reveals how the nerd

stereotype operates to promote an aggressive, compulsory heteronormativity.[108] As Lewis

himself attempts to suggest, nerds are defined less by their interest in computers or

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[105] *Revenge of the Nerds*.
[106] Ibid.
[107] A much more benign and palatable example of this phenomenon occurs in *The Goonies*. While the Goonie crew is underground on their adventures, the beautiful young girl Andy (Kerri Green), who has a crush on Mikey's (Sean Astin's) buff brother Brand (Josh Brolin), accidently kisses Mikey in the dark, thinking it is Brand. She enjoys the kiss immensely, but comically questions whether or not Brand wears braces. While more innocent than the full-on nerd rape scene, the principle of mistaken identity here is similar: the nerdy, asthmatic, braces-wearing Mikey would likely have never kissed the girl (or more precisely have a girl kiss him) if there had not been such a mix-up.
[108] For more on these "nerd rape scenes," see William Bradley, "Reconsidering Revenge: How Revenge of the Nerds' Misogyny is Evident in Current Nerd Culture," The Mary Sue, posted April 3, 2015, http://www.themarysue.com/reconsidering-revenge/ (accessed March 1, 2017); Amy Benfer, "The 'Sixteen Candles' date rape scene?" Salon, posted August 11, 2009, http://www.salon.com/2009/08/11/16_candles/ (accessed March 1, 2017); and Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, "Privileged and Getting Away With It: The Cultural Studies of White, Middle-Class Youth," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 114.

science or academic achievement, but the stereotypical supposition that all nerds ever think about is sex.

If the minimization and objectification of women in the film highlights the maleness of the nerd protagonists, a similar contrast highlights their whiteness. The joke of these nerds joining an all-black fraternity, in turn, emphasizes their whiteness through a comic contrast that relies on racial stereotypes. And at the end of the film, the tough, thuggish black representatives of Lambda Lambda Lambda, along with some vaguely funky black musical underscore, manifest out of nowhere to support the nerds and prevent the jocks from bullying them. Perhaps the most intriguing character to join the nerd entourage is Lamar (Larry B. Scott), who is rendered as both black and stereotypically, flamboyantly gay. Interestingly, of the core group of young men that comprise the Tri-Lamb group—Lewis, Gilbert, Poindexter (Tim Busfield), Wormser (Andrew Cassese), Booger (Curtis Armstrong), Lamar, and Takashi (Brian Tochi)— Lamar is the least nerdy of them all. Lamar is not associated with computers or any other nerd markers, instead being primarily associated with the supposedly feminizing hobbies of dancing, party planning, and, in true 80s fashion, video aerobics. The fact that Lamar, their one black friend (and one gay friend), is clearly not a nerd like the others emphasizes the whiteness and straightness of the other nerds.[109]

While *Revenge of the Nerds* attempts—whether authentically or no—to give the nerds their day at the end of the film, the film actually does little to challenge or refute the nerd stereotype. Instead, it actually further augments it, emphasizing both white male entitlement and compulsory heteronormativity. After all, the film asks us to identify with

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[109] The fact that Lamar is the one true non-nerd of the Tri-Lamb crew (although the unkempt misfit pothead Booger may be more geek than nerd) also serves as an important marker for the black nerd (or the lack thereof), who had yet to receive any major popular media performance in the 80s.

Lewis and Gilbert—the very nerds the first half of the film mocks—by the end because they have redeemed their failed masculinity by both the heterosexual conquest of women and besting the Alpha Betas at their own game. These white male nerd heroes aside, the film also includes a wide range of other minor nerdy characters—characters that demonstrate other important facets of the nerd stereotype in the 80s, most especially in terms of the aforementioned expulsion of the female nerd and the inclusion of the Asian nerd.

While the blonde, attractive, white Pis serve as sexual objects for the male gaze for most of the film, other female characters do appear, namely the Omega Mus, the supposedly unattractive female sorority and companion group to the nerdy male Tri-Lambs.[110] The Mus, however, are really only utilized as a mere sight gag: Unlike their male, Tri-Lamb counterparts, they are not the heroes of the film who undertake any serious action of any kind. The one Omega Mu who gets a tiny bit of screen time is Judy, and even then only as a love interest for Gilbert.[111] True, Judy is presented and performed as a female nerd—a proper companion to a male nerd—but she is so far relegated to the sidelines of the narrative that she spends more time augmenting Gilbert's nerd status than performing her own.[112]

The most telling scene in terms of the diminution of the female nerd is when Gilbert first meets Judy—in a computer lab, no less. The scene begins with Judy banging

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[110] It might be tempting to say that the Omega Mus are the female nerd equivalents of the Tri-Lambs, but they are so relegated to the background of the film, there is not enough strong evidence to suggest either intelligence or social awkwardness. The primary reason they are in the movie is to be unattractive in comparison to the Pis, and to show the desperation of the male nerds.

[111] It is interesting how two of the last semi-prominent female nerd portrayals of the mid-80s—Judy in *Revenge of the Nerds* and Jordan in *Real Science*—were both portrayed by the same actress, Michelle Meyrink.

[112] Judy plays the accordion, which is of course the nerdiest of instruments. Although Poindexter and his violin may come in a close second.

her head in frustration on the computer. Gilbert, as either a concerned passerby or some sort of lab monitor, swoops in helpfully, telling her to "take it easy. The computer's your friend."[113] She responds with "I wasn't meant to interface with a machine."[114] Gilbert then proceeds to wow her with his computer skills by creating (rather unrealistically) a cute cartoon on the computer of him and her holding hands, all the while expounding on the virtues of computers. While on the surface a simple "first meeting" scene between two characters, the gendered relationship with computers—much like that in *WarGames*—is clear: women are not meant to "interface with a machine," but men clearly are.[115]

As for the inclusion of an Asian nerd character, it is the nerdy Takashi who fulfills this role. Unlike Lamar, Takashi embodies the nerd stereotype to a T. He is established as a nerd early in the film, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a pocket protector (even in his pajamas!) as well as playing chess. Like Ick and Data—but perhaps even more so—Takashi also performs the sort of benign Asian sidekick role in relation to the white heroes. He is overly polite and obsequious, even thanking Booger when he cheats him at poker. Much of the humor involving Takashi revolves around Booger playing off of his childlike naivety in this way, be it getting him high or teaching him inappropriate phrases like "hair pie."[116] Some of the humor tends towards generic Asian stereotype as well, such as when Booger mocks his accent and his inability to pronounce the letter "l."

Of particular note is that the film associates Takashi primarily with his camera, not only when taking the group photo of the Tri-Lambs, but taking pictures of the Omega

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[113] *Revenge of the Nerds.*
[114] Ibid.
[115] The young nerdy prodigy Wormser, it should be noted, is seen playing an Atari console early in the film, further associating video games with not only nerds, but also males and young children.
[116] *Revenge of the Nerds.*

Mus at their failed party. The stereotypical image of the Asian tourist brandishing a camera is folded into this performance, but the association also emphasizes the nerdy, obsessive use of technology. This connection to cameras and taking photos is also seen in *The Goonies*, where, at the end of the film, Data's father whips out a camera on a spring-loaded gadget much like his son would do. Another representative example of the 80s Asian whiz kid like Long Duk Dong, Ick, and Data, Takashi updates and adapts the harmless and helpful Charlie Chan stereotype into the stereotypical Asian nerd.

Taken all together, *Revenge of the Nerds* is, as film scholar Robin Wood describes it, a "curious and confused" movie.[117] On one hand, the first half of the film spends a majority of its time making fun of nerds, but on the other, it attempts to redeem them as underdog heroes for the latter half. And when the nerdy Tri-Lambs emerge victorious at the very end, is this really challenging the jockish white male hypermasculinity of the Alpha Betas, or merely replacing it with much of the same hegemonic masculinity? And what of Gilbert and Lewis' call for nerd pride at the end of the film? Is this meant to be taken seriously or as so ridiculous that it subverts credulity? Does *Revenge of the Nerds*, as William Paul suggests, more fully achieve "the egalitarian promise" than any other film of the genre?[118] Or, as Lori Kendall suggests, does it rather set up the nerd as a supposedly "oppressed straight white male identity" that "addresses critiques of white straight masculine authority without actually considering the plight of oppressed peoples

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[117] Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 216, n.

[118] William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 228.

directly"?[119] Frankly, depending on the reception of the individual viewer, interpretations of the movie may vary disparately.[120]

What is indisputable, however, is that *Revenge of the Nerds* not only performed multiple versions of the nerd stereotype, but it also placed that stereotype at the forefront of the film—in subject matter, in characters, and even in the title. And in doing so, it helped to solidify much of the many meanings and manifestations of that stereotype for decades to follow. In keeping with neoconservative Reagan Era politics, the nerd stereotype of the fourth phase ridiculed the wimpy straight white male for his failed masculinity while, simultaneously, reifying his white masculine privilege. The misogynistic identity politics of the fourth phase also attempted to erase female nerds from the stereotype altogether, particularly with regards to computer usage, resulting in a severe reduction in the number of prominent female nerd characters from the mid-80s and into the 90s. And finally, the Asian nerd was added to the repertoire of nerd stereotypes during this phase as well, an antidote to the supposed threat of Asian whiz kids depriving white American students of educational and occupational opportunities. And each of these important manifestations of the nerd stereotype are not only vividly present in *Revenge of the Nerds*, the quintessential and emblematic nerd performance of the 80s, but also crucial characteristics of the nerd in the following decades— characteristics that, in many ways, are still with us today.

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[119] Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999), 265.

[120] Although I do think it is worth pointing out that most nerds today really do not seem to care much for *Revenge of the Nerds*—it has not achieved the high status of a nostalgic "nerd favorite" in nerd culture that another 1984 movie achieved: *Ghostbusters*.

Coda

Conclusion: From Nerd Stereotypes to the Nerd Identity

Looking Forward: A Brief Glimpse at the Nerd in the 90s

One might well argue that when *Performing Nerd: The Nerd Stereotype in American Popular Culture* secedes from its exploration of the nerd stereotype in the late 80s, it does so just as the story is about to get especially fascinating. As we move out of the fourth phase of the nerd stereotype and into what I characterize as its fifth (the latter roughly ranging from 1989 to 2001), a number of important trends regarding the stereotype immediately present themselves as noteworthy. First, the nerd stereotype obviously continues to proliferate exponentially. If the 70s witnessed the marked ascendance of the nerd stereotype, and the 80s beheld the stereotype taking its prominent place in American popular culture, the 90s were practically overridden with a plethora of stereotypical nerds in performance. To be certain: from the late 80s forward to the present day, the nerd stereotype is indelibly imprinted on the American imaginary.

Yet surprisingly, the teen nerd character that was so popular in cinema during the early to mid-80s diminishes on the silver screen during the late 80s and early 90s. However, rather than indicating a lack of interest in nerd performances *per se*, I would argue that this decrease in nerd representation in the movies is actually a consequence of a more general decline in the production of teen movies which, understandably, happened to be the "favorite medium" for nerd characters in the 80s. While there are likely a multitude of factors for this sudden change, the primary reason is likely the simple fact that teen sex comedies (like *Revenge of the Nerds*) and teen tech movies (like *Real Science*)—the two primary cinematic genres that focused on nerd characters—quickly fell out of fashion by the late 80s. Timothy Shary aptly suggests that cultural factors

likely contributed heavily to this shift for both genres: the social discourses around

teenage pregnancies and AIDS made teenage sexuality much more troubling to audiences

in the late 80s,[1] and the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster in 1986 essentially put a

moratorium on movies that promoted science for youth.[2]

The nerd stereotype, of course, did not disappear. On the contrary, it simply

shifted to a "kinder, gentler" medium in the late 80s and early 90s where it intensified

even further in popularity: television. While nerd characters may have waned at the

Cineplex, they began appearing in a multitude of television shows, most especially family

and youth oriented sitcoms. Shows like *Head of the Class* (1986-1991)[3], *The Wonder

Years* (1988-1993)[4], *Saved By The Bell* (1989-1993)[5], and of course *Family Matters*

(1989-1997)[6] would take up the mantle of promulgating the nerd stereotype in the late

80s and early 90s.[7] This conspicuous shift from primarily cinematic to primarily televised

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[1] Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980*, rev. ed. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2014), 223-4.

[2] Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 75.

[3] This ABC sitcom is another series set in a school, with a teacher and his wacky assortment of students, much like the 70s *Welcome Back, Kotter*. However, while *Welcome Back, Kotter* poked fun at remedial (and multiethnic) students, *Head of the Class* poked fun at the advanced students of the IHP (Individualized Honors Program), a rather telling difference, and a further reflection of the pronounced anti-intellectualism of the late 80s, in particular. While there are many nerd characters in the show, two of the most prominent are math/science nut Arvid Engen (Dan Frischman) and the pudgy computer geek Dennis Blunden (Dan Schneider). For some basic information on the show, see *Head of the Class*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090444/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017).

[4] This nostalgic ABC series centered on the growing pains of young Kevin Arnold (Fred Savage), who had a very nerdy best friend: Paul Joshua Pfeiffer (Josh Saviano). Not only was Paul a brilliant student, he was also prominently Jewish as well. For some basic information on the show, see *The Wonder Years*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094582/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017).

[5] NBC's *Saved by the Bell*, another school-based sitcom, features one of the most famous stereotypical nerds of the period, Screech (Dustin Diamond). For some basic information on the show, see *Saved By the Bell*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096694/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017).

[6] ABC's family sitcom *Family Matters* centers on the Winslow family and the breakout character of the series, their nerdy neighbor Steve Urkel (Jaleel White). Not only would Urkel become one of the most popular and well-known nerd performances of the 90s, he is notably one of the first major prominent black nerd characters. For some basic information on the show see *Family Matters*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096579/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017).

[7] Two of my favorite nerd characters from this period happen to be animated nerds: The first is Bart's friend Milhouse from *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and the second is the minor character Doofus from *DuckTales* (1987-1990). However, a number of important television shows from 1989-2001 touch upon the

performances suggests a significant move from the public sphere to the private sphere of the family home, and therefore a deeper and more invasive promulgation of the nerd stereotype in American life.

However, this further infiltration of the nerd stereotype in the American imagination was not the only noteworthy trend to occur during the fifth phase. The 90s also witnessed the rise of the black male nerd character as a prominent figure, a truly significant change for the nerd stereotype. True, many of the mainstream portrayals of nerds remained primarily white, but this phenomenon marks a radical break with nerd performances before 1989. As we have seen throughout this work, up to this point African Americans were excluded from the nerd stereotype due mainly to the "whitening" of intelligence. Then suddenly nerdy characters like Carlton Banks (Alfonso Ribeiro) from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1998) and the notoriously popular Steve Urkel (Jaleel White) from the aforementioned *Family Matters* began to appear.[8] There was also a popular remake of *The Nutty Professor* (1996) starring Eddie Murphy as Sherman Klump/Buddy Love (not mention the rest of the Klump family).[9] This inclusion of black male nerds (black female nerds, it seems, would still have to wait) marks a decisive rupture with nerd performances of the past, all of which notably marked

nerd stereotype in a variety of ways, from the highly popular comedy *Frasier* (1993-2004) to the science fiction drama *The X-Files* (1993-2002) to the short-lived cult classic *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000).
[8] For some more basic information on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Carlton, see *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098800/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017). One could also make an argument that the character Dwayne Wayne (Kadeem Hardison), a brainy math major at the fictional HBCU Hillman College in *A Different World* (1987-1993), was a bit of a black male nerd as well, one that actually anticipates Steve Urkel.
[9] Personally, I feel that just as *The Nutty Professor* (1963) marginally represented a slight improvement for intellectualism in American culture in the early 60s, albeit one still limited by its reliance on (playboy) masculinity, the 1996 remake potentially represents a similar phenomenon. Perhaps a comparison between the two films and between the early 60s and the mid-90s (and the presidencies of Kennedy and Clinton) might reveal certain cultural similarities with regard to the marginal recuperation of intellectualism. For some basic information on the Eddie Murphy remake of *The Nutty Professor*, see *The Nutty Professor*, IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117218/?ref_=nv_sr_1 (accessed April 5, 2017).

intelligence as the sole providence of whiteness. Might this significant change represent a slight improvement regarding the acceptance of black intelligence in American culture? Or a further attempt to mock black intelligence through gross stereotype?

While my research into these black male nerds of the 90s is still preliminary, I believe that there is a strong connection between the rise in popular recognition of black intellectuals in the broader culture and these black male nerd performances.[10] Up into the 80s, white Americans usually found ways to ignore or erase or "tokenize" black intellectuals, and to prevent them from achieving wider recognition in the mainstream (white) culture.[11] Then in the late 80s/early 90s, we see not just notable black intellectuals, but notable black intellectuals disseminated as more widely recognized public intellectuals. From Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (who published his seminal *The Signifying Monkey* in 1988) to Cornell West to Toni Morrison to Shelby Steele to bell hooks to many others, the rise of so many prominent black public intellectuals in this period is an especially intriguing phenomenon.[12] Might these black nerd stereotypes be reflecting this phenomenon, much like the prominence of the Jewish nerd reflected the

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[10] And again, black intellectuals have always been present in American culture, so it is not that black intellectuals suddenly started appearing in the late 80s/early 90s, but that the intellectual contributions of blacks were finally beginning to be acknowledged in the broader public sphere.

[11] It can also be argued that this burgeoning acceptance of black intelligence is part of a larger trend of embracing the humanity of black folk more generally, not just intellectually. The 80s, after all, witnessed Vanessa Williams crowned Miss America 1984 and the immense popularity of *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011). These popular culture figures and figurations were embraced not as *black* people, but as *people*—people all Americans "could relate to" empathetically. Perhaps with this increasing understanding that black people could be "just like white folk," there was an increasing understanding that black people could "be nerds, too."

[12] For an interesting and highly useful article discussing the prominence of black public intellectuals during this period, see Robert S. Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1995, 53-6, 60-2, 64-8, 70.

New York Intellectuals of the past? As this topic is so rich and complex, these are connections I plan to research even further in future work.[13]

Another noteworthy trend in the late 80s/90s is the dearth of female nerd performances after their erasure near the end of the fourth phase (see chapter 8). After all, each and every popular 90s nerd mentioned above is notably male. As examined throughout *Performing Nerd*, female nerd representations from the mid-40s to the mid-80s had always been less prominent than their male counterparts, but they were nevertheless present and conspicuous in popular performance. Then the number of female nerd characters dwindled rather precipitously by the late 80s to almost none, an erasure that denied women their right to intelligence and to be masters of computers (and video games). This erasure of the female nerd was, as we have seen, part of a highly misogynistic, anti-feminist, neoconservative push that continued into the late 80s and well into the 90s.

In fact, it is not until the late 90s when a rare few prominent female representations slowly began to reappear again, and even then, in a rather problematic fashion, as represented by the film *She's All That* (1999). This youth comedy encapsulates the prototypical female nerd Cinderella story: the female nerd character gets a makeover, takes off her glasses, and then magically becomes pretty and a worthy love interest for the cool male lead.[14] So even in those rare instances in the late 90s (when

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[13] I also feel that another important contributing factor to the rise of black male nerds in the 90s was the pronounced popular emphasis on black hypermasculinity at the time, most prominently represented by the figure of the gansta thug. Just as the figure of the white jock in the 80s seemed to create a greater cultural need for white nerds at the time, perhaps the gangsta thug black male figure seemed to create a cultural need for hypomasculine black male nerds in the 90s?

[14] Another important film, and one that Timothy Shary suggests is "the first full portrayal of a female nerd in American school films" is *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996), which is another problematic and rather disheartening portrayal of a female nerd. (46) For more on the rare few female nerd performances in the late 90s, including *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and *She's All That*, see Timothy Shary*, Generation*

female nerd characters slowly and sporadically begin to appear again) where there was a semi-prominent female nerd character, the entire point of the character was that she should *not* be nerdy.[15] Taken altogether, the ten years or so spanning from the late 80s to the late 90s, short though it may be, was a sort of interregnum for female nerd representations, one that likely reflected the especially angry and vindictive misogyny of the time.[16]

Whether considering the greater dissemination of the stereotype in performance, the notable shift to the medium of television, the inclusion of black male nerds, or the exclusion of female nerds, the nerd stereotype undoubtedly underwent significant changes in the late 80s/early 90s. The most momentous of all of these changes, however, is "the rise of the nerd" and the nerd identity (discussed below), which radically altered nerd discourse during the fifth phase—so much so that I feel it necessary to consider it separately from the present work of *Performing Nerd*. In a way, the first four phases studied throughout this examination mark subtle modifications in the performance and treatment of the nerd stereotype: this sharp shift into the fifth phase marks a much more significant change. It might then be best to consider the nerd stereotype from 1945-1989, as suggested previously, as the "early" nerd stereotype, and the "current" nerd stereotype

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Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980, rev. ed. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2014), 46-50.

[15] That said, the late 90s also sees one of the most important and influential female nerd performances of all time, Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), who, in my opinion, is one of the first relatively positive representations of a female nerd, which may well account for *Buffy*'s strong (female nerd) fan base. More to the point, I would argue that one reason Willow became so popular was because she stood out as a "new" female nerd after the long lack of female nerd characters, a crucial first step towards breaking the "girls can't be nerds" myth. For more on Willow as an intelligent female nerd performance, see Holly Randell-Moon, "Being a Nerd and Negotiating Intelligence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," in *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television*, Lisa Holderman, ed. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 173-86.

[16] Recall that, as mentioned in a chapter 7 footnote, that the late 80s/early 90s was the time when the term "feminazi" entered the American lexicon, and as mentioned in a chapter 8 footnote, Barbie found math to be tough. One could also point to the harsh neoconservative treatment of President Bill Clinton's wife and first lady, Hillary Clinton, as an indication of this vindictive misogyny in the 90s.

as ranging from 1989 to present day. It is my hope that the work presented here in
Performing Nerd on the early nerd stereotype will be useful in later examinations of the
current nerd stereotype and, as I shall address below momentarily, other nerd-related
constructs as well.

Looking Back: Reviewing the Early Nerd Stereotype

Before looking forward at the nerd identity and other more contemporaneous nerd
discourses, it is best to address some of the main findings of *Performing Nerd*, as a
number of significant points have come up during this research that both bear further
comment and affect potential future examinations. The first major point worth
emphasizing is that the nerd stereotype, as mentioned above, has not been static over
time, shifting subtly in its various representations throughout the years. Some of my
general observations have found that in the first phase of the nerd stereotype (1945-
1957), nerds tended to be more pretentious in their performances, often portrayed as
oddball misfits with a touch more aristocratic snobbishness and elitism. I feel this is a
reflection of how intelligence was especially seen as undemocratic and, yes, un-American
during this era. However, in the second phase (1957-1969), most nerd performances
wend towards quirky anti-heroes and tolerable wacky sidekicks, revealing both a partial
recuperation of intelligence at the time as well as a problematic attempt to masculinize
that intelligence for white males.

Then, at the crucial juncture of the late 60s/early 70s, it seems that the neurotic
Jewish schlemiel had rendered the stereotypical nerd performance to be even more
ridiculous, even more preposterous, giving the nerd stereotype a stronger inflection of
sexual failure rather than general masculine/feminine failure. In an odd, but rather

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revealing way, just as the Asian model minority myth arose in the late 60s/early 70s as a sort of white male hegemony defense mechanism to chastise empowered and aggressive African Americans, the neurotic Jewish sexual schlemiel rose to prominence as a sort of preliminary response to Women's Liberation, to chastise both feminists and the men who supported them. Clearly liberated women would render American men emasculated, neurotic, sexual failures. It seems as if, through the schlemiel, white male hegemony at first found this notion of emasculated males just as funny as feminism itself. But when feminism refused to go away, when women continued to press for their rights, those guffaws turned to a much deeper anxiety throughout the 70s. Those neurotic schlemiels transitioned from comic figures to dramatic ones. Hence, many nerd performances in the third phase (1968-1980), especially during the mid- to late-70s, tend to possess a level of disturbed anxiety and sexual neuroses that previous incarnations lacked.

As the stereotype shifted into the fourth phase (1978-1989), the general tone of most nerd performances again shifted. As the discourses of hypermasculinity, anti-intellectualism, and anti-feminist sentiment that slowly grew in the long 70s achieved dominance throughout the culture in the 80s, the nerd stereotype became a ridiculous sexual failure again, but this time demanding an especially harsh and humiliating treatment in antithetical response to the idealization of hypermasculine jocks and hard body action heroes as the masculine ideal. Yet despite this rather brutal debasement, these 80s nerd performance was also imbued with an even keener sense of white male entitlement, as evidenced particularly in the complex figure of the computer programmer/hacker nerd that proliferated during this phase. In a fashion, these 80s nerd performances combined the belittling of "elitist" intellect prominent from the 50s nerd,

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the ridiculousness of the 60s nerd, and the sexual failings of the 70s nerd. Yet they also consistently portrayed both computer technologies (and the money and power that went with them) as the province of white men—a marked change from earlier phases, when computer programming in particular was a job associated with women and weirdos. If anything, these 80s nerd performances portrayed young men overcoming their wimpy nerdiness and mastering both computers and women, the rightful objects of the entitled white male in Reagan's America.

In short, how the nerd stereotype is treated and portrayed varies from phase to phase, reflecting cultural modulations over time. This, I feel, is an important phenomenon to keep in mind when considering past nerd stereotype performances. One cannot treat the nerd Dilton Doiley from the 50s in precisely the same analytical fashion as Jerry Lewis's Professor Kelp, Woody Allen's Alvy Singer, or Anthony Michael Hall's The Geek—each must be situated into the larger frame of other similar nerd performances from their respective periods.

And yet, these subtle phase-to-phase variations aside, there still remain core characteristics of the nerd stereotype that have also united these performances over time. Most importantly, the two primary functions of the nerd stereotype have staunchly remained in place over the years: both the hegemonic and the exclusionary dynamics remained pivotal to all of these nerd performances. While the treatments and deployments of stereotypical nerd performance may have adapted to fit and reflect their respective times, the key attributes of masculine/feminine failure and of disempowering the marginalized remain staunchly in place.

The exclusionary dynamic of the nerd stereotype deserves special attention. After all, bound within the historically and culturally contingent variations of the general nerd stereotype over time are, as we have seen, prominent variations in terms of the marginalized Other. These variations, in turn, impact the "othering" of the nerd stereotype. For example, the association of Jewishness with the nerd stereotype, while essentially omnipresent, was particularly emphasized in the 50s and then again in the 70s,[17] whereas the Asian nerd was particularly emphasized via nerd performances in the 80s. Both the inclusion of Jewish and Asian nerds and the exclusion of black nerds highlight how it is the "almost white" folks that were ascribed hyperintelligence and incorporated into the nerd stereotype. Furthermore, these inclusions occur for particular ethnicities or races at key historical junctures when their "almost white" status was being negotiated in American culture. This phenomenon reinforces the biased connection that dominant American culture holds between whiteness and intelligence. This conflation of whiteness and brainpower is further exemplified by the association of Britishness with an intelligent, cultured, hyperwhiteness that arose primarily in the 60s.

What I find to be one of the most exciting revelations from this research was that there was a long and relatively substantial history of female nerd representation. I fully admit that I was rather surprised by how many female nerd performances I was able to uncover over the past 75 years or so. Perhaps unduly influenced by the cultural myth perpetuated by the nerd stereotype that nerds are inherently males, I erroneously assumed there would be little to no female nerd representations before the late 90s due to the long

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[17] Interestingly, the nerdy Jewish schlemiel figure pops up again in the 90s and the 00s, primarily in the television comedy *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), the teen sex comedy *American Pie* (1999) and its subsequent sequels, and many of the film comedies of Ben Stiller, such as *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *Meet the Parents* (2000).

history of sexism in American culture. And yet, as we have seen, it was partially *because of* that sexism that female nerd characters indeed existed through much of the latter half of the twentieth century. More specifically, these female nerd performances reinforced my finding that both men and women suffer from the heteronormative dynamic, and that to be intelligent constituted gender misperformance for all genders. This in turn confirmed that anti-intellectualism was also a foundational characteristic of the nerd stereotype: after all, if the stereotypic notion of "being too smart" applies to all human beings, from the most hegemonic identity construction to the most abject, then it is safe to assume that anti-intellectualism is always at play in the nerd stereotype.

Another reason I was particularly excited to discover this long history of female nerd performance—as well as the approximate cultural moment of their erasure in the late 80s—is because it resonated with another key finding of my research into all things nerd-related: namely, that the nerd stereotype was intimately intertwined with another important nerd construct, the nerd identity. More specifically, the erasure of female nerd performances reflected an attempt to erase not only the very history of female nerd performances, but also real-life female nerds themselves. Any woman attempting to claim a real-life nerd identity for herself in the 90s (and onward) would have to contend and actively resist this pronounced hegemonic pressure to erase and inauthenticate the female nerd—and hence female access to intelligence and the life of the mind. Not coincidentally, real-life female nerds began to resist and fight against this exclusion in the mid-90s, as evidenced by web groups such as www.nrrdgrrls.com and www.girlgeeks.org, and Ellen Ullman's 1997 book *Close to the Machine*.[18] Sadly, this

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[18] For more on Nrrdgrrls (which is apparently no longer live online) see Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1999),

female exclusion—perhaps best summed up by the misogynistic notion of the "fake geek girl"—extends up to recent times, as evidenced by the prominent "fake geek girl" controversy that arose during 2012/2013[19] as well as the #GamerGate controversy that began in 2014.[20] The cultural myth that contends that "girls can't be nerds" not only represents the exclusionary dynamic of the nerd stereotype, but also that the discourses surrounding the nerd identity are built out of the same ideological stuff as the nerd stereotype.

So if the early nerd stereotype examined throughout *Performing Nerd* does indeed lead, in a way, to the advent of the nerd identity, what does that mean for those people who claim a nerd identity? How might the findings in this current examination impact potential future work on the nerd identity? And what is a nerd identity, anyway?

260-83. For more on GirlGeeks, which was found in 1998, see GirlGeeks, http://www.girlgeeks.org (accessed April 5, 2017). Also see Ellen Ullman, *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and its Discontents* (New York: Picador, 1997).

[19] The term "fake geek girl" is defined on Wikipedia as "a pejorative term for a woman who is accused of feigning interest in geeky topics such as video games or comic books to get attention from men." In short, girls weren't really nerds, they just pretended to be to make male nerds like them. The controversy that arose around fake geek girls in 2012 and 2013 was mainly played out in a series of online articles, initiated by a March 26, 2012 Forbes.com article by Tara Tiger Brown entitled "Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away." For a few useful articles and resources on the fake geek girl controversy, see "Geek girl," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geek_girl (accessed September 30, 2017); Tara Tiger Brown, "Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away," *Forbes*, March 26, 2012, https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/#24329be35370 (accessed September 30, 2017); Noah Berlatsky, "'Fake Geek Girls' Paranoia Is About Male Insecurity, Not Female Duplicity," *The Atlantic*, January 22, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/#24329be35370 (September 30, 2017); and Joseph Reagle, "Geek Policing: Fake Geek Girls and Contested Attention," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015), 2862-80, online at http://reagle.org/joseph/2014/fake/fake.html (accessed September 30, 2017).

[20] The Gamergate controversy arose in 2014, and focuses on sexism in video game culture and, more specifically, the violent misogynistic backlash that targeted women in the gaming industry—including feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian—through the hashtag #GamerGate. For more on this phenomenon, see "Gamergate controversy," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy (accessed September 30, 2017); Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, vol. 1 (March 2015), 208-20, online at http://www-tandfonline-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/doi/full/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917?scroll=top&needAccess=true (accessed September 30, 2017); and Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* (2016), 1-20, online at http://journals.sagepub.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/doi/full/10.1177/1555412016640408 (accessed September 30, 2017).

"The Rise of the Nerd" and the Nerd Identity

Of all the intriguing and illuminating shifts and trends that occurred during the

fifth phase mentioned above that merit future study, the most important may well be how

the 90s gave rise to people actually *wanting* to be nerds, people actively claiming a nerd

identity.[21] As mentioned in the introductory chapter to this work, "the rise of the nerd"—

that cultural transformation where certain people were beginning to claim a nerd identity,

proudly self-identifying as nerds, and celebrating nerdy passions (i.e. when nerds

apparently became stylish)—begins in the turbulent years between the late 80s to the

early 00s. Likely fostered by the popularization of the internet, real-life nerds began to

assume the title of "nerd" publically, essentially taking the highly damning epithet from

the 70s and 80s and treating it like a badge of honor. Accordingly, throughout the 90s, the

nerd seemingly shifts from being the lowest of wimps to, perhaps oxymoronically, a

potentially "cool" nerd.[22] By the 00s and certainly the 10s, nerd chic was hip, again

marking a radical change from the early nerd stereotype explored in this work.

The rise of the nerd and the nerd identity is perhaps best understood by the avid

celebration of famous nerd celebrity icons like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs who took

American popular culture by storm in the late 80s and well into the 90s. This popular

celebration of billionaire computer gurus, best encapsulated by Robert X. Cringely's

documentary series *Triumph of the Nerds* (1996), is surely a key component of this

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[21] While I hesitate to truly "define" the nerd identity here, I think it is fair to say that it is a socially
constructed identity formation based primarily on an appreciation (be it authentic or no) of intelligence,
science, education, technology, and related forms of nerdy fandom. Importantly, nerd communities rose
alongside the nerd identity, as both identity and community are intrinsically intertwined. As such, we can
also begin to speak of a nerd culture or subculture along with this promulgation of the nerd identity.
[22] Perhaps the best nerd performance of the fifth phase to encapsulate the valorization of nerdiness and "the
rise of the nerd" is the popularity of the comic strip character Dilbert, who first appeared in publication in
1989 and became one of the most notable and beloved nerd characters of the 90s.

sudden change in the overall treatment of the nerd.[23] Much like American culture in general, Cringely's documentary valorizes the plucky young computer upstarts of the 70s and their eventual triumphant rise to fame and fortune. However, Cringely problematically celebrates these white male nerds conspicuously as white males, particularly those who, in service to the discourse of capitalist-driven practicality, invented useful technology and made a lot of money in the process. In brief, Cringely's conception of nerds, intended or not, leaves no room for nerds who do not use computers, who are non-white, and most notably who are women.

As *Triumph of the Nerds* and the popular hero worship of Gates and Jobs suggest, the rise of the nerd raises a number of complex questions. What was really being celebrated by this cultural trend of nerd valorization? Was being nerdy finally becoming acceptable? Was intelligence finally being valued in American culture? Was male femininity? Or was it rather a reinforcement of white male hegemony? A rehash of the old "American Dream" myth where hard-working white men achieve a drastic upward mobility, making mountains of money in the process? And perhaps the most pressing question is Was the claiming of a nerd identity in the 90s a conscientious, rebellious break away from the anti-intellectualism and hypermasculinity of the past, or merely a further, subtle consolidation of white male privilege? After all, in light of the aforementioned erasure of female nerds in popular performance in the late 80s/90s, it

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[23] *Triumph of the Nerds: An Irreverent History of the PC Industry*, DVD, directed by Paul Sen (1996; New York: Ambrose Video Publishing, 2002). This documentary series is based on Cringely's 1992 bestselling book. See Robert X. Cringely, *Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can't Get a Date* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1992). In many ways, Cringely's work in the 90s helped to promulgate the celebrity computer nerd and the nerd stereotype, most especially the white male nerd stereotype.

appears that many of those claiming a nerd identity were white men, some of whom were

convinced that only white men like themselves could be real-life nerds.

While my research into these questions is still preliminary, I feel it is safe to say

at present that the rise of the nerd and the formation of the nerd identity throughout the

90s was a highly contested and complex cultural discourse that, depending on context

(not to mention the individual nerd), was a potential site for *both* a rebellion against the

anti-intellectual hypermasculinity of the past *and* a reinforcement of hegemonic white

masculinity. On one hand, given the highly pronounced anti-intellectualism of the late

80s/early 90s, any appreciation of intelligence must be understood as moving counter to

the dominant culture, as well as neoconservatism. After all, if black nerd characters—let

alone real-life black intellectuals—were becoming popular celebrities, then perhaps the

rise of the nerd could very well be a potential site for the "un-whitening" of intelligence

and a truly democratic conception of intellect for all?[24] Yet on the other hand, as

previously mentioned, the nerd identity was also often argued to be a solely male identity

in the 90s, a sort of "boys only" clubhouse that fostered the notion that girls could

inherently not be "real" nerds.[25]

With these identity politics in mind, I would also argue that it is exceptionally

vital that we recognize that the nerd *identity*—deeply imbricated as it is with the nerd

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[24] It is also worth noting that there is substantial evidence that the contested whiteness and maleness of the nerd identity in the 90s eventually opened up and seemingly gave way to a variety of various nerd identities in the 00s and the 10s. For example, female nerds seemed to grow immensely after their interregnum in the 90s, a trend in turn reflected by the plethora of female nerd characters that populate the 00s and the 10s, such as forensic scientist Abby Sciuto from the CBS hit drama, *NCIS* (2003-present), forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance "Bones" Brennan (Emily Deschanel) from the Fox television drama *Bones* (2005-2017), and computer whiz Penelope Garcia (Kirsten Vangsness) from the CBS hit show *Criminal Minds* (2005-present), to name only a few.

[25] Sadly, as suggested above, this myth that girls cannot be nerds never fully disappeared, although it certainly seems to have weakened in the 00s and the 10s, as suggested in the previous footnote. That said, starting very recently in the mid-10s, there seems to be a strong resurgence of this misogynistic notion that the nerd identity is not meant for women. Again, see the "fake geek girl" and #Gamergate controversies mentioned above.

stereotype—is also intimately bound up with the same two dynamics of hegemony and exclusion. After all, both the nerd stereotype and the nerd identity, while very different constructs, are comprised of the same ideological building blocks, as it were. Furthermore, the genealogy of the nerd stereotype explored in this cultural history clearly still resonates with the nerd identity, even today. In brief, the great weight of the nerd stereotype's history cannot be overlooked.

Accordingly, to self-proclaim a nerd identity or to participate in a given nerd subculture automatically places an individual in a complex of nerd discourses that necessitate some reaction for or against these two dynamics. I would argue that this is inevitable. If a given individual nerd or nerdy fandom truly celebrates intelligence in all of its various forms, actively challenges idealized gender roles and accepts the feminine male and masculine female openly, and admits no impediments to the inclusion of all nerds regardless of race or gender or other supposed identifactory markers, then we might find much positive promise and potential in such a nerd identity, one that purposefully denies both the heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics of the stereotype. If, however, the status of nerd is used to belittle and ostracize women and non-whites, to further reinforce white masculine hegemony and entitlement, and used as an outlet for racist and sexist vitriol as well as staunchly anti-intellectual sentiments, we may assume that the nerd stereotype in its most pernicious—and neoconservative—manifestations are still at work. In short, I believe that the nerd identity has much potential to subvert the heteronormative and exclusionary dynamics of the nerd stereotype, but also much potential danger to further deploy those very destructive dynamics as well. And over the

past thirty years or so, the nerd identity has been used, in varying specific contexts, in both of these ways.

While these are vitally important research questions and topics fraught with complex identity politics, I feel they are best left for future work primarily because this present work has focused mainly on the performance of a singular nerd construct: the nerd stereotype. From the late 80s forward, it would be imperative, I believe, to study both the nerd stereotype and the nerd identity in tandem: two separate entities, yet both intimately intertwined. In fact, I think it would actually be best to go back to that pivotal shift in the late 60s/early 70s and begin tracing the nerd identity from there forward, where it seems to have its strongest roots, up to the moment in the late 80s/early 90s when it begins to blossom. That research project, however, would need a new set of parameters and might benefit from a deeper consideration of fandom studies, as well as sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic work as they relate to real-life nerds specifically and identity formation more generally.

As suggested in the introduction, *Performing Nerd: The Nerd Stereotype in American Popular Culture* intends to ground this sort of future research; a thorough exploration of nerd identity would not be fully possible without a full understanding of the nerd stereotype—where it came from, how it operates, and how it has experienced change and fluctuations over time. Any understanding of the nerd construct from the 90s forward without the foundational exploration provided by *Performing Nerd* would be an ahistorical study, severely lacking in crucial contextual insights. It is my sincere hope to contribute to this continued discourse, and I fully intend to investigate the nerd identity

more thoroughly in my future work, perhaps as a sequel of sorts, an "Episode II," as it were, to *Performing Nerd*.

Additionally, I would also argue that such an investigation of the nerd identity and its related discourses is something that we Americans desperately need at this particular historical moment. After all, if the nerd identity, like the nerd stereotype, is also wrapped up in the cultural discourses of anti-intellectualism, white masculinity, anti-feminism, right-wing politics, heteronormativity, and the marginalization of the Other, a better understanding of what it means to be a nerd today would likely be highly revealing, given the current political climate in the U.S.

Some Final Thoughts: Nerds in the Age of Trump

In a general, yet very palpable sense, we have seen throughout this work how, when anti-intellectualism is in the ascendant in American culture, there is a concordant rise in conservatism/neoconservatism, repressive gender roles for both men and women, anti-feminist backlash, homophobia, racism (most especially against African Americans), and the reification of white masculine hegemony.[26] And as I write this conclusion (in the fall of 2017), the United States of America seems to be shifting into such an era again, one that recapitulates much of the identity politics of the 80s and, even further back, the 50s. From the violence at the Charlottesville rally in August 2017, which speaks to a

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[26] Although it is a complex subject for another time, I feel that far from being only a concordant relationship between anti-intellectualism and hegemony, these two concepts are actually intimately conjoined. If hegemony seeks to enforce coercion and manufacture consent in order to strengthen itself and weaken those discourses that would seek to unseat it, then intelligence (critical thinking) is perhaps the most serious threat to hegemony. Hegemony obfuscates itself, and resists analysis—it wants to manifest as common sense, a simple understood, and does not want to be examined or critiqued. And in this way, I believe, hegemony is inherently anti-intellectual. The public intellectual who dares to speak truth to the power of hegemony must be silenced and diminished by that hegemony, and anti-intellectualism may be seen as the hegemonic mechanism that performs this function.

disturbing resurgence of white supremacy,[27] to the recent string of scandals in Silicon

Valley (such as Uber CEO Travis Kalanick's resignation, and the much-publicized sexist

internal memo at Google that, essentially, argues that "girls can't be nerds" because of

biological essentialism),[28] which speaks to the pervasive sexism that still remains in

corporate America (particularly the tech industry), it appears that white masculine

hegemony is reasserting itself as strongly as ever.

Perhaps this cultural shift is best personified by the shift from President Barack

Obama (in office 2009 – 2017) to the current presidency of Donald Trump (2017 –

present).[29] After all, Barack Obama is widely considered one of the nerdiest (in the most

positive sense) presidents in recent times, a sort of intellectual antidote to the supposedly

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[27] For a small sample of reportage on the Charlottesville rally, see Richard Fausset and Alan Feuer, "Far-Right Groups Surge Into National View in Charlottesville," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/far-right-groups-blaze-into-national-view-in-charlottesville.html (accessed September 30, 2017); Dara Lind, "Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained, *Vox*, August 14, 2017,
https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138246/charlottesville-nazi-rally-right-uva (accessed September 30, 2017); Joe Heim, Ellie Silverman, T. Rees Shapiro, and Emma Brown, "One dead as car strikes crowds amid protests of white nationalist gathering in Charlottesville; two police die in helicopter crash," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/fights-in-advance-of-saturday-protest-in-charlottesville/2017/08/12/155fb636-7f13-11e7-83c7-
5bd5460f0d7e_story.html?utm_term=.ea7621a427d0 (accessed September 30, 2017); and "Unite the Right rally," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Right_rally#Vehicular_ramming_into_counter-protesters (accessed September 30, 2017).
[28] For a small sample of the recent sexism scandals in the tech industry, see Sara Ashley O'Brien and Seth Fiegerman, "Silicon Valley finally faces a reckoning with sexism," CNN Money, August 9, 2017, http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/09/technology/culture/silicon-valley-sexism/index.html
(accessed September 30, 2017); Kate Conger, "Exclusive: Here's the Full 10-Page Anti-Diversity Screed Circulating Internally at Google [Updated]," Gizmodo, August 5, 2017, https://gizmodo.com/exclusive-heres-the-full-10-page-anti-diversity-screed-1797564320 (accessed September 30, 2017); Liza Mundy, "Why Is Silicon Valley So Awful to Women?," *The Atlantic*, April 2017,
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/why-is-silicon-valley-so-awful-to-women/517788/ (accessed September 30, 2017); and Sara Wachter-Boettcher, "Tech's sexism doesn't stay in Silicon Valley. It's in the products you use.," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2017,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/08/techs-sexism-doesnt-stay-in-silicon-valley-its-in-the-products-you-use/?utm_term=.19499d8cd27e (accessed September 30, 2017).
[29] At present, my future work on the nerd identity will likely be broken down into phases, just as I have used throughout this work. The fifth phase, 1989 – 2001, witnesses the recuperation of the nerd and the emergence of the nerd identity. The sixth phase, 2001 – 2013, may be viewed as the period where the nerd identity thrived. And from 2013 to today, well, it is too soon to tell, although the mounting anti-intellectualism and the rising of alt-right politics might suggest future concerns.

unintelligent G. W. Bush presidency that came before.[30] Armed with his Blackberry, his

support of scientific inquiry, and pro-feminist image, Obama came to be a sort of nerd

icon in much of the (liberal) nerd subculture. Trump clearly painted himself as

antithetical to Obama in this sense during his presidential campaign, and continues to do

so now that he is in office. Even as he campaigned against Hillary Clinton (who, like

Obama, was often portrayed as a nerd in the popular media), the popular media could not

resist drawing the Hillary/nerd, Trump/bully analogy.[31]

   Whether or not Trump is indeed an anti-nerd bully or not, there is certainly

mounting evidence that his presidency embodies and reflects not only a reinforcement of

entitled white male hegemony in American culture, but also a resurgence of anti-

intellectualism as well. In many ways, Trump's very own brand of political populism

epitomizes this anti-intellectual trend.[32] In addition, Trump's actions in office and his

administration have been roundly viewed as anti-science[33] and anti-education,[34] views

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[30] For more on Obama's nerd cred (and support of science in particular), see Seth Borenstein, "Obama: Full-on geek or just 'nerd adjacent?'," NBC News.com, December 26, 2008, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/28390800/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/obama-full-on-geek-or-just-nerd-adjacent/#.WdApoEyZOqA (accessed September 30, 2017); Cliff Ransom, "President Barack Obama on How to Win the Future," *Popular Science*, 2016, https://www.popsci.com/features/interview-with-president-barack-obama/?dom=tw (accessed September 30, 2017); Damon Young, "Why a Skinny Black Nerd Became the Coolest Man on the Planet," *GQ*, January 17, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/obama-the-nerd (accessed September 30, 2017); and Gardiner Harris, "Obama to Leave the White House a Nerdier Place Than He Found It," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/us/politics/obama-to-leave-the-white-house-a-nerdier-place-than-he-found-it.html (accessed September 30, 2017).

[31] For two small examples of such popular references to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, see Christian Piatt, "Bullies, Nerds and Why Trump Is Winning," Huffpost, February 22, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-piatt/bullies-nerds-and-why-tru_b_9292276.html (accessed September 30, 2017); and Lisa Belkin, "Nerd vs. jock: Everything you need to know about Clinton and Trump, you learned in high school," Yahoo!, June 23, 2016, https://www.yahoo.com/news/nerd-vs-jock-everything-know-000000618.html (accessed September 30, 2017).

[32] Recall, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, that Hofstadter suggests that anti-elitism, a primary pillar of anti-intellectualism, can best be equated to political populism in American life.

[33] For more on Trump's connection to anti-science sentiment (as well as his head of the EPA Scott Pruitt's), see The Editorial Board, "President Trump's War on Science," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/09/opinion/sunday/trump-epa-pruitt-

that I have argued reflect both anti-intellectualism as well as an antipathy towards nerds, intellectuals, and those who live the life of the mind. In particular, his attacks on public intellectuals and experts—most especially journalists—resonate with pronounced anti-intellectual sentiment.[35]

Might the "Trump Era" indicate an end to the "rise of the nerd" and so-called nerd chic? A nadir for nerdiness and a zenith for angry white male jocks and bullies? Or might the nerd identity continue to thrive, but become even more exclusionary, figuratively (or literally) building a wall between women, blacks, and other marginalized Others and the sort of knowledge-based power afforded white American men? Or is it possible that nerd culture might instead become a bastion *against* the mounting anti-intellectual trend, a place for intelligent folk of all kinds to combat racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, islamophobia, and all forms of unthinking bias and prejudice? A place where white masculine hegemony can be combated and deconstructed for the good of everyone: males

science.html?emc=edit_th_20170910&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=52937129 (accessed September 30, 2017).

[34] For more on Trump's connection to anti-education sentiment (as well as his Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's), see Gail Collins, "The Trump War on Public Schools," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/opinion/the-trump-war-on-public-schools.html (accessed September 30, 2017).

[35] For a few varying opinion articles on Trump's anti-intellectualism, see Nicholas Baer, "American Idiot: Rethinking Anti-Intellectualism in the Age of Trump," Resilience, August 30, 2017, http://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-08-30/american-idiot-rethinking-anti-intellectualism-in-the-age-of-trump/ (accessed September 30, 2017); Louis René Beres, "Trump and the Triumph of Anti-Reason," *U.S. News & World Report*, July 13, 2017, https://www.usnews.com/opinion/op-ed/articles/2017-07-13/donald-trump-and-the-triumph-of-anti-reason-in-america (accessed September 30, 2017); Conor Lynch, "Draining the swap—of brainpower: Trump's corrupt administration is fueled by anti-intellectualism," Salon, July 22, 2017, https://www.salon.com/2017/07/22/draining-the-swamp-of-brainpower-trumps-corrupt-administration-is-fueled-by-anti-intellectualism/ (accessed September 30, 2017); Paul Krugman, "We Don't Need No Education," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2017, https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/07/12/we-dont-need-no-education-2/ (accessed September 30, 2017); Bruce Bartlett, "Trump Is What Happens When a Political Party Abandons Ideas," Politico, June 24, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/24/intellectual-conservatives-lost-republican-trump-215259 (accessed September 30, 2017); and Chris Cillizza, "Donald Trump isn't an intellectual. And he's very proud of that.," *The Washington Post*, January 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/19/the-aggressive-anti-intellectualism-of-donald-trump/?utm_term=.fda45bb41a1d (accessed September 30, 2017).

and non-males, whites and non-whites, Americans and non-Americans, even Democrats and Republicans?

Frankly at this point it could go either way. Only time will tell. However, it is clear that the performance of the nerd stereotype in American popular culture will be an exceptionally useful barometer with which to track this exceedingly important phenomenon, one that I hope we will all watch with the utmost care, objectivity, and, yes, intelligence.

Appendix

Figure 1: The nerd Dilton Doiley from Archie Comics (as represented in the 40s/50s), more often than not portrayed as elitist and emasculated

Figure 2: The nefarious and effete gay intellectuals Phillip Morgan (Farley Granger, left) and Brandon Shaw (John Dall, right) in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948)

Figure 3: The tolerable "NASA nerds" of NASA's Mission Control,
surrounded by "electronic brains"

Figure 4: The playboy Buddy Love (Jerry Lewis, top) as antithesis to Professor Kelp (also Jerry Lewis, bottom) in *The Nutty Professor* (1963)
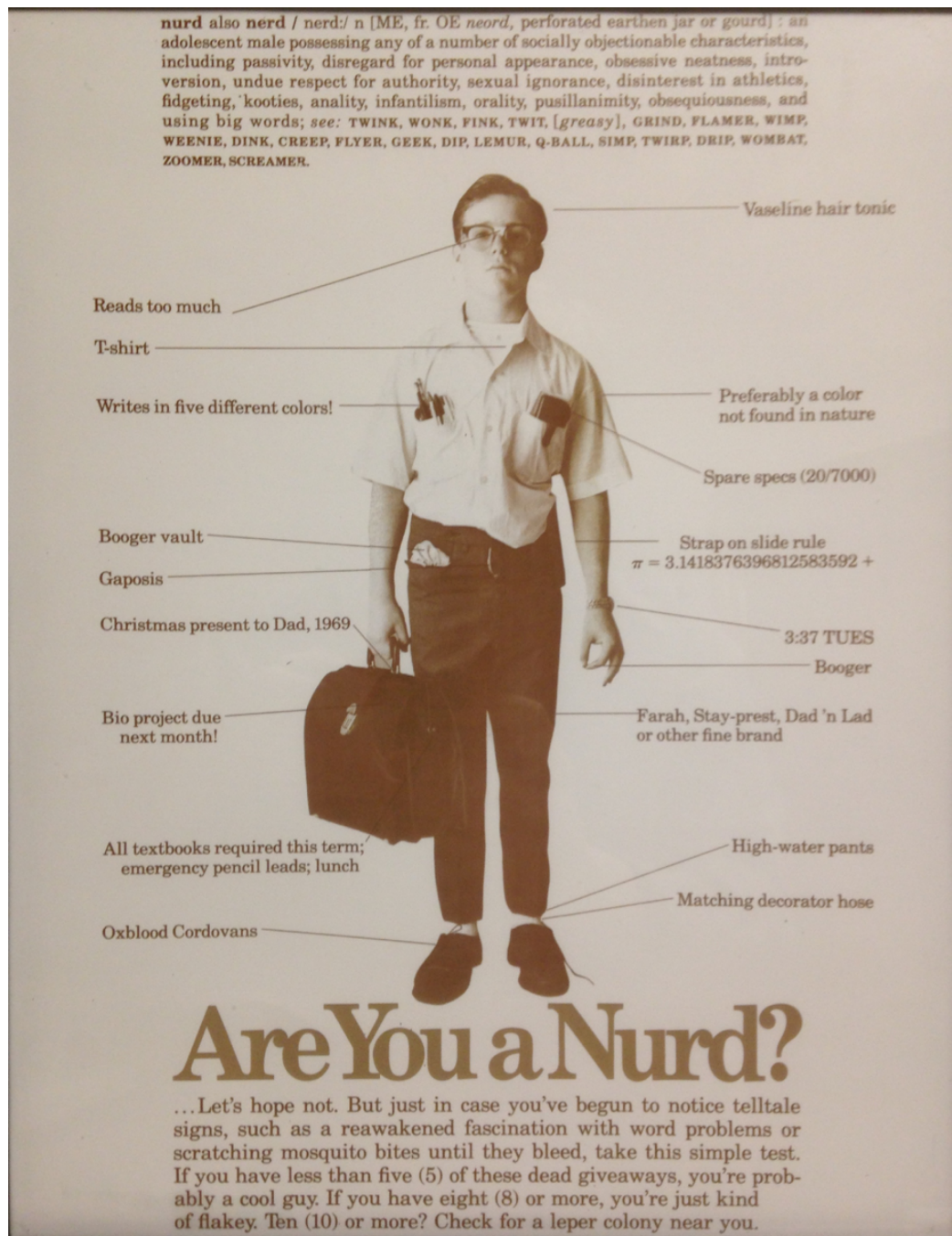
Figure 5: The "Are You a Nurd?" poster from *National Lampoon* magazine, first pictured in 1974
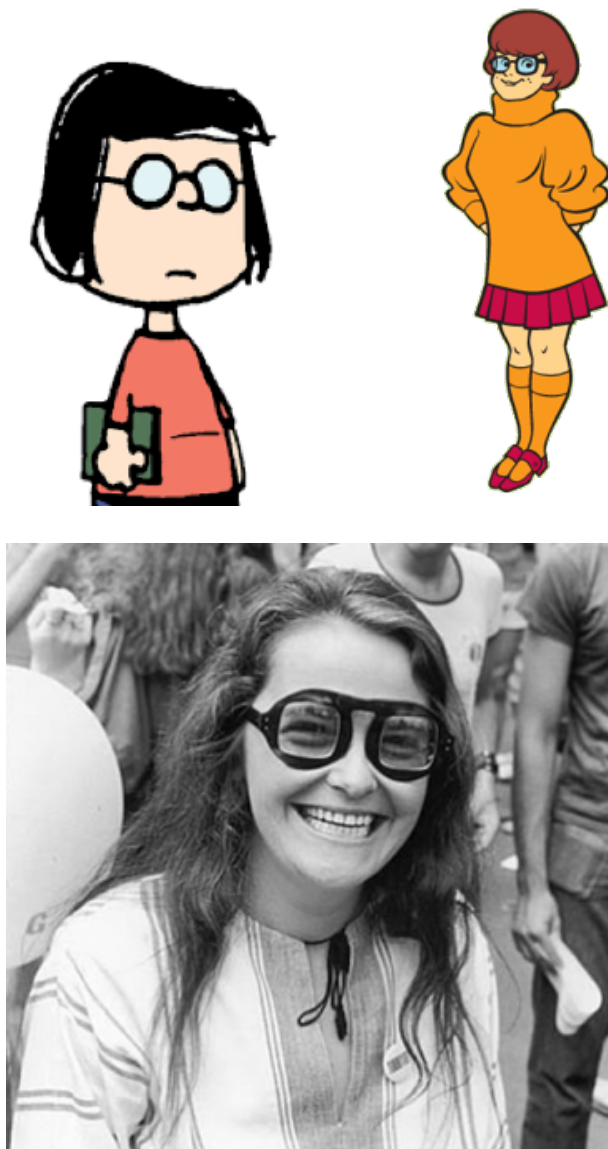
Figure 6: Three female (lesbian?) nerds from the early 70s: Marcie from Charles M. Schulz's comic strip *Peanuts* (top left), Velma Dinkley from *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (top right), and feminist scholar Kate Millett (bottom), author of *Sexual Politics*

Figure 7: Subordinated masculinities in the 70s: "new man" Dustin Hoffman as the emasculated David Sumner (left) trapped in his own home in *Straw Dogs* (1971), and the quintessential nerdy Jewish schlemiel, Woody Allen (right)

Figure 8: Anthony Michael Hall as "The Geek" in John Hughes' *Sixteen Candles* (1984), desperately pining for Sam Baker (Molly Ringwald) (left), and just before he wakes up and realizes he had sex with the popular girl Caroline (Haviland Morris) (right), an example of a prominent "nerd rape scene" from the 80s
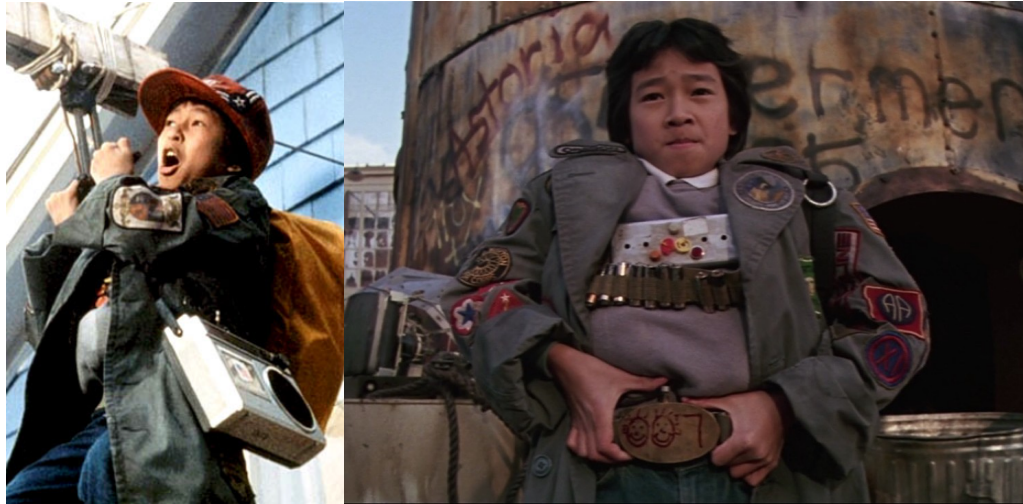
Figure 9: 80s Asian nerd Data (Jonathan Ke Huy Quan) from *The Goonies* (1985), trying to be like James Bond, but winding up much more like Q with his gadgetry

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