FIELDING FANDOM:
READING CHILDHOOD THROUGH POPULAR AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT
The phrase fielding fandom intends to take advantage of the many entailments of the word field. Designating at once a space or sphere of interest characterized by joint activity and the processes of picking up, putting into action, and responding skillfully, this research includes a consideration of the data gathering techniques, re-presentational strategies, and interpretive skills the contemporary researcher of popular culture can bring to both playing the field and interpreting a particular field of play.

In general, this research is an interpretive account of my own close reading strategies and experiences in relation to those popular cultural texts and discourses around childhood that have compelled me to “read wrongly” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). More specifically, it considers various close encounters that shaped the interactions between other readers in a participatory context (the online fan community Television Without Pity) and, as shaped by a particular text (the Reality TV program Kid Nation). I argue that during these contemporary literary engagements, the subjects of and for reading were discursively formed as individuals employed various strategies to negotiate the inherent paradoxes of the Reality TV text.

Emphasizing the ‘real’ in reading popular cultural texts suggests that it is not an a priori form, but rather, must be bracketed from the everyday ways in which we come to know the world. I suggest that reading these texts as a fan-tellectual evokes game-like epistemologies and situated discursive strategies that may also be used to inform the ways in which popular and school-based ways of knowing and forms of knowledge are addressed in the context of teacher education. The image of the researcher as fan-tellectual suggests that educators, too, should strive to recognize and take advantage of the many ways of knowing “(other)wise” (Vinz, 2000) and tolerance for ambiguity and paradox being a fan entails.
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DEDICATION

To my parents
PREFACE
When *Survivor* debuted in 2000, I was teaching high school English in a rural community in central Alberta. Friday mornings always began with an animated class discussion about the previous nights episode, particularly around those characters we simply ‘loved to hate’. Since then, I have become an avid Reality TV fan and continue to be intrigued by the way these *fictionalized* programs invite me to negotiate what is ‘real’ in the context of deliberately unreal situations.

In September 2007, the debut of one particular Reality TV show seemed to have the most potential for not only re-envisioning literary engagement, but more importantly, for identifying and re-considering the popular conceptions and discursive networks of childhood. *Kid Nation* aired in the fall of 2007 and involved a cast of 40 participants aged 8-15 working together to re-build the failed 1885 community of Bonanza City. To no surprise, the show generated much controversy and moral panic on the Internet. But in the fan community *Television Without Pity*, individuals were reading the *Kid Nation* text much more closely, looking for the authentic implications of what they knew to be a manipulated narrative of the experience of childhood.

In studying the fan discourse around *Kid Nation*, I noticed how the format of Reality TV was uniquely suited to creating a vibrant “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2001) through which significant cultural conversations concerning the status of the child in contemporary society converged. I believe the conceptions of childhood re-presented by *Kid Nation* fans are worthy of attention because these same cultural narratives are implicated by (and sometimes entrenched in) the discourses of teachers and teacher education. Not unlike the cultural myths Britzman (2003) identified as shaping what it means to be a teacher there appear to be equally insidious “normalizing fictions” regarding what it means to be a child; fictions that teachers especially ought to be able to negotiate.
CHAPTER ONE - REPRESENTATION, REALITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF READING CLOSELY

In this chapter, I introduce some of the salient issues concerning the media’s relationship to reality, and in particular, the ways in which choice in a media-saturated environment may more a matter of attending to the unexpected and ambiguous conditions of our experiences rather than the product of a independent, rational mind.

After a brief discussion of *The Truman Show* as one of the first popular cultural texts to address the ways in which the media shapes our “everyday consciousness” (Gitlin 1980), I reconsider the notion of choice under such conditions. In response to the commonsense binary drawn between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture that this research aims to challenge, I argue that the engagements conditioned by popular cultural forms like Reality TV are indeed ‘literary’ in the sense that the text embodies sufficient gaps and indeterminacies that serve to evoke imaginative speculation (Iser, 1978; Sumara, 1996).

By re-positioning elements of the ‘real’ in a fictionalized form, Reality TV creates a *commonplace location* or *collecting place* for readers to insert their own past, present and predictive experiences in relation to the text (Sumara, 1996; 2002). The final section takes a closer look at the image of the fan as a particular kind of reading subjectivity. Drawing on Jenkins (1992) conception of fandom and Said’s (1994) notion of the “amateur intellectual”, I offer an image of the contemporary literary researcher as a *fan-tellectual*. 
MEDIATING REALITY

The media bring a manufactured public into a private space. From within their private crevices, people find themselves relying on media for concepts, for images of their heroes, for guiding information, for emotional charges, for public recognition of values, for symbols in general, even for language. Of all of the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness – by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity. They name the world's parts, they certify reality as reality.

(emphasis added, Gitlin, 1980, pp. 1-2)

Before Reality TV became the ubiquitous phenomenon it is today, one of the first mainstream texts to explore the ways in which media serve to “orchestrate human consciousness” was the film The Truman Show (1998) written by Andrew Niccol and directed by Peter Weir. The film stars Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, a happy-go-lucky insurance salesman and unknowing protagonist of a 24-hour reality television program chronicling his everyday life. Adopted by a television conglomerate as an infant, Truman’s entire life has been ‘scripted’ and everyone in his life, even his best friend, is merely an actor playing a role. Truman Burbank’s world is a blatant media construction, but this satirical text compels us to ask: Is our experience of the world (of reality) any less a construction?

As The Truman Show’s director Christof suggests: “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It’s as simple as that.” Rationalizing the thirty-year façade that has become Truman’s life, he asserted:

“He could leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there is no way we could prevent him. Ultimately, Truman prefers his cell.”
Truman isn’t compelled to question the nature of his own imprisonment until ‘the real’ (i.e. falling light fixtures and rain showers that fall only on him) begins to breach the boundaries of his perceptual world. Only then does he begin to recognize that his entire life is a meticulously scripted artifice. It is conceivable that these ‘accidents’ (i.e. ruptures of the *real*) have been occurring throughout Truman’s life; what changes is Truman’s disposition to notice and his propensity to pay attention to these breaches.

As Thomas and Gillard (2006) suggest, *The Truman Show* “permits the raising not only of ontological questions (what is real?) but also, more significantly, of epistemological questions (how do we know?)” (p. 116). In the first case, we are asked to consider the “indeterminate nature” of the “distinctions we draw between the reality of television (or media more generally) and the reality of our lives” (p. 117). Put another way, the film draws attention to the nebulous relationship between subjective and social reality. More importantly, we are also challenged to reconsider our understanding of “free will” in a world of mass mediation. That is, what role does ‘the real’ play in orienting our experiences of agency and choice in a media-saturated environment?

In the context of this research, mediation refers to the ways in which popular cultural forms work to re-present or communicate an idea or concept *through* something else, but yet, do not function as transparent “windows unto the world”. As Ellsworth (1997) defined it, the process of representation “presents its subject again, in ways that have *mediated* it through language, ideology, culture, power, convention, desire” (emphasis in original, p. 76). Simply put, the media “alter what they represent in the process of re-presenting it” (ibid).

In de Zengotita’s (2005) assessment of a contemporary post-modern ethos, the notion of ‘mediated selves’ also speaks to the ways in which these popular cultural forms condition our experience of the world and address our
subjectivities in particular ways. The rapid proliferation of Reality TV and reality-based forms of popular culture over the past decade suggest that the techniques and strategies media use to re-present reality are undergoing a rapid evolution.

Like *The Truman Show*, contemporary forms of Reality TV raise both ontological and epistemological questions about ‘the real’, and more importantly, how we might go about gaining access to it. Gitlin’s (1980) treatise in *The Whole World is Watching* and film *The Truman Show* (1998) introduced just how nebulous the conditions under which media assume the symbolic capacity to “certify reality as reality” would become.

**Re-conceptualizing Agency in a World of Whatever**

For de Zengotita (2005), the contemporary mediated self is an inherently *flattered* self. He offered the expression “whatever” as an idea that “distills the essential situation” of the media-saturated self into a “single gesture” which is also seen to shape an ongoing “dialectic” (pp. 15-16). In one sense, the term designates the seemingly unlimited array of possible experiences available through contemporary cultural forms; that is, we can read, watch, hear, imagine and even be, *whatever* we want (ibid). But the notion of whatever accompanied by the shoulder shrug also speaks to the ways in which all of these possibilities are characterized by an “aura of surface” where although “we are at the center of attention, there is a thinness to things, a smoothness, a muffled quality” (ibid).

De Zengotita summarized the paradoxical nature of this ‘ethos of whatever’ thusly: “Haunting the moment of ‘I can experience whatever I want’ is the moment of ‘What difference does it make?’” (p. 17). “In a mediated world,” he posited, “the opposite of real isn’t phony or illusional or fictional – it’s optional” (p. 14). As he explained,
We are most free of mediation, most real, when we are at the disposal of accident and necessity. That’s when we are not being addressed. That’s when we go without the flattery intrinsic to representation (de Zengotita, 2005, p. 14).

As conventionally understood, choice plays no role in the situations de Zengotita identifies as “most real”. Put another way, if one is “at the disposal of accident and necessity” in relationship to media and its representations, one is open to being “pulled up short” by its texts. Kerdeman (2003) develops Gadamer’s (1997) notion of “being pulled up short” to designate textual encounters in which “our assumptions, expectations, and desires fail to materialize, are thwarted or reversed” (p. 295). Most importantly, asserted Kerdeman, we cannot choose or predict which texts or events will pull us up short, “but we can choose to recognize these experiences when they occur” (p. 305).

As Kerdeman (2003) explained: “Encounters and events pull us up short only when we acknowledge that they have revealed blind spots or deceptions we prefer to dismiss or ignore” (p. 305). In sum, we cannot choose when or how ‘the real’ emerges in such engagements, only whether we will recognize it and respond when it does. Such an approach understands choice as a disposition rather than the product of rational reflection (Kerdeman, 2003).

I open with de Zengotita’s image of the incessantly-addressed self and Kerdeman’s understanding of “being pulled up short” to set the stage for a hermeneutic approach to researching popular cultural forms and practices. Not unlike de Zengotita’s non-optional glimpses of the real, hermeneutic understanding often arises in ambiguous, unanticipated, and emergent contexts. In both cases, attention and hermeneutic imagination is evoked in those accidental moments of urgency that simply cannot be shrugged off.
As Sumara (1996) has described it, these acts of acknowledgement and interpretation become “differences that make a difference” in the way we understand our experiences in the world.

If, as Gitlin (1980) asserts, the media “specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness”, then a hermeneutic approach to popular texts and practices “seeks the rupture – the breach – in order to illuminate what is silenced and deferred in the ordinary course of daily events” (Sumara, 1996, p. 127). In hermeneutic inquiry, questions are not pre-determined but emerge in “the hap” or “the moment-to-moment unpredictable experiences that contribute to our remembered, lived and projected experiences” (Sumara, 1996, p. 176).

Like the media-saturated self who seeks unexpected emergences of the ‘real’ within the representational, the hermeneutic researcher imaginatively attends to the “breaches” and “blind-spots” that arise in (real)ly reading (or reading for ‘the real’) in the engagement with the texts and events of popular culture.

**POPULAR CULTURE AND IMAGINATION**

Right now, human beings as a mass, have a gruesome appetite for what they call 'real', whether it's Reality TV or the kind of plodding fiction that only works as low-grade documentary, or at the better end, the factual programmes and biographies and 'true life' accounts that occupy the space where imagination used to sit. Such a phenomenon points to a terror of the inner life, of the sublime, of the poetic, of the non-material, of the contemplative.

(Jeanette Winterson, introduction to the novel *Weight*)

I have much respect for Jeanette Winterson as both an author and theorist and it would be irresponsible to suggest that the sentiments of this one passage represent, in significant way, the depth of her work. Yet in this passage, the
assumption that the contemporary fascination with the ‘real’ (i.e. as popularized by Reality TV) somehow de-thrones or debilitates the role of imagination in the engagement with popular culture is troubling to me.

Johnson (2005) described this tendency to antagonize the relationship between individual intelligence (or in Winterson’s terms, “inner life”) and popular culture as the “lowest-common-denominator principle” which assumes that left to their own devices, “the masses want dumb, simple pleasures” (emphasis in original, p. 9). As Hagood (2008) argued, models and theories that conflate popular culture with mass culture tend to view the audience as passively engaged, non-discriminatory, and insatiable consumers, and its texts as predictable, uncomplicated, and self-evident.

Yet as an avid Reality TV fan, I know that my engagements with these texts offer much more than simple pleasures, mindless escape or predictable experiences. Reality TV addresses me as an active reader rather than as a passive pleasure-seeker (although I do derive pleasure from watching). As I began thinking about Reality TV in terms of conditioning a particular kind of literary experience, I knew that Winterson’s lament represented the commonsense binary drawn between high and low cultural forms and practices my research would have to confront.

But yet, on another level (i.e. from the position of a literature teacher), I knew Winterson’s words also rang true. Other theorists, even Johnson (2005) himself, identified the literary novel as the symbolic cultural form par excellence for capturing the phenomenological intricacies of human mentality or “inner life” (Donald, 2001; Lodge, 2002; Zunshine, 2006).
The gist of this argument is that literary fiction, more than any other cultural form, allows the reader to “vicariously possess the continuum of experience” represented by a character’s consciousness in a way that is not possible in reality (emphasis in original, Lodge, 2002, p. 32). So while a reader’s initial engagements might confirm commonsense assumptions about why people think and behave the way they do, further engagements with the text over time (re-readings), supplemented by a variety of extra-to-text and juxtapositional readings, create the necessary conditions to confront these assumptions in transformative ways (Sumara, 2002). Compelled to interpret the gaps between readings, each return to the literary text is part of a recursively generative process since the reader’s attention is oriented towards noticing changes in perception that have emerged since the previous reading (Sumara, 2002).

As Lodge (2002) explained, over the past several hundred years, authors of what we now identify as the contemporary literary novel have learned how to create multiply-threaded/faceted texts which require considerable skill on the part of the reader. What I am adding to this argument is the suggestion that just as literary writers’ skills in depicting consciousness have evolved over time, so too have the media’s abilities to apply these sophisticated strategies of representation to increasingly unconventional, multimodal, inter-textual cultural forms.

Extending Donald’s (2001) argument, I suggest that both reading fiction and reading popular cultural forms like Reality TV are examples of the kinds of “symbolic games we play”. As Donald elaborated, such engagements inspire our mutual exploration of the possible and our collaborative extension of the boundaries of subjective awareness. It is the game itself that drives us, as our cognitive depths, both individual and cultural, strive for wider and wider horizons (emphasis in original, p. 276).
In effect, what Winterson described as a “gruesome appetite for the real” that displaces imagination in the engagement with contemporary popular culture, may alternately be conceived of as *game-like willingness* to engage the contingency and unpredictability of ‘life as an embodied mind’. By experimenting with hybrid forms and inter-textual strategies for blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional, some popular cultural texts also appear to be spurring new ways of exploring the relationship between the body and the mind. While Reality TV is the obvious example, this preoccupation with the intricacies of human embodiment can be seen in more conventional televisual texts as well.

For example, in January 2009, Fox television debuted a new dramatic series entitled “Lie to Me” believed to be loosely based on ‘real life’ psychologist Dr. Paul Elkman. According to Elkman, a specialist in the study of human emotions and facial expressions, the face can reveal 3000 meaningful (or micro) expressions that are virtually impossible to control consciously. The show’s popularity can be seen in terms of a larger popular cultural fascination with strategies for observing and interpreting the pre-conscious (non-linguistic) aspects of human behavior. Reality TV is perhaps the most pervasive cultural form that intentionally invites both reading minds and reading bodies. In this sense, it invites readers to explore the tenuous boundaries between subjective and social experience as (armchair) observational researchers.

The most popular and commercially successful format of Reality TV programming (RTV) is the “gamedoc”. This format includes programs like *Survivor, Big Brother,* and *The Amazing Race* where intermittent challenges and eliminations/evictions structure participants’ engagements with each other within a ‘game-frame’ (Hill, 2005). These programs are hybrid forms incorporating at once: the unpredictability of game shows and sports events; the unscripted representations and emotions of ‘real people’ associated with documentaries; and the serialized narrative structure and melodramatic gaze of soap operas.
Other sub-formats of RTV include dating programs (*The Bachelor, The Bachelorette*); lifestyle/makeover programs (*The Biggest Loser, What Not to Wear, Extreme Makeover*); docu-soaps (*The Real World, The Hills*); talent contests (*American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance*); competitive depictions of high-profile occupations (*America’s Next Top Model, Project Runway, The Apprentice*) and variations that aim to reveal, and test, the ‘real-life’ personalities of celebrities (*Dancing with the Stars, Celebrity Apprentice, I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!*). As Ouellette and Murray (2004) suggested, it is the contemporary “fixation with ‘authentic’ personalities, situations and narratives” that distinguish the format of RTV from more conventional (i.e. scripted) serial dramas and sitcoms (p. 4).

In order to access this ‘authentic’ experience, some of these programs actively appropriate a social experiment agenda. For example, within the sub-format of lifestyle programming, shows like *Trading Spouses* and *Wife Swap* seek to “temporarily move subjects into environments that test their ethics and commitment to a certain lifestyle” and in this sense, the unfamiliar setting becomes a “stage” or “lab” for “testing one’s accepted practices and lived principles of running a household” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 194-195). Within the game-doc format, shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* also draw on the idea of RTV as a form of social experimentation, but in these cases the focus is on “games of group governance” and thus their aim is to reveal and take advantage of the “tensions between individual and collective interests” in the creation of community (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 185).

In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2004), editors Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette posited that the RTV format represents a “fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real”. Yet, this claim is also characterized by a fundamental paradox. As they explained,
Although reality TV whets our desire for the authentic, much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains fictional elements (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 5).

The authors further suggested that in the wake of flourishing forms of reality-based television programming, contemporary “viewers, participants and producers are less invested in absolute truth and representational ethics and more interested in the space that exists between reality and fiction” (p. 6). This context is shaped by a fundamental paradox: “Reality TV promises its audience revelatory insight into the lives of others as it withholds and subverts full access to it” (p. 6). To reiterate a thematic throughway, the real emerges in the ‘accidental’ and unanticipated rather than the intentional and representational.

The necessarily “unstable” and incomplete RTV text thus invites viewers “to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary and the intimate” relative to the representations offered to them (ibid). As Ouellette and Murray (2004) concluded,

> Far from being the mind-numbing, deceitful, and simplistic genre that some critics claim it to be, reality TV supplies a multilayered viewing experience that hinges on culturally and politically complex notions of what is real, and what is not (p. 6).

That is, even though RTV claims to provide access to the authentic or real, it also rewards “saavy viewers for recognizing its constructed and fictional elements” (p. 9). The reader is compelled to invent various ways to pay attention to the many possible meanings inherent in the gaps and tensions of the text. In this sense, Reality TV may be seen as a hybrid literary form; an overtly fictionalized representation of ‘the real’ that requires viewers to discern for themselves what is worth paying attention to in the text.
In this way, engaging with the inherent paradox of RTV creates an interpretive opening that allows readers to insert their own past and predictive experiences to account for perceived gaps in the text (Iser, 1978; Sumara, 2002).

Television as a ‘Producerly’ Text
Fiske’s (1987) distinction between a television program and a television text is similar to Barthe’s (1975) distinction between a work and a text. Like a program, a work is potentially many texts, but the text is “a specific realization of that potential produced by the reader” (Fiske, 1987, p. 95). In Fiske’s definition, a program is transformed into a text at the “moment of reading”. As he explained, this occurs when “the interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings/pleasures that it is capable of provoking” (p. 14). Most importantly, Fiske noted that the “motivation to exploit the polysemy of the [television] text is social” (ibid, p. 15).

Fiske (1987) also drew on Eco’s (1979) notion of the ‘open’ text and Barthe’s (1975) ‘writerly’ text to argue that television calls for a hybrid conception (or what he calls the ‘producerly’ text). As Fiske noted, Eco (1979) originally conceived ‘open’ texts in terms of literary exemplars while mass media was relegated to producing ‘closed’ texts characterized by singular and easily attainable meanings. But for Fiske, the polysemic text of television does not attempt to limit its own meaning and resists closure, and therefore it is often a productive site of struggle between dominant ideologies and socially situated readers (p. 94).

Fiske took further advantage of Barthe’s distinction to argue that television “often is and always can be a writerly” (or open) text. The writerly text has the following characteristics: it announces its own constructed/discursive nature; it is polysemic and full of contradictions; and it resists coherence, unity, or closure (Fiske, 1987, p. 94). On the other hand, the “readerly” text (as television is often
described by critics), “does not foreground its own nature as discourse” but rather, promotes more “singular meaning which is not that of the text, but of the real” (p. 94).

However, for Fiske television is in fact more writerly in the sense that it requires its readers to “participate in the production of meaning and thus of [their] own subjectivities” and to “subordinate the moment of production to the moment of reception” (p. 94). Or more specifically, television is a producerly text that combines the “open” characteristics of the “writerly” text with the easy accessibility of the “readerly” (ibid).

Fiske acknowledged that his conception of television as a producerly text had much in common with Kaplan’s (1983) notion of the “radical text”. He outlined the characteristics of the producerly/radical text as follows:

- “it draws attention to its own textuality;
- it does not produce a singular reading subject but one that is involved in the process of representation rather than a victim of it;
- it plays with difference between the representation and the real as producerly equivalent of the writerly mixing of documentary and fictional modes, and;
- it replaces the pleasures of identification and familiarity with more cognitive pleasures of participation and production” (p. 95).

While both Kaplan (1983) and Fiske (1987) were writing well before the emergence of RTV (as we currently understand it), these descriptions appear quite prophetic when used to understand the ways in which these popular cultural texts engage their readers as contemporary literary forms.
Even though I have been trained as a teacher of literature (that is, as a purveyor of “high” cultural capital), I am not concerned by the proliferation of ‘real-life’ cultural forms like RTV. Mostly because I believe these texts, like any other text, must be *read*. Whether a canonized Classic, or low-grade “plodding fiction”, the event of reading entails that the individual dispositions (and predispositions) of the reader and the social contexts for reading matter too. So however “gruesome” our contemporary appetite might appear, it does not necessarily follow that, borrowing a sentiment from Grumet (1988), we have somehow “lost our stomach for reading” (p. 133).

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH READING

Close reading is…a technique to make us learn, to make us see what we don’t already know, rather than transforming the new into the old.  
(Gallop, 2000, p. 11)

As a high school English teacher in the mid-nineties, the notion of ‘close reading’ meant something very different to me than it does today. Influenced by the work of Rosenblatt (1978) and Sumara (1996) in reader response theory, I left my undergraduate program convinced that meaning in the literary engagement is neither solely generated by the reader nor contained in the text, but rather, emerges in the interaction between them. This transactional or symbiotic view of reading conceives it to be much more than a cognitive process or isolated set of skills, but rather, an embodied and situated event involving readers, texts and contexts.

However, in hindsight I recognize that the close reading practices I advocated in my English classrooms were often a means of confirming, and thus reproducing, what was already-known about the text. The New Criticism approach I was introduced to as a high school student was part of the biographical knowledge
that shaped my teaching practices, albeit implicitly. Simply put, deeply entrenched notions of what I ought to be doing as an English teacher overshadowed the reader-response framework I thought I was using. While I consistently invited students to find particular and innovative ways to engage with the themes, characters, and situations in the text, in the end, much of this activity was framed by the implicit belief that it was up to me to lead my students towards consensus, or at least, some sense of closure.

Faust (1992) argued this implicit need to provide closure to event of literary meaning-making supports practices “where any number of idiosyncratic, personal readings are reined in, so to speak, by a process of ‘going back to the text’. As Faust explained: “The assumption here is that some readings will receive confirmation, others will not, and in the end an acceptable range of possibilities, if not a universally agreed upon interpretation, can be determined” (p. 44). And unfortunately, most of these “agreed upon” interpretations had already been determined before our meaning-making activities began.

This process of going back to the text – what I then understood as close reading – really meant giving the text the ultimate authority to define the limits of its possible meaning. Certain ‘truths’ about human nature implicated by the text were verified by referring to the information provided by its author and the context in which it was written. In our English department, student responses deemed insightful were those that demonstrated such close reading skills through their ability to identify and unpack significant passages in the text.

In the notion of significant passages itself lurks another assumption that insightful readers ought to be able to recognize and mirror the important (already-determined) ideas in the text. For my colleagues and myself, honing in on what was significant in the text was a way of rendering the meaning-making activities of the students and the interpretive possibilities of the text more
predictable, and therefore, more conducive to the ‘teacherly’ activities of planning and assessment.

I now suspect that what my students ultimately experienced as knowledge was more a function of the structuring experience of my teaching rather than the structuring experiences of the textual engagement (Britzman, 1993). Pedagogical tactics such as the use of concluding lessons, final essays, and end-of-unit cumulative exams all implied that the knowledge gleaned from the textual experience would be, and could be, contained. This is not to suggest that addressing universal or established interpretations of the text are not important in the literature classroom. They only become dangerous when they are used commonly sensically to tame and contain the possibilities for meaning evoked by a particular group of readers in a particular context.

In making this qualification, I draw on a feminist poststructuralist understanding of commonsense as “the medium through which already ‘fixed’ truths about the world, society and individuals are expressed” (Weedon, 1987, p. 77) and in some cases, perpetuated. As a high school English teacher, the processes of close reading I encouraged served primarily to re-inscribe and reproduce commonsense (fixed) understandings of the relationship between individual meaning-making and textual knowledge.

In my graduate work, however, I encountered a much different notion of close reading in Jane Gallop’s (2000) essay “The Ethics of Close Reading”. She defines close reading as “a way of learning not to disregard those features of the text that attract our attention, but are not principle ideas” (emphasis added, p. 8). Learning not to disregard what appears insignificant means that a close reading of a text, in Gallop’s sense, complicates rather than confirms a reader’s preconceptions and encourages her or him to reconsider present patterns of thinking in light of these perceptual interruptions.
While Gallop’s discussion primarily concerns interactions with print-based literary and theoretical texts, I find her argument useful for understanding interpretive engagements with hybrid literary texts such as RTV. What RTV offers that conventional texts cannot is the opportunity to infer the conscious intentions of others by paying close attention to the unconscious actions of the body (a strategy I refer to as pre-reading and develop in more detail in Chapter 6). The RTV text allows for a reading of both the bodily and mental states of others in situ and therefore offers an immediacy and unpredictability that cannot be captured in language. Not unlike the observational researcher, the RTV reader is able to interpret human behavior directly, in-the-moment and in extra-linguistic terms, albeit as shaped by the fictionalized situations of the RTV genre.

In general, this research is an interpretive account of my own close reading strategies and experiences in relation to popular cultural texts that have compelled me to “read wrongly” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). The notion of the RTV engagement as a kind of literary experience that I develop in this chapter allows me to bring together evolving forms of popular media and the cultural and discursive construction of childhood (which is the subject of Chapter 2). Chapter 3 highlights the overlapping and sometimes conflicting evolution of participatory literacies and studies in television. Chapter 4 marks a shift in emphasis from my own close reading to an examination of the reading subjects and subjectivities other fans bring to the engagement with the televisual text.

In particular, this research considers various close encounters that shaped the interactions between particular readers (RTV fans), in a particular context (the online fan community Television Without Pity) and, as shaped by a particular text (the RTV program Kid Nation). I argue that during these literary engagements, the ‘subjects’ of and for reading are discursively formed as individuals employ various strategies to negotiate the inherent paradoxes of the RTV text within the liberating constraints of the interpretive fan community.
Reading Reality TV as Contemporary Literary Engagement

Reading a text, said Rosenblatt (1978), is not a process but, rather, an event. In this vein, the coming together of reader and text is always fluid and subject to both visceral and social influences given the interpretive activity of that particular reader, at that particular time, in that particular context. The related notion of literary engagement captures an interpretive occasion that is discontinuous and open-ended, and in this respect, ambiguity implicates the reader to engage with what Iser (1978) referred to as ‘the gaps’ in the text. This fundamental indeterminacy invites personally meaningful, yet essentially unstable, interpretations to emerge.

Grumet (1988) similarly argued that reading involves “bridging the gap between private and public worlds” thus providing a temporary “passage between the images, impulses, and glimpses of meaning” that arise in the interaction of reader, text and context (pp. 135-136). She used the phrase “bodyreading” to suggest that the act of reading, like the world in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) original conception, is the answer to the body’s question. Meaning arises “to meet our intentionality” and “coheres around our needs, wishes, possibilities, real and imagined” but cannot be located in either the text or the reader alone (Grumet, 1988, p. 143). In her conception, reading is an intensely embodied, contingent, and entangled affair that “throbs with the conflicts that shape our mortal condition” (p. 130).

An understanding of reading Reality TV as a kind of embodied literary engagement posits that viewers’ selective and imaginative identifications with the participants and situations are part of a dynamic process of reading as “re-creation”, and thus encourage an exploration and expansion of self-identity (Iser, 1978; Sumara, 1996). Beyond a search for stable Truths that serve to tame or transcend the personal/emotional response, interpreting the unwritten and ambiguous aspects of the RTV text opens up a transitional or pivotal space
where the personal and the cultural exist in mutually transformative, albeit transitory, relation (Ellsworth, 2005).

Grumet’s (1988) understanding of text provides a resonant segue to the fan-based context of reading RTV. Since she was writing well before the advent of “New Literacies”, convergent media forms and participatory cultures, her words are notably prophetic:

There are no sacred texts. Let the cursor unravel the binding of the text as readers erase what they do not believe, or add whatever it is that the author left out. Why not invite them to weave their questions, responses and arguments into the texts themselves and so acknowledge the wisdom of graffiti? (emphasis added, Grumet, 1988, p.146).

Citing what is perhaps the most recognizable ‘non-sacred’ text, the Wikipedia entry for the term graffiti links it to both the Greek infinitive graphein (“to write”) and the Italian word graffiato (“scratched”). Another related term, “graffito” refers to a particular aesthetic practice which generally involves “scratching through one layer…to reveal another beneath it” (Wikipedia). The wisdom of graffiti in the engagement with RTV sometimes involves scratching beneath the surface the text (and its commonsense discourses) to reveal what otherwise would remain unnoticed. In this way, graffiti can be seen as a counter-normative discursive strategy for engaging the fictionalized texts of contemporary culture.

Such an image is also relevant to my ongoing project of conceptualizing the contemporary researcher of popular culture as both a fan and an “amateur intellectual” who, in seeking out these hidden layers, is “unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés” (Said, 1994, p. 23). The image of the fan captures a range of reading and discursive strategies while the amateur intellectual points to a particular epistemological (and ethical) disposition.
As fan-tellectuals, contemporary literary researchers may activate the imaginative potential of televisual texts and evoke the wisdom of graffiti by maintaining a “state of constant alertness…a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along” (Ibid). The wisdom of graffiti, as Grumet puts it, emerges as readers reserve the right to ‘talk back’ to the text.

McRobbie (1994) described graffiti as “a cultural identity which half mocks, half celebrates, the excesses of mainstream culture” (p. 22). This sort of self-reflexive ambivalence also speaks to the defining ethos of the fan community *Television Without Pity*. As the website’s creators describe it, *TWoP* is a place for fans to collectively explore what it is they “love to hate and hate to love about TV” (Ariano & Bunting, 2006). The website’s motto: “Spare the snark, spoil the network” reflects a commitment to the inherent pleasures and possibilities of popular cultural critique as a kind of graffiti. A term coined from “snide remark”, snarking refers to an ironic attitude “shaped by the desire to talk back to the television set” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 31).

Vinz (2000) asserted that there is a fundamental difference between “talkinabout” and “talking back” to a text. As she explains, “talkinabout objectifies the subjects” of the text; that is, “we can have our say without interacting with the subject itself” (p. 33). Many conventional literature discussions fall into this category, for example, when students talk about characters and events, textual strategies, or “compare personal experiences to the events in the literary text” (p. 33). “Talkinabout” the text depends on imaginative identifications with particular elements of the text but it does not require an ethical commitment to the relational other, and often seeks to confirm already-conceived understandings and norms of social experience.

“Talking back” however, suggests that textual meaning is far more “contingent” and arises when readers are disposed to “identifying embedded ideology” and
“working against binary oppositions” (i.e. child/adult) (Vinz, 2000, p. 33).

Drawing on ideas developed by bell hooks (1989), Vinz suggests that literature education should involve learning how to “talk back to the bodies of rules and to the social, racial, and cultural locations in texts” (ibid). It is an orientation that does more than use the text to confirm already-held belief and norms of social experience. Talking back entails a close reading that seeks to interrupt the text rather than identify with it.

Adopting a cultural studies perspective, Weber and Mitchell (1995) likewise suggested that reading a text closely often involves a kind of “political incorrectness” and the “need to read wrongly” (p. 130). They used the expression “That’s funny…” to point to the generative possibilities of ironic or unexpected situations where current perceptions somehow clash with or no longer correspond to previously held beliefs (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 140). Close reading as a kind of “misreading” is one way to “interrogate the collage of contradictory images, clichés, and stereotypes” that give shape to the discursive networks of popular culture (ibid, p. 9). “That’s funny” marks the moment when the text subverts or thwarts our expectations and may reveal our blind spots, if we choose to acknowledge them (Kerdeman, 2003).

The following analogy offered by Pecora (2002) clearly announces the tenuous relationship among representation, reality, and reading popular culture in contemporary terms. As he put it,

The Truman Show got it half right: We are now the subjects of media-shaped, even virtual, realities, but we are also being encouraged to become the producers – and the ethnographers – of these virtual lives, to edit them on our IMACS even as we live them (p. 353).
The images of graffiti, talking back, misreading, and editing virtual realities all imply a resistant (if not rogue) reading subjectivity. Likewise, the fan of popular culture has come to represent a subversive meaning-maker who appropriates (or “poaches”) popular cultural texts for her or his personal needs and pleasures (Jenkins, 1992).

Costello and Moore (2007) described fans who have chosen to engage in online spaces to explore their encounters with Reality TV as “cultural outlaws”. However, some fans are more than mere outlaws, ‘textual poachers’ (Jenkins, 1992) or ‘resistant readers’ (Hall, 1980). In particular, some fans may also be seen as being disposed to “being pulled up short” by the texts of popular culture.

In an ideal sense, the fan embodies an evolving reading subjectivity whose wisdom emerges in ongoing attempts to ‘scratch beneath’ the surface of popular cultural texts, and a willingness to “read a text wrongly…in the service of getting it right” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 130). In Chapter 6, I offer examples of fans’ interactions with the RTV text, and each other, as characterized by emergence, necessity, emotional investment, and ethical sensitivity. Further, as I argue in the concluding chapter, this is a reading disposition that can and should be elaborated in the context of educating teachers. Citing Kerdeman’s (2003) argument again,

Being pulled up short discloses attitudes, qualities, and behaviors we would prefer to disown, deny or recognize only insofar as we project them onto others. What seemed natural or right is exposed as an evasion of responsibility, a blind spot that diminishes or distorts who and how we are in the world (p. 296).

The image of the fan as graffiti artist, who in ‘talking back’ to the texts of popular culture, seeks to produce situated readings (and more importantly,
‘misreadings’) provides fruitful imagery for conceptualizing the role of the contemporary researcher of popular culture. In the end, I offer a more ambitious conception of the teacher educator as fan-tellectual, noting some of the salient features of fandom that might inform the structures and experiences (structuring experiences) of teacher education.

FROM FANATIC TO INTELLECTUAL HYBRID: CONTESTED IMAGES OF FANDOM
Not unlike the teacher, the fan has had to contend with deeply entrenched images and stereotypes in mainstream culture. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins (1992) lamented the negative stereotypes associated with the image of the fan and traces the roots of the term to the Latin ‘*fanaticus*’. Jenkins noted its usage moved from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any ‘excessive and mistaken enthusiasm,’ often evoked in criticism to opposing political beliefs, and then, more generally, to madness” (p. 12).

In his argument, contemporary representations of the fan remain tethered to these early connotations of “zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession and madness” as articulated through commonsense discourses and conventional conceptions of “good taste” (ibid, p. 12).

As Jenkins put it, from the position of high culture and “good taste”, fans often appear to be “frighteningly out of control, undisciplined and unrepentant, rogue readers” of uncouth or ‘low’ cultural texts (p. 18). And although fans’ reading practices often involve “close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, and repeated and prolonged reading”, the assumption is that these strategies, while “acceptable in
confronting a work of ‘serious merit’ seem perversely misapplied to the more ‘disposable’ texts of mass culture” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18).

Drawing on ideas from de Certeau (1984), Jenkins (1992) offered a strategic image of fan reading characterized by “…a series of ‘advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text” (p. 24). Based on the imagery developed by Jenkins (1992), fans participate in a kind of “cultural bricolage” through which readers disassemble texts and “reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience” (p. 24).

Put yet another way, fans experience reading as “design” (Kress, 2003). As Kress has argued, the multimodal complexity of contemporary culture has encouraged a shift away from understanding “reading as interpretation” (where the object of knowledge is assumed latent in the text) towards an understanding of “reading as ordering” (where the object of knowledge is yet-to-be designed) (p. 140). Along with this shift is an increased sensitivity to the “materiality of the bodily senses that are engaged in reading” and the understanding that “the shape of there is to be read has its effects on reading practices” (ibid).

Broadly speaking, Jenkin’s (1992) fans are socially situated individuals “who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests” and in particular, embodied “spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (p. 23). In this respect, fan reading is both a subjective and “social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers” (p. 45).

“To speak as a fan” wrote Jenkins, involves both appropriating “what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy” and forging
alliances with a community of others; that is, it is also “to speak from a position of collective identity” (p. 23). To speak as a fan is to take up a position somewhere between subjective and social ways of knowing and forms of knowledge.

Jenkins invented the image of the “aca/fan” to describe the in-between nature of his research identity. As he explained,

> When I write about fan culture...I write both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community) (Jenkins, 1992, p. 5).

I adopt a similar hybrid position as both an educational researcher, who draws on pedagogical theories and critical literature to understand popular cultural forms and practices, and as a fan, who over time, has developed a kind of insider sensitivity that allows me to represent the landscape of contemporary cultural forms (television in particular) in terms of its intertextuality and pedagogical possibility. In my case, I did not develop an interest in popular culture as a researcher; I developed as a researcher because of my interest in popular culture.

Most importantly, through the image of the aca/fan the researcher as expert (or authority) is hybridized. Most commonly used figuratively, the notion of hybridity refers to “anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements” (OED). However, equally interesting is its etymological roots. Hybrid comes from Latin term *hybrida* originally used to denote the offspring of a tame sow and wild boar. In this way, the researcher of popular culture, as a hybridized authority, attempts to ‘cross-breed’ the
established norms and discourses of education with the emergent and potentially counter-normative discourses of fandom.

To this end, I elaborate Jenkin’s (1992) image of the aca/fan in light of Said’s (1994) notion of the “amateur intellectual” to posit a hybrid understanding of the contemporary literary researcher (and ultimately, teacher educator) as a fan-intellectual. Said’s conception drew on a distinction made by Gramsci (1971) between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals. The first category refers to people like teachers, priests and administrators, whose body of knowledge remains relatively stable as they tend to “do the same thing from generation to generation” (p. 4).

Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are much more sensitive to context and contingency, and use knowledge “to organize interests, gain more power/control, attention”. Rather than transmitting any already-determined body of knowledge, the organic intellectual is engaged in “a constant struggle to change minds and expand markets” (Said, 1994, p. 4). As Said concluded, “everyone who works in any field connected with either the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci’s sense” (p. 9).

In this way, both fans in online communities and teachers in classrooms can be conceived as contemporary intellectual figures. According to Said (1994), the main difference between the professional intellectual (i.e. teacher) and the amateur intellectual (i.e. fan) is

the professional claims detachment on the basis of a profession and pretends to objectivity, whereas the amateur is moved neither by rewards nor the fulfillment of an immediate career plan but by a committed engagement with the ideas and values in the public sphere (Said, 1994, p. 109).
If the image of the organic intellectual is the one most suited to negotiate the complex conditions of contemporary culture, then it appears that the structures and strategies of teacher education may indeed be informed by a closer look at the structures and strategies of fandom.

Through the image of the teacher as fan-tellectual, I argue a need for teacher education to provide teachers with close and collective opportunities to navigate the heterogeneous texts and discursive networks of popular culture. Fanagogy encapsulates a range of reading experiences that predispose beginning teachers to acknowledge and articulate the ways in which the hybrid texts of popular culture can be read wrongly (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) and in some cases, may also serve to “pull them up short” in transformative ways (Kerdeman, 2003). In the final chapter, I will attempt to flesh out a theory of fanagogy in the context of teacher education, but for now, the emphasis is on my own attempts to embrace the role of the fan-tellectual in my engagements with popular cultural texts and practices.

READING POPULAR CULTURE AS A FAN-TELLECTUAL
When I began my dissertation project, I was primarily interested in reading Reality TV as literary engagement and drew my examples from familiar programs like *The Amazing Race* and *Survivor*. However, somewhat serendipitously, in September 2007 CBS launched a new RTV program – *Kid Nation* – featuring participants aged eight to fifteen attempting to re-build a failed community in the middle of the New Mexico desert. This program presented itself as a particularly rich text for exploring not only the emergence of a new playing field for RTV fans, but also, a new cultural form for noticing the ways in which popular media forms work to construct childhood.
Adopting the role of fan-tellectual and oriented by (but not limited to) the RTV program *Kid Nation*, I turn to the task of interrogating the images and stereotypes associated the contemporary construction of childhood. In the following chapter, I offer both readings and misreadings of popular representations of childhood in contemporary culture. For the most part, chapter two serves to introduce *Kid Nation* as a particular node in an evolving network of images and discourses that constitute childhood as a particular status and/or state characterized by otherness and/or ‘not-yetness’.

In chapter three, I return to my interest in understanding RTV as a popular cultural form that conditions literary (imaginative) engagement, this time from a historical perspective. I employ Neil Postman’s (1982) *The Disappearance of Childhood* as the focal text for a situated and selective account of the sometimes parallel, sometimes contradictory, ways in which theories of reading, literacy and television have evolved. I suggest that commonsense assumptions about childhood (as a state/status of not-yetness) have historically been, and continue to be, entwined in shifting notions of the uses and usefulness of both literacy and popular media.

Chapter four takes a closer look at the methodological challenges and issues I faced as endeavored to “lay down a particular path of inquiry” in both hermeneutic and emergent terms (Sumara, 1996). I also provide a more detailed description of the *playing field* for this inquiry, the online fan community *Television Without Pity*. This project went through many visions and re-visions, and what began as a search for reported experiences of fandom became a situated understanding of fan experience through the image of the fan-tellectual. Conceiving the researcher-as-fan-tellectual reflects an emphasis on developing context-dependent strategies for: 1) ensuring ethnographic sensitivity, 2) representing discursive understanding, and 3) evoking hermeneutic imagination.
I offer a narrative account of how I negotiated each of these stances as they “presented themselves” throughout the course of my inquiry (Sumara, 1996).

Chapter five and six provide strategic re-presentations and deconstructive discussions of fan texts in response to *Kid Nation* as archived by the online fan community *Television Without Pity*. First, in reading childhood as discursive network, I suggest that *Kid Nation* represents a particularly generative node for challenging commonsense conceptions. Both normative and counter-normative reading subjects (or subjects-of-reading) can be seen to arise around fans’ interactions with one character in particular, 10-year old Taylor, a beauty pageant queen from Georgia. In chapter six, I focus on a particularly generative televisual event involving Taylor that suggests that some fans are both imaginatively and emotionally invested in the possibility for the RTV text to “pull them up short” and thus challenge already-established ways of knowing and forms of knowledge.

The final chapter attempts to bring it all home by unpacking the implications of fan epistemologies and representational strategies in the context of teacher education. In particular, I address the following questions that ‘presented themselves’ at the end of this inquiry: What are the main features of teacher education conceived as fanagogy? What might a curriculum of and for fan-tellectuals look like?

Re-iterating the hermeneutic stance, the concluding chapter does not attempt to “report” on what I discovered or concluded, but rather through the image of the (fan)tellectual, attempts to capture, at least temporarily, “the ongoing and co-evolving relationship between what is known and coming to be known” (Sumara, 1996, p. 128). The guiding question throughout this endeavor is a simple one: What is (real)ly going on here?
Emphasizing the ‘real’ in reading popular cultural texts suggests that it is not an *a priori* form, but rather, must be bracketed from the everyday ways in which we come to know the world. *(Real)ly reading*, simply put, is a kind of close reading wherein the real does not pre-exist the reading, but rather emerges “when we are at the disposal of accident and necessity” (de Zengotita, 2005, p. 14).
CHAPTER TWO - POPULAR MEDIA AND THE PERSISTENCE OF POSTMAN’S CHILD

TOWARD COUNTER-NORMATIVE STRATEGIES FOR READING CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD

In this chapter I offer three contemporary yet fundamentally different representations of childhood as mediated by popular cultural forms. While drawn from both televisual and print-based sources, each can be seen to implicate and perpetuate similar assumptions about childhood. These examples include: The Miley Cyrus/Vanity Fair controversy (April 2008), mainstream media reports of ‘No Child Left Behind’ (June 2007), and the debut of the RTV program Kid Nation (September 2007).

More importantly, in assuming the position of the fan-tellectual, these are also examples of popular cultural texts whose ironies, silences and scandals compelled closer encounters, even misreadings (albeit for very different reasons). Considering all three examples together, there is a sense that what appears as normal may, in fact, be more dangerous than what announces itself as scandal or crisis.

Since Kid Nation included participants that ranged in age from 8 to 15, when I use the term childhood I am assuming a similar chronological span even though the latter stages are more commonly referred to as youth or adolescence. I acknowledge that this age-range is indeed an arbitrary one and not without controversy as some early Internet discussion around Kid Nation in fact questioned whether such variously-aged children should be grouped together at all. What all three examples share is an understanding of childhood as something other-than adulthood, and the child as something less-than adult.
In the first section, I outline a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of theorizing as a genealogical rather than representational endeavor. I situate myself as a fan-tellectual in the readings of the Miley Cyrus scandal, the Times report on No Child Left Behind, and the initial publicity and Internet controversy around Kid Nation. That is, I am drawing on a game-like willingness to engage with the gaps and paradoxes of the “culturally cumulative” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) text of childhood as a fan. Rather than neutral or reductive, these readings are situated and emergent and arise primarily out of my own self-interested attempts to scratch beneath the surface of these texts. Each of these texts “pulled me up short” in such a way that I could not help but ask: What’s (real)ly going on here?

Along with fan-like ways of knowing, the image of the fan-tellectual also implies an obligation to make these forms of knowledge public, preferably in non-normative (unsettling) ways. I suggest that contemporary status of childhood could do well with a little scandalizing if only to draw attention to the “unthought of normalcy” that pervades contemporary conceptions of the child (Britzman, 1998).

THEORIZING CHILDHOOD: A GENEALOGICAL APPROACH

Derived from the Greek theorin (to gaze upon), a theory employs a particular “system of interpretation” that in turn, shapes a “necessary but limiting” way of seeing the world (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000, p.52). So while a theory helps us make sense of disparate experiences, it also frames what warrants our attention. In this way, a theory can also become a way of not seeing. For the most part, theories operate implicitly as we deal with the practicalities of everyday living.

Thus, a concern arises when theoretical frameworks become relegated to commonsense and taken-for-granted assumptions persist despite a sense of
waning usefulness. We no longer ‘see’ these frames, but yet, they continue to “determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior” (Miller, 2005, p. 5). Theories frame what is seeable or doable in a given context, and therefore can equally constrain what is imaginable or possible.

Grumet (1988) reminded us of theory’s religious and historical associations as a kind of purposeful gazing. As she recounted,

> The *theoros* was a representative sent from his Greek city to observe sacred festivals in other cities. Through *theoria*, “looking on,” he abandoned himself to those events, to their version of the cosmic order, and strove to imitate its ordered relationships and proportions in his own self-formation (pp. 183-184).

Feminist theory, she further argued, struggles against this human inclination for mere imitation –or mimesis –in order to “reclaim our minds and bodies from the entrapment in [the] so-called natural order of things”. (p. 184). That is, unlike the Greeks, to theorize in contemporary contexts, is to “repudiate” rather than reproduce already “ordered relationships” (ibid). The image of the fan-tellectual is also informed by this feminist understanding of theorizing that does not seek to represent things as they are, but rather, through imaginative and emotional investment, challenges the so-called “order of things” that tends to disembody the act of “purposeful gazing”.

While theories consciously and unconsciously prompt us to take a particular stance towards our experiences; ‘theorizing’ entails an added sense of historically-informed agency that Grumet (1988) hints at and that I wish to evoke here. Bryson and de Castell (1994) summarized Foucault’s (1980)
understanding of the purpose of theorizing that hopefully makes this distinction clearer. As they argued,

the purpose of theorizing is not to answer questions about truth and rightness, but, rather to ask how things have come to be this way, and to try to discover, at any given moment, wherein lie the greatest dangers within the various discourses which are accepted and made to function as ‘true’ (Bryson & de Castell, 1994, p. 210)

Theorizing, then, may be seen as a counter-normative response to the oft-unnoticed ways theory comes to function as ‘truth’. From this genealogical perspective, the insight sought in this sort of theorizing is “not the truth that will finally make further discussion redundant, but how the discussion itself…defines the way we live and represent ourselves” (emphasis added, Mansfield, 2000, p. 6). In this way, theory is double-sided; operating both as an analytical tool for re-negotiating meaning, and itself, a potential object of analytic inquiry.

From this perspective, theorizing childhood involves bringing a historically-informed yet contextually-sensitive orientation to the narratives and discourses that currently “function as true” in contemporary popular culture. As a fan-tellectual, I am bringing a game-like willingness to participate in the possibilities of each text by employing various re-reading and misreading strategies, and juxtaposing these readings with more conventional and conservative examples.

However, I am not seeking to articulate a ‘new’ or ‘re-conceptualized’ theory of childhood, but rather, to develop a deeper understanding of “how things have come to be this way” (Bryson & de Castell, 1994). In this sense, I am ‘talking back’ to these texts as a way of participating in rather than just providing a representational model of “the discussion itself” that constitutes childhood in contemporary Western culture.
MORALIZING CHILDHOOD: THE SCANDALIZING OF HANNAH MONTANA

Pictures and autographs.
You get your face in all the magazines.
The best part’s that you get to be who ever you wanna be.

(Lyrics to the Hannah Montana theme song)

As Hannah/Miley Cyrus sums it up, “You get the best of both worlds”. Since its debut in March 2006, the Disney Channel series Hannah Montana has generated sold-out concert events, platinum soundtracks, DVD sales, and most recently a major motion picture, putting the show’s 16 year old star, Miley Cyrus, on track to be a billionaire by her 18th birthday. The television series follows the life of the fictional character Miley Stewart as she struggles to balance her everyday life as a regular teenager with her ‘secret’ life as teen pop star Hannah Montana. Given that Cyrus auditioned for the role along with thousands of other young girls, the fictional Miley Stewart and the ‘real’ Miley Cyrus (nee Destiny Hope Cyrus) have much in common since both are by-products of the Hannah Montana franchise.

In April 2008, Cyrus, famed photographer Annie Leibowitz, and fashion magazine Vanity Fair came under much criticism for producing a seemingly topless photo revealing the bare-backed then 15-year-old casually draped in a bedsheat. It was later confirmed that Cyrus was in fact clothed underneath, but there is little doubt that the photo conveyed a relatively provocative image of the mega-star and role-model for millions of young girls.

I must admit, when I first saw the Vanity Fair photos, I had never really watched an entire episode of Hannah Montana. But my interest was piqued, and as I followed the controversy as it unfolded online, I was compelled to get a better
sense of the world of *Hannah Montana* and her real-life embodiment as Miley Cyrus. As product of Disney’s ‘family values’ oriented conservatism, *Hannah Montana* represents the ideal image of ‘girlhood’ in contemporary North America. As an embodiment of contemporary youth, however, the trials and tribulations of the real-life Miley Cyrus reflect the oft-ambiguous and highly-contentious conditions under which ‘the best of both worlds’ must be negotiated. And for Miley/Hannah, this does not just demarcate a balance between fame and normalcy, but also, between adulthood and childhood.

In her own defence, Leibowitz claimed: "Miley and I looked at fashion photographs together and we discussed the picture in that context before we shot it. The photograph is a simple, classic portrait, shot with very little makeup, and I think it is very beautiful." Leibowitz later lamented that the image (and the intent behind it) had been largely “misinterpreted” by the public.

Much of the outrage over the *Vanity Fair* photo came from conservative parents who were disturbed by the *sexualized* nature of this particular image, contradicting Cyrus’s heavily-marketed wholesome image in the context of Disney’s family-oriented (G-rated) programming. Then campaigning as a presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton even commented on the controversy capturing the generic voice of concerned parents:

"From everything I've heard she's a great kid and obviously very talented, but I think we need to do more to preserve our kids' childhood…They grow up so fast and [there are] so many influences coming from all directions these days," Clinton said. "I think it's important that all of us as parents draw some lines here."  

In a similarly preservationist vein, Disney’s official response to the controversial photo condemned *Vanity Fair* but not necessarily Cyrus herself, suggesting that
the photos represented “a situation created to deliberately manipulate a 15-year-old in order to sell magazines”. Responding to the Internet circulation of the photo and ensuing media attention before the *Vanity Fair* issue even hit the stands, Miley Cyrus followed Disney’s lead and released a public statement of apology to her fans on April 27, 2008:

“...I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be ‘artistic' and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed. I never intended for any of this to happen and I apologize to my fans who I care so deeply about.”

In effect, by issuing this public apology Miley Cyrus accepted and re-affirmed the ‘less-than-adult’ status ascribed to her by dominant, conservative conceptions of childhood. Her “embarrassment” re-affirms that her innocent state is fragile and in need of safeguarding. Jackson and Scott (1999) noted that these notions of fragility and risk are central themes that continue to shape contemporary constructions of childhood. As they put it,

Because children are...constituted as a protected species and childhood as a protected state, both become a loci of risk and anxiety; safeguarding children entails keeping danger at bay; preserving childhood entails guarding against anything which threatens it. Conversely, risk anxiety helps construct childhood and maintain its boundaries – the specific risks from which children must be protected serve to define the characteristics of childhood and the ‘nature’ of children themselves (pp. 86-87).

The following online contribution to the Miley Cyrus/*Vanity Fair* controversy is worth noting in this context since it draws on a deeply entrenched modernist conception of childhood that my research aims to challenge. Writing for Christianity.com, Michael Milton’s “Miley Cyrus and the disappearance of childhood” draws an explicit link between Neil Postman’s (1982) cultural critique
of the eroding moral boundaries between adulthood and childhood and the current crisis announced by the “Miley Cyrus photo fiasco” which is seen here to be the “the symptom of a sick society”. Milton lamented:

This sickness will lead to sadness, in Miley's life and in ours as a society. This is the heart-breaking part of it all: the alluring fashion styles, aimed at making young girls look like seductresses, is robbing these little girls of their innocent childhoods and promoting a culture of sensuality that will unleash further sexual perversion in our already sex-saturated society.

In a tone Milton appears to mimic, Postman (1982) likewise emoted:

To have to stand and wait as the charm, malleability, innocence and curiosity of children are degraded and then transmogrified into the lesser features of pseudo-adulthood is painful and embarrassing and, above all, sad. (p. xiii)

Both Postman and Milton are evoking a kind of “moral panic” that aims to stir up a wider debate over a specific social or cultural issue. Moral panic stories are common in ‘ripped from the headlines’ televised crime dramas where producers take up the role of “moral guardian…alerting [audiences] to new possibilities for concern and indignation” (Biltereyst, 2004a, p. 14).

For example, a May 2009 episode of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit introduced the audience to the “moral epidemic” currently plaguing youth - the increasingly common practice of “sexting” (sending nude or lewd photos of yourself via cell phone). In this case, the “letter of the law” was invoked to “send a message” to youth and the young girl responsible for sending the photos was charged and convicted with distributing child pornography. Interestingly, since the Vanity Fair controversy, Miley Cyrus has more recently come under criticism for sending intentionally provocative photos of herself in this manner.
In a postmodern environment, argued Biltereyest (2004a), moral panic stories like the ‘sexting’ narrative are “woven into a massive flow of other media stories, events and voices” in such a way that “the world of the media can no longer be separated from social life” and are better designated as “media panics” (p. 15). I explore this concept in more detail as it relates to the initial reception of *Kid Nation* at the end of this chapter.

Postman’s moral crisis, however, calls for an explicit separation of the social and the technological. As Mills and Mills (2000) suggested, Postman’s thesis rests on the claim that the inherent (and for Milton, the God-given) innocence of childhood “can only thrive on secrets and shame, and that with the advent of the all-pervasive, all-intrusive medium of television and other means of mass communication, no privacy can survive” (p. 14).

In Postman’s (1982) words: “Nothing is mysterious, nothing awesome, nothing is held back from public view” (p. 97). In Milton’s text we see that Postman’s main argument - without a well-developed idea of shame, childhood cannot exist - is still influential in shaping the discourses of risk, anxiety and panic when it come to understanding the relationship between popular media and the child.

It is interesting to note that Postman (1982) explicitly identified the “Disney conception of what the child is and needs” (p. 125) as the one in most danger of disappearing, albeit he was writing well-before the *Hannah Montana* series was conceived. It is clear that Hillary Clinton, Disney, Milton, and Postman are all drawing on set of normative notions that ascribe the characteristics of “naivety, corruptibility, and innocence” to portray the child as “a social incompetent who needs to be brought to a state of sociability and morality through the benevolent authority of parents”, and potentially, educational, religious, and media institutions as well (Wyness, 1999, p. 9). What is in danger of disappearing, argued Wyness, is not the concept of childhood per se, but a particular
conception or “understanding of childhood… [that] restricts children to subordinate and protected social roles” (Wyness, 1999, p. 1).

Returning to the Miley Cyrus example, I cannot help but wonder why it is so easy for critics and conservatives alike to draw a moral boundary between her ‘topless’ Vanity Fair photo and her Disney-fication as Hannah Montana. Writing for Salon.com, Rebecca Traister (2008) articulated the ultimate moral paradox posed by this ‘media panic’ event when she asked, “Are we really so appalled by the sight of a less-clad-than-usual 15-year-old who has already been packaged, marketed and unrelentingly sold, sold and sold to America's daughters?”

Not unlike falling light fixtures in The Truman Show, the embodied and sensualized images of the ‘real’ Miley Cyrus breached the boundaries of the fictionalized world of Hannah Montana that had been created around her. But yet, few of us seem to question the fact that this fictionalized world has been created in the first place. Is Hannah Montana simply the 21st century version of The Truman Show?

In both cases, attention is drawn to the way in which media do not merely reflect some already-determined version of reality back to us, but in fact, create a reality by framing our perceptions in particular ways. In this context, the forms through which popular media represents the child must be recognized as cultural and constructed rather than natural or essential (Bignell, 2005). And once the child is considered a cultural construction, it is open to counter-normative strategies of deconstruction, and re-construction (James & Prout, 1997).
NORMALIZING CHILDHOOD: RALLYING FOR ‘NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND’

I began with the Miley Cyrus/Vanity Fair scandal in order to introduce the argument that the status of childhood is not an *a priori* form, but rather, is *mediated by* the forms of its cultural expression. In the previous example, normative discourses served to identify childhood as “a loci of risk” and the child characterized by vulnerability, therefore in need of protection (Jackson & Scott, 1999).

But one might argue that this is an isolated/sensationalist example that really has nothing to offer educators in terms of understanding popular media’s perception of quotidian (normal) childhood. Anticipating this critique, I offer a more conservative and conventional (i.e. print-based) example of popular media’s role in perpetuating less-than and other-than adult conceptions of childhood. In a sense, it provides a foil to the previous example in that it replaces the notions of risk and anxiety central to the moral perspective with a developmental and deterministic view that emphasizes potential and performance. In this way, it makes sense of childhood through the discourses of education.

I offer this example to draw attention to the ways in which more mainstream mediated narratives of childhood, while intentionally avoiding sensationalism and scandal, might actually serve more insidiously *normalizing* functions. And, it is this seemingly innocuous intent that makes them far more dangerous.

The June 2007 issue of *Time* magazine included a “Special Report on Education” in which authors Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe issue a ‘report card’ analysis of the sweeping reform movement in American schools commonly known as “No Child Left Behind” (2001). Although writing in a Canadian context, I refer to this particular example of popularized educational policy because its
wide-reaching appeal – as perpetuated by a borderless mass media – draws on deeply entrenched commonsense understandings concerning educational experience. This policy can be seen to perpetuate particular ‘myths’ (Britzman, 2003) about educational experience – knowledge as object, learner as isolated, and teacher as expert – myths to which Canadian educators are clearly not immune. In uncovering the normative discourses that undergird “No Child Left Behind”, longstanding assumptions about knowledge, the learner, and the teacher may be interrogated.

Introduced by former president George W. Bush in 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) invoked an outcomes-based approach to educational reform in which school funding was dependent on student performance as measured by standardized tests and assessments. In short, better test scores equals more funding for schools. The law’s intention, in Bush’s words, was to hold schools accountable for eradicating “the soft bigotry of low expectations” and for its strongest proponents, this was not merely a matter of standardizing educational practices, but a matter of ensuring civil rights for all children (Wallis and Steptoe, 2007).

The article begins with a narrative snapshot of the efforts of one “high-poverty, low-achieving” Pennsylvania school in particular, James G. Blaine Elementary, and described one of the ways in which student motivation is ‘rallied’ in preparation for State testing. In rousing unison, the 8-year olds repeat the following chant: “We believe we can learn at high levels…We believe we can reach our learning potential…We believe that Blaine will become a high-performing institution” (p. 26).

The image is at first endearing in its optimism, but when one considers the underlying myth the language implicates, the pep rally becomes a bit more problematic. What exactly is a “high level” of performance? And who decides
how high is high enough? What assumptions must be in place before “high levels of performance” (as measured by standardized examinations) can actually be coveted and celebrated as an ideal educational experience?

The insidious aspect of the ‘rally’ that opens the article, and NCLB Act as a whole, is that it perpetuates a teleological understanding of the learner, and educational experience in general, as a series of measurable outcomes that serve to shape an ‘ideal’ education. This orientation is upheld by normative discourses around learning and teaching that in their pervasiveness have become relegated to commonsense.

In Britzman’s (2003) terms: “Cultural myths offer a set of ideal images, definitions, and justifications that are taken up as measures for thought, affect, and practice” (p. 30). Education as both the mode and means for reaching ‘one’s potential’, and curriculum as the ‘scope and sequence’ of one’s progress toward that end is an example of such a myth that in its persistent and “naturalized appearance” appears to “speak for itself” (Britzman, 2003, p. 30). Who could argue against an education designed to enable a child to reach her learning potential?

And so, the themes of purposeful progress toward an ultimate design (as represented by NCLB markers such as “high performance” and “adequate yearly progress”) continue to elude mainstream media interrogation. Achievement, measurement, standards, goals, objectives, formulas, strategies, and progress and other popular notions of educational experience remain tethered to notions of linear trajectories, accumulative progressions, and the myth of the isolated (incomplete) learner despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008).
This ‘report card’ assessment of educational reform simply reinforces the status quo by employing the very same logic of accumulative accountability and ultimate design. Such commonsense discourse around education remains preoccupied with a concern for developing the child’s innate abilities (potential) as measured by the predetermined accumulation of information by an independent mind (performance). The locus of all learning remains the individual learner, that enduring “locatable point of view or subject position from which meanings are made” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 7). What is to be known necessarily pre-exists the autonomous learning self.

Britzman (2003) mounted an influential critique of the pervasive nature of such discourse as it continues to shape popular opinion unchecked. In her argument, such “normalizing fictions” function to protect the status quo, heighten the power of knowledge to normalize, and deny the more significant problems of how we come to know, how we learn, and how we are taught (p. 229).

Postman’s moral imperative for the keeping of ‘adult’ secrets and the linear trajectories and teleology of “No Child Left Behind” are such normalizing fictions that serve to uphold a binary logic that cannot help but see the child in terms of an other-than, less-than, yet-to-be adult in need of either protection or inculcation.

Even in his most cynical moments, however, it’s not likely that Postman could have ever imagined a television program like *Kid Nation* whereby the unstable status of childhood and popular cultural images of the child are deliberately and openly contested in public forums.
TELEVISING CHILDHOOD: EXPERIMENTING WITH KID NATION

As Besley (2003) has argued, in conventional discourses childhood is often “idealized and institutionalized as a deficit state of ‘becoming’ that exists and has meaning in relation to the adult it will ‘arrive’ to be” (emphasis in original, p. 156). What is missing from these conceptions, she argued, is a consideration of the impact of the child’s own situated sense of agency. While the biological and psychological differences between adult and child are certainly significant, more important is the way these differences are “constructed by society and in turn negotiated by individuals” (Besley, 2003, p. 156).

Despite Postman’s (1982) warning, my research suggest that popular media (specifically television) has not lead to the “disappearance of childhood”, but rather, has produced generative nodes in the ever-evolving and increasingly inter-textual discursive network that constitutes the child/childhood in contemporary society. More specifically, contemporary televisual forms like RTV have emerged as productive sites of populist pedagogy, or in Ouellette and Hay’s (2007) terms “civic laboratories”, wherein the status of childhood may be deconstructed, tested, and potentially re-invented.

Introducing Kid Nation
Murray and Ouellette (2004) identified MTV’s The Real World (which premiered in 1992 and is still airing today) as the earliest prototype of the RTV format and its influence can be seen in Kid Nation. As the opening sequence indicates, the Real World format includes bringing seven strangers to live together and have their lives recorded in order “to find out what happens... when people stop being polite... and start getting real”. Murray and Ouellette suggested that in “casting young adults in a manner intended to ignite conflict and dramatic narrative development” and “employing rapid editing techniques in an overall serial
structure, *The Real World* served to “train an entire generation of young viewers in the language of reality TV” (p. 3).

Ouellette and Hay (2008) further identified *The Real World* series as belonging to a “history of youth fiction as (and about) rites of passage – of recognizing and assuming ‘adult’ responsibilities” (p. 191). This research aims to understand *Kid Nation* as yet another incarnation of televised fiction for and about youth – and in this case, incorporating an explicit experimental design.

In the context of *Kid Nation*, participant-pioneers encountered situations that were designed to re-enact larger social, cultural, political, and ethical conflicts in the creation of community, and the implication is that the kids may find a way to remediate rather than reproduce the adult mistakes of the past. The official press release entices its potential audience by asking, “Will these kids prove to adults everywhere - and their own parents - that they have the vision to create a better world than the pioneers who came before them? This theme of children as able guides to the future recognizes them as capable and resilient social actors but for the normative and sometimes jaded influences of the adult world.

**CBS Introduces the 40 Pioneers of *Kid Nation* (Press Release, August 15, 2007)**

*KID NATION* features 40 kids, or "Pioneers," who will have 40 days to form a new society in a ghost town that died in the 19th Century. These kids, ages 8-15, will spend more than a month without their parents or modern comforts in Bonanza City, N.M., attempting to do what their forefathers could not - build a town that works. They will cook their own meals, clean their own outhouses, haul their own water and even run their own businesses - including the old town saloon (root beer only). They'll also create a real government - four kid leaders who will guide the kids through their adventure, pass laws and set bedtimes. Through it all, they'll cope with regular childhood emotions and situations: homesickness, peer pressure and the urge to break every rule they've ever known.
At the end of each episode, all 40 kids will gather at an old fashioned Town Hall meeting where they will not only debate the issues facing Bonanza City, but also decide which worthy Pioneer will be awarded the coveted Gold Star, worth $20,000. They'll show wisdom beyond their years and the candor that only kids can exhibit.

There are no eliminations on KID NATION - you only go home if you want to. And in every Town Hall meeting, kids may raise their hands and leave. Will they stick it out? In the end, will these kids prove to adults everywhere - and their own parents - that they have the vision to create a better world than the pioneers who came before them? And just as importantly, will they come Together as a cohesive unit, or will they abandon all responsibility and succumb to the childhood temptations that lead to round-the-clock chaos? (The Futon Critic)

Creator Tom Forman, a 34-year old father of two, intended the experience of participating in Kid Nation to be much like going to summer camp. To avoid an undue emphasis on competition, participants were designated a “pioneer” status and guided by an ongoing narrative that documented their collective efforts at redeeming Bonanza City’s tarnished history, this time, guided by the wisdom gained from past mistakes. An account of the trials and tribulations of Bonanza City’s original members was presented to the kids in the form of the Pioneer Journal. Each episode, the town leaders gathered to read an entry from the journal describing one reason why the first Bonanza City failed and offering the leaders suggestions for avoiding or addressing similar difficult situations.

In effect, these journal entries provided the thematic frame for individual episodes. Throughout the series, the issues raised in the context of the Pioneer Journal reflect larger socio-cultural issues and controversies. For example, episodes were constructed around situations designed to reveal the kids’ various experiences of:
leadership (Episode 1: “I’m Trying to be a Leader Here!” and Episode 3: “Deal With It!”);
religious diversity (Episode 4: “Bless Us and Keep Us Safe”);
democratic procedure (Episode 5: “Viva la Revolucion!”);
environmental impact/ pollution (Episode 6: “Bonanza is Disgusting”);
economic parity (Episode 7: “The Root of All Evil”);
cultural expression (Episode 8: “Starved for Entertainment”)
social equality (Episode 9: “Not Even Close to Fair!”);
effective communication (Episode 10: “Let Me Talk!”)

With a cast of 40 participants, producers relied on familiar stereotypes (or metonymic devices) in which certain individuals or particular groups were allowed to “stand in for” recognizable elements of our shared social fabric (Bignell, 2005, p. 63). For example, as the oldest and largest member of Kid Nation, 15-year-old Greg’s behavior was framed by the assumed characteristics of a ‘typical teenage boy’ and in the context of a program that involves kids as young as 8, larger social issues like bullying and gender politics were easily implicated. ‘Greg-as-bully’ becomes a site through which what is expected, normal or even essential about both teenagers and boys in North America may be recognized, represented, and in some cases, re-negotiated.

Another example of metonymic or stereotypical framing is evident in the decision to choose the “four kid leaders who will guide the kids through their adventure” before production of Kid Nation began. The models of leadership introduced by producers can be seen to draw upon shared cultural narratives concerning the social roles characteristic of contemporary childhood. The four leaders chosen to guide the kids through the initial stages of community-building in Kid Nation included:

11-year-old Mike, a boy scout from Washington.
12-year-old Anjay, a spelling bee champ from Texas.
10-year-old Taylor, a beauty pageant queen from Georgia.
12-year-old Laurel, a respected student leader from Massachusetts.

One way these pre-chosen leaders can be read is to consider them as culturally-shared representations of the particular roles available to children within the “cliques” that characterize contemporary girlhood and boyhood. Popularized by Rosalind Wiseman (2002) in her *New York Times* best-seller *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, Mike-the-boy-scout sets the audience up for a “Nice Guy” who has good intentions, but is often overlooked because of his ‘average-ness’, especially by girls. Anjay, on the other hand, is identified by an intellectual rather than social achievement, pushing him closer to the “Geek” profile. Taylor-as-beauty-queen evokes the image of the “Queen Bee” who wields power through charisma, good looks, will and manipulation. And finally, identifying Laurel through her relationship with her peers suggests that she may be have been cast as Wiseman’s “Floater” who maintains her popularity across cliques by being a genuinely “nice” person. Discerning whether or not ‘Greg-the-bully’ or ‘Taylor-the beauty queen’ live up to their stereotypical frames is one important way in which *Kid Nation* hails its audience and evokes imaginative engagement.

Since imposing a structure of competition is one of the main ways RTV applies pressure to the surface of social situations, the imposition of a hierarchical class structure allowed producers to design “showdown” competitions between groups in which each District would earn their “status” in Bonanza City for a period of three days. The original four leaders divided the town into four Districts: red, blue, yellow and green respectively. Each District would assume responsibility for a particular set of tasks ranked from lowest to highest: labourers, cooks, merchants, and upper class. Labourers earned 10 cents for unpleasant tasks like hauling water and cleaning the latrines. Cooks earned 25 cents for preparing meals and doing dishes. Merchants ran the businesses in Bonanza City, like the Soda Saloon, and earned 50 cents. At the top was the Upper Class who earned
a dollar but didn’t actually have to do anything yet could choose to pitch in wherever they were needed.

If all four teams completed the showdown within a certain amount of time, the leaders would have the opportunity to choose between two possible rewards for the entire town. According to Forman, the town reward at the end of each challenge was designed to bring the kids back together, but it is also one of the production elements of *Kid Nation* that addresses the viewer through a kind of binary reasoning. In Forman’s own words,

"If you let 40 kids decide between a library or video arcade, what are they going to decide?" "A microwave or a pizza party? A barbecue or toothbrush and toothpaste? It really got to what matters to kids and let them experience what it means to make decisions between immediate gratification and long-term consequence"

Yet, when “what matters to kids” is constructed in either/or terms, the gap between the choices/performances of the children in the context of the program and the assumptions made by the producers in designing the format must be negotiated by the viewers.

**The Paradoxical Address of *Kid Nation***

As Ellsworth (1997) defined it, mode of address is a film studies concept having to do with the relationship between “the outside of society” and “the inside of the human psyche” (p. 22). Simply put, who does the text think you are? I employ the notion of mode of address to point to the ways that RTV texts are deliberately structured cultural forms that serve to shape readers’ perceptions and experiences in particular ways.
In this way, *Kid Nation* is not only a “system of images and an unfolding story” but is also “composed of a structure of address to an imagined audience” (i.e. ‘hailing’ a viewer into a position from which to read the text) (Ellsworth, 1997 p. 24). Rather than designating some stable characteristic of the either the text or its readers, mode of address speaks to an “event that takes place somewhere *between* the social and the individual” (ibid, p. 23). As Ellsworth asserted, the “power of address” draws on the productive space between the “producer’s choices” and “all other choices that were historically and discursively possible and intelligible” (p. 40).

This means that *Kid Nation* readers must take into account the ironic distance editors and producers bring to the ‘real-life’ encounters of the participants. As Bignell (2005) put it, in the context of producing the RTV text “the desire to produce unmediated access to the real goes along with, but is contradicted by, the necessity to domesticate and contain the material” (p. 62). A paradoxical tension emerges between creating a text that is “representative and accurate” while also conforming to the “conventions of argument or storytelling” (ibid).

In this way, *Kid Nation* readers “find themselves seeking balance between the natural narrative and the manipulated narrative, the spontaneous and the scripted, the being and the acting” (Rose & Wood, 2006, p. 292). For example, it is common for RTV readers to interpret certain contestants as unwitting victims of the ‘evil edit’ or the possible heroes of a redemptive narrative arc. As readers negotiate the existence of both ‘people like me’ and storybook ‘characters’”, this paradoxical mode of address invites them to adopt an external perspective towards what is represented and consider the choices made by producers in light of other possibilities (ibid, p. 290). In this way, *Kid Nation* has the potential to draw readers’ attention toward the “fact of representation so that the work of the forms through which representation takes place are recognized as not natural but cultural and constructed” (emphasis added, Bignell, 2005, p. 77).
Again drawing on Ellsworth (1997), the paradoxical address of *Kid Nation* can also be said to condition a pedagogical occasion. If *Kid Nation* "speaks from somewhere within currently circulating ideas, fantasies, anxieties, desires, hopes, events" then, “that ‘somewhere’ can be located by looking at the ways certain characters, voices, points of view discourses, and actions are visually privileged and rewarded over others” (p. 35). Modifying Ellsworth’s original questions to fit the current context: Can the paradoxical mode of address of RTV in general, and *Kid Nation* in particular, provoke or fuel other ways of being or knowing? Can individual changes in the way someone understands the world start from and be fueled by the *curriculum* of RTV? (p. 36).

**RESEARCHING CHILDHOOD**

In Postman’s (1982) conception, television often conditions “an isolating experience, requiring no conformity to rules of public behavior. It does not even require that you pay attention, and, as a consequence, does nothing to further an adult awareness of social cohesion” (p. 114). In the wake of proliferating forms of “reality-based” programming over the past twenty years, Pecora (2002) alternately argued that the experience of contemporary television is far from isolationist or solipsistic, but rather involves

making exoteric the kind of social psychological research (i.e. testing the norms and limits of individual responsibility and group identity) that has traditionally been carried out esoterically in academic institutions (p. 355).

If *Kid Nation* can be conceived in terms of a popular form of social experimentation, what assumptions undergird the status of childhood within the study and how do these assumptions influence the ways in which the child is positioned? Drawing on the work of Dahlberg et al. (2007), Janzen (2008) identified common constructs of childhood in a review of educational research in
early childhood that, in the context of my project, can also be seen to describe commonsense discourses that emerged in early discussions of *Kid Nation*. These constructs/discourses include: developmental (“the child as biologically determined”), deterministic (“the child as reproducer of knowledge, identity and culture”), and deconstructive (“the child as a co-constructer of knowledge, identity, and culture”) (pp. 290-293).

**Developmental Discourses of Childhood**

The most prominent influence in this view is Piaget’s cognitive development theories as taken up in the field of educational psychology. Developmental models begin with and point to deficits in children’s abilities and understand learning in terms of stages, and cognition in terms of a linear sequence.

The term ‘development’ itself invokes a sense that children are not yet developed (whole) so need developing (improving) and that there is a predetermined place at which one can arrive (presumably adulthood) (Janzen, 2008, p. 290).

From the developmental perspective, the ultimate value of education is as a means in which to structure the child’s “evolution from a ‘not yet’ to a towards a ‘fully-formed’ person” (Vanobbergen, 2004, p. 166). Paradoxically, as Prout (2004) has pointed out,

...despite its roots in a biological conception of the child, [developmentalism] helped to create a situation in which childhood was no longer seen to occur naturally. It did this by promoting the idea that childhood needed the attention and intervention of experts” (p. 47).

The developmentalism inherent in psychological discourses of childhood has been criticized for “setting up adulthood as the standard of rationality” (Prout,
Prout notes how educational psychology has historically shaped a form of “biopolitics through which the state and others sought to define and regulate normality” through standardized testing and linear understandings of cognitive development and social behavior (p. 50). Not unlike the No Child Left Behind narrative, the developmental discourse of childhood adopts an outcome-based approach to understand the child’s evolution from a not-yet to a fully formed adult.

**Deterministic Discourses of Childhood**

In this view, the child is conceptualized as a reproducer of knowledge, identity and culture that must be “prepared for the world”. Citing Dahlberg et al. (2007), children are “empty vessels” that must be filled with ‘skills, knowledge, and dominant cultural values which are already determined, socially sanctioned and ready to administer’” (Janzen, 2008, p. 290). Not unlike the developmental perspective, this deterministic view “maintains that the child is more valued as a being in process, thus privileging that which the child will become rather that the child’s current state of being” (ibid, p. 291).

As Janzen (2008) noted, studies that conceptualize the child as a passive recipient of socialization do not “inquire into children’s confusions, multiple subjectivities, agency or struggles with power” (p. 291). As Prout (2004) similarly pointed out,

> The concept of socialization was criticized for rendering children as passive and for having an excessive focus on the individual. Because it focuses on the outcome of adulthood, it marginalizes the process of growing up and sidelines children's own actions, meanings and cultures. (p. 60)

Yet despite these criticisms, both developmental and deterministic discourses appear to remain influential in understanding contemporary childhood, at least in
the popular sense. In the example that follows, both can be seen to perpetuate an image of the child as a ‘not-yet’ or ‘becoming’ that fails to recognize the impact of the child’s own agency in negotiating the confusions and struggles that characterize the socially unstable status of childhood in contemporary culture.

**Developmental and Deterministic Discourses in Early Kid Nation Controversy**

Early media coverage around *Kid Nation* addressed the assumed intent and ethically tenuous promises of this new program before it even aired. One of those promises was revealed when critics and publicists alike began linking the central question posed by *Kid Nation* to the one explored in William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies*. As the final sentence of the official CBS Kid Nation press release puts it: “Will they come together as a cohesive unit, or will they abandon all responsibility and succumb to the childhood temptations that lead to round-the-clock chaos?”

In an online article for Reality TV World ([Psychologist likens CBS’ new ‘Kid Nation’ to ‘Lord of the Flies’](https://www.realitytvworld.com/2003/09/psychologist-likens-cbs-new-kid-nation-to-lord-of-the-flies/)), Gregg Steinberg, Associate Professor of Sports Psychology at Austin Peay State University claims that *Kid Nation* poses the same questions as *Lord of the Flies* but with one important difference: “The show has adults overseeing the action”. Without adult supervision, Steinberg posits the “results could be as stark and violent as the conclusion of William Golding’s book”. In his argument,

> Children do not have the cognitive abilities to grasp discipline, hard work and integrity. Without parents to guide them down the right path, we would see tragic consequences with bullying turning into more savagery and a lack of discipline turning into utter chaos.

In this example, both developmental and deterministic discourses are being invoked to draws distinctions between the social worlds of children and adults.
And, once children are understood to be “a homogenous social group defined by their biology” then they necessarily become something ‘other’ than adult (Holloway & Valentine, 2003, p. 3). The “less-than-adult status” ascribed to children not only refers to physical and social bodies, but also a presumed lack of intellectual, emotional, and practical knowledge and competencies (ibid).

This “presumed lack” was certainly evoked in Steinberg’s statement and in developmental terms, reduced to a kind of cognitive immaturity that prevents children from grasping the social contracts (discipline, hard work, integrity) of the adult world. In more deterministic terms, Steinberg suggests that adults/parents are necessary influences in order for the unformed/unruly child to behave in socially sanctioned ways en route to full status as an adult.

Holloway and Valentine (2003) pointed to images introduced by Jenks (1996) to describe ways of thinking and talking about children from these essentialist perspectives.

*Dionysian* understandings of childhood view children as ‘little devils’ who are inherently naughty, unruly, and must be disciplined and socialized into adult ways in order to become fully human (p 4).

It is this *Dionysian* view of children that Golding explored in *The Lord of the Flies* and that Steinberg evoked in his discussion of the sociological implications of *Kid Nation*. The underlying normalizing fiction - without the restraints of adult authority (a.k.a. civilization) children are (and human nature is) dark at heart. As Jenks (1996) put it,

Such children must not fall into bad company, establish bad habits, or develop idle hands – all of these contexts will enable outlets for the
demonic forces within, which is, of course, potentially destructive of the child but also of the adult collectivity (Jenks, 1996, p. 71).

This view is taken up and ultimately perpetuated in Steinberg’s use of phrases like ‘bullying’ ‘savagery’ and ‘utter chaos’ in linking Kid Nation to Lord of the Flies.

In contrast,

*Apollonian* views of childhood, which emerged later, conceptualize children as born inherently ‘good’, only for the ‘natural’ virtue and innocence of these ‘little angels’ to be corrupted by adults as they are socialized into adulthood (Holloway & Valentine, 2003, p. 4).

From an Apollonian perspective, childhood is rendered a fragile state of susceptibility that must be protected as the child makes the transition into the adult-world. In Jenks (1996) conception, “children in this image are not curbed nor beaten into submission, they are encouraged, enabled, and facilitated” and believed to possess “natural virtues and dispositions which only require coaxing out into the open” (p. 73).

Jenks (1996) made it clear that the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* images he offered were not intended to be literal or essential descriptions of the child. And yet, as he argued, “these images are immensely powerful, they live on and give force to the different discourses we have about children” (p. 74). Not unlike Britzman’s (2003) notion of normalizing fictions, these persistent images “constitute summaries of the way we have over time, come to treat and process children ‘normally’” (Jenks, 1996, p. 74).

And although these are contradictory images and understandings of the child, one does not exclude the other, and both operate simultaneously in contemporary Western societies (Jenks, 1996; Holloway & Valentine 2003). In
both cases, the child is conceived as not-quite-adult, and in essentialist terms, this difference is conceptualized either as an innate evil that must be civilized or a vulnerable virtue that must be protected.

The problem is that both developmental and deterministic discourses and *Dionysian* and *Apollonian* images fail to address “children’s confusions, multiple subjectivities, agency or struggles with power” (Janzen, 2008, p. 291). A postmodern approach, however, emphasizes the spaces between subjective and social experience and recognizes children as competent and contextually-embedded social actors in their own right (as both *beings* and *becomings*).

This view acknowledges the need to privilege children’s understandings and experiences of their own childhoods (Holloway & Valentine, 2003, p. 5). It is marked by a turn towards studying children *as they are* and not as adults-in-waiting and thus these “New Social Studies of Childhood” understand that children ought to be “granted the status of participants in the processes that construct the worlds that surround them” (Nikitina-den Benston, 2008). In Janzen’s (2008) summary,

Research in which the construct of the child is influenced by postmodernism complicates preconceived constructions of children, examines the ways that children contradict prescribed social behavior and investigates the play and work of children that transgresses normalizing social constructs (p. 292).

With a postmodern approach to researching childhood in mind, *Kid Nation* may be seen as a televisually mediated social experiment which draws on essentialist understandings of the child as frames of reference, while at the same time, inviting these frames to be challenged by granting children the status of postmodern participants in constructing their own social worlds.
In effect, it may be argued that the fans who have chosen to engage with Kid Nation in the online fan communities are playing the role of (armchair) researcher as they attempt to discern what is (and what is not) authentic, ethical, and/or significant about the Reality TV text. In chapter 5, I look closer at the ways in which fans-as-researchers exploit the postmodern and polysemic potential of Kid Nation as a generative node in the discursive network of contemporary childhood.

**De-constructing Childhood**

From Jenks (1996) perspective, the study of childhood is characterized by an ongoing paradox that everyday rhetoric and binary reasoning fails to capture.

> Simply stated the child is familiar to us, yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being” (p. 3).

Sensitive to the conditions of his writing, Jenks recognized that dominant conceptions of the child had not yet “escaped or deconstructed into the post-structuralist space of multiple and self-presentational identity sets” (p. 3). Rather, he argued, the “widespread tendency to routinize and ‘naturalize’ childhood, both in common sense and theory, serves to conceal…its significance and strangeness as a social phenomenon” (p. 8). In this view, the incremental socialization of the child still involves “becoming one with” the normative social structure (Jenks, 1996, p. 79).

In *The Future of Childhood*, Prout (2004) also drew attention to the “inadequacy of oppositional dichotomies" for understanding childhood in contemporary society. Her central argument recognized that
the boundary between childhood and adulthood, which modernity erected and kept in place for a substantial period of time, is beginning to blur, introducing all kinds of ambiguities and uncertainties. This is the soil from which anxiety about the ‘disappearance’ of childhood grows and it is the feature of contemporary childhood that demands new approaches to its understanding and analysis (p. 34).

In summarizing the lingering effects of modernity on conceptions of childhood, Prout (2004) noted that once childhood was conceived as the ‘cultural other’ of adulthood, a framework of meaning was put in place that “constituted childhood through a heightened, dichotomized and oppositional relationship” (p. 10). To this end, she offered a familiar list of some of these still powerful modernist oppositions: childhood/adulthood; private/public; nature/culture; irrational/rational; dependent/independent; passive/active; incompetent/competent; play/work (ibid).

Prout’s (2004) main assertion is that the future of childhood studies entails stepping outside of this modernist binary logic that seems to be over-concerned with lamenting its death.

Childhood difference is becoming more visible. This has had paradoxical effects, both homogenizing and differentiating the local construction of childhood and, as a result, fragmenting and undermining once stable notions of what childhood is and what it should be (p. 8).

In the context of this research, I consider Kid Nation to be part of an ever-evolving network or web of discourses around the child/childhood in contemporary society. At first glance, the chanting children of James G. Blaine elementary have little in common with the moral scandals surrounding Miley Cyrus, or the social experimentation of Kid Nation but yet when these narratives are conceived at the level of discourse, they are all part of a much wider
conversation about who the child is and most importantly, “what [childhood] should be” (Prout, 2004).

Ironically, Postman (1982) gets the last word in this regard, for as he suggests, “the symbolic arena in which a society conducts itself with either make childhood necessary or irrelevant” (p. 120). Put another way, the persistence of childhood is intimately entwined in the discourses and discursive strategies of popular cultural forms and practices. Discourse, in this sense, refers to a “language or system representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic” (Fiske, 1987, p. 14). The understanding of discourse as a social act pays attention to “discursive practices” as strategies that either reproduce or challenge dominant cultural narratives/ideologies. And when it comes to childhood, the themes of these narratives often include notions of risk, anxiety and moral panic.

**Media Panic and Kid Nation**

In the previous example, in linking *Kid Nation* to *Lord of the Flies*, both critics and producers drew attention to the social issues implicated by the text. The following examples of early controversy, however, are characterized by more ethical notions of undue risk and parental (ir)responsibility from both legal and moral perspectives. That is, both parents and media were being criticized for not protecting the child-participants from undue harm. For example, on August 22, 2007, the online version of *The New York Times* reported:

> [A]fter the production ended in mid-May, the parent of one child in the production complained to state officials that the children’s treatment bordered on abuse.
Four children received medical treatment for accidentally drinking bleach\(^1\), one child was burned on her face with hot grease while cooking in an unsupervised kitchen, and most of the children were required to work 14 hours or longer per day. They received a payment of $5,000 for their participation. \(\textit{CBS Was Warned on ‘Kid Nation,’ Documents Show}\)

From a legal standpoint, two issues emerge in this report. Were the children exposed to undue harm by participating in the show? And, was the status of ‘pioneer-participant’ used to exploit child labour laws? Fueling the controversy further, the popular legal-based investigative website \textit{The Smoking Gun} posted the extensive 22 page contract parents had to sign in order for their children to be a part of \textit{Kid Nation (No Human Rights in ‘Kid Nation’)}\(\). That same day, \textit{The New York Times} also retained a copy of the contract and drew attention to its extensive nature.

The 22-page agreement leaves little room for parents to argue that they did not know what their children might encounter. As is standard in such agreements, the parents and the children agreed not to hold the producers and CBS responsible if their children died or were injured, if they received inadequate medical care, or if their housing was unsafe and caused injury.

The “participant agreement” also included more scandalous clauses such as the one which held the minor and parent solely responsible for any “emotional distress, illness, sexually transmitted diseases, H.I.V. and pregnancy” that might occur if the child “chooses to enter into an intimate relationship of any nature with another participant or any other person” \(\textit{('Kid Nation’ Parents Gave Show Free Rein)}\). At the heart of this debate is the idea that parents in effect ‘signed

\(^1\) One participant, DK, did drink from an unmarked bottle that in fact contained bleach, but did not suffer any serious injuries. And while \textit{voluntarily} cooking fried potatoes she intended to sell to her fellow pioneers, another participant, Divad, did incur minor burns from splashing grease. However, the children were never completely unsupervised as a team of medics and psychologists were always on-site.
away’ their parental authority to the producers of Kid Nation. In this controversy, it is clear that legal descriptions of media and parental ethics were highly unsatisfying in terms of protecting the child from undue moral risk and/or harm.

This risk and potential harm was also considered in psychological terms. The phrase “fame-whoring” is a common critique of Reality TV and is used to refer to participants in such programs who are in effect willingly ‘selling themselves’ (i.e. their personas) to media institutions in exchange for temporary celebrity status. For some, the most ethically disturbing aspect of the participant agreement was that parents in effect sold the life stories of their children. In particular, one of the most troubling clauses in the 22-page agreement stated,

CBS and the production companies, Good TV Inc. and Magic Molehill Productions, retained the rights to the children’s life stories “in perpetuity and throughout the universe.” And that right includes the right to portray the children either accurately or with fictionalization “to achieve a humorous or satirical effect.” (Kid Nation’ Parents Gave Show Free Rein)

There is little doubt that RTV is designed to provoke or apply pressure to the surface of reality rather than represent it objectively and authentically. So while the action in Kid Nation was ‘true’ in the sense that it was unscripted and the characters were ‘real’ in the sense that they were not professional actors, what the viewers ultimately see is a (manipulated) version of reality. There is no doubt that granting CBS the right to decide whether a child’s depiction will be “accurate” or “fictionalized” is risky business.

However, these media panic discourses actually invite the active participation of the RTV reader, who after having been exposed to variety of such programming, has learned how to negotiate between the manipulated and the authentic elements of the televisual text. So even though these moral and ethical issues frame the children as ‘victims’ and the parents/audience as ‘dupes’ of the media,
this early Kid Nation controversy characterizes an “integral part of the multimedia, interactive format of Reality TV” (Biltereyst, 2004b, p. 92). Put another way, Kid Nation can be seen as a catalyst for “invigorating spiralling debates on a range of social and moral issues” concerning the tenuous status of childhood in contemporary culture (ibid).

**A Chance to Prove Themselves?**
Creator Tom Forman and CBS executives officially responded to these early criticisms of Kid Nation and denied accusations that they violated child labour laws or put children in situations of undue risk or harm. In statements to The Daily Variety producer Forman expressed particular outrage over allegations of ‘child abuse’. He asserted that Kid Nation was “deliberately designed as a kind of social experiment to allow kids to prove to adults that they were capable of doing more than anyone thought they could ever do” (CBS deflects Kid Nation charges). But this notion of ‘testing’ obviously clashes with the dominant discourse of the child as a ‘not-yet’ and childhood as ‘loci of risk and anxiety’. The final example of Internet controversy I offer here makes this tension explicit.

In “Buffer the Children, and Imperil Common Sense”, Washington Post author Robin Givhan links the outrage over Kid Nation to North American society’s overzealous need to protect children from everything. As she put it,

> The essence of the fury...seemed to be that Kid Nation dared to tangle with the culture’s distorted views on childhood. A child is now the equivalent of a minor royal who should be coddled, revered and praised at all times. To put a child in the position of possible skinning a knee is unacceptable. To risk bruising a child’s delicate ego is an abomination. To make a child cry – and capture it on tape – could signal the end of civilized society.
In the discursive network that constitutes contemporary childhood, popular titles like *Saving Childhood: Protecting our Children from the National Assault on Innocence* (Medved & Medved, 1998) persist alongside polar examples such as *Generation Me: Why Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable than Ever Before* (Twenge, 2006). Yet all are part of a wider network of discourses that educators, in particular, ought to be able to navigate with some degree of savvy.

As I have argued, this involves paying attention to the products of popular cultural texts and practices as *fan-intellectuals*; figures whose pedagogical (and perhaps even moral) imperative involves “publicly raising embarrassing questions” (Said, 1994, p. 11) in order to challenge the status quo binaries that currently de-limit the culture (and future) of childhood. As Said (1994) suggested, one of the tasks of the contemporary intellectual is to show how the group [i.e. childhood] is not a natural or god-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it, that it is sometimes important to represent (p. 33).

Weber and Mitchell (1995) have similarly argued,

> The culture of childhood is neither fixed nor static. It does however have rootedness and history that ensure its survival, and it interwoven with images, especially the pervasive, mass-produced images of popular culture (p. 6).

While Weber and Mitchell (1995) sought to explore a sedimentary construction of ‘the teacher’ within the popular culture of childhood, I reverse the direction of their gaze to explore the interwoven images of the child as mediated by popular cultural forms. In effect, both ‘the teacher’ and ‘the child’ can be seen as
“cumulative cultural texts”; a phrase used to draw attention to their intergenerational and inter-textual nature (p. 140). So while Weber and Mitchell explored the text of teacher, I am exploring the text of childhood. In both cases,

We are searching for the deep or structural metaphors that underlie and often sabotage educational theory and practice, and we are warning against single or simplistic readings, even if they are ideologically appealing to democratic and emancipatory intentions (p. 130).

And like Weber and Mitchell (1995), I am compelled by the “longevity and resilience of certain images” in the cumulative cultural text of childhood. Likewise, my intent is to “interrogate the collage of contradictory images, clichés, and stereotypes” that give shape to the discursive network of childhood with an emphasis on the representation of the child through fictionalized or hybrid popular cultural forms like RTV.

I argue that reading these popular texts as a fan-tellectual evokes game-like epistemologies and situated discursive strategies that may also be used to inform the ways in which popular and school-based (academic) ways of knowing and forms of knowledge are addressed in the context of teacher education. The image of the researcher as fan-tellectual suggests that educators, too, should strive to recognize and take advantage of the game-like ways of knowing and tolerance for ambiguity and paradox being a ‘fan’ entails.
CHAPTER THREE - STUDIES IN TELEVISION AND LITERACY: A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHING CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ENGAGEMENT

In the previous chapter, I outlined some of the contemporary nodes in the discursive network that constitutes contemporary childhood. In this chapter, I concentrate on one particular “hub” or highly connected node in this network: Neil Postman’s (1982) *The Disappearance of Childhood*. What follows is situated critique of the modernist position as exemplified by Postman’s argument in order to pave the way for a more a strategic review of post-Postman understandings of the relationship between television and literacy (Fiske, 1987; Hartley, 1999) and the status of childhood in a postmodern milieu (James & Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996; Prout, 2004; Wyness, 1999). The tales we have told, and continue to tell, about the relationship between television and childhood have deep roots, and as I will show, are also entangled in shifting notions of literacy.

TELEVISION AND LITERACY: A TALE OF TWO TECHNOLOGIES

Postman’s argument can be seen to depend on and perpetuate a modernist binary logic that maintains sharp distinctions between child/adult, image/word, literate/illiterate, emotion/reason, and public/private. Since Postman, these distinctions have been blurred by post-discourses that conceptualize contemporary multimodal environments for reading in terms of “multiliteracies” and seek to understand and conceptualize the emergence of “New” literacy practices. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; New London Group, 1996). In short, these more recent authors all agree that the complex multimodal conditions in which we read have made it necessary to revisit our assumptions regarding *what reading is* (Kress, 2003).
In the section that follows, I situate Postman’s understanding of the relationship between television and literacy in the context of literacy studies that were emerging at the time of his writing. In particular, Scribner and Cole’s *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981) is oft-heralded as a pivotal text in countering the strict separation of text and context that was central to Postman’s technological determinism.

**He Ain’t No ‘Post’, Man!**
The title for this section comes from a cleverly titled review article by Hoikkala, Rahkonen, Tigerstedt, and Tuormaa (1987), “Wait a Minute, Mr. Postman! – Some Critical Remarks on Neil Postman’s Childhood Theory”. For these authors, Postman himself is a bit of a paradox since he began his career in the late 60s and early 70s as part of the “American movement of radical pedagogues” concerned with provoking the traditionally print-bound education system to meet the challenges of the new media environment (p. 87). As these authors argue, by the time *The Disappearance of Childhood* was written in 1982, Postman “had made a complete volte-face” (ibid). The fact that Postman’s arguments remain entrenched in commonsense understandings of the relationship between popular media and the child-as-protected-species suggests that conservation remains a prevailing bias in contemporary Western culture.

Since Postman was both a cultural critic and technological determinist, he was concerned with what he saw as the inevitable cognitive and moral erosion brought on by the mass televisualization of culture. Holloway and Valentine (2003) defined technological determinism as constituted by narratives in which technology is presumed to *impact* (either positively or negatively) on society, replacing what has gone before, and producing a predictable set
of effects which are presumed to be more or less the same everywhere” (p. 12).

Technology, as pre-given and independent, determines its own social uses and shapes individual practices.

Bryson and de Castell (1994) argue that such “artifactual views” of technology in effect decontextualize user experiences in order to “make possible the production of abstract generalizations” which ignore the everyday social contexts in which these technologies are embedded (p. 206). These generalizations ultimately become the tales we tell (commonsense narratives) about our experiences with technology. Unfortunately, these narratives also often serve to “preconstruct human subjects…in terms of their possible relations to the technology at their disposal” (emphasis in original, p. 201). From this deterministic view, technology is assumed to carry its own pre-packaged imperatives, and human subjects are considered more-or-less passive recipients.

In this way, Postman’s lament centered on what popular media forms were doing to people rather than with what people were doing with media (Hoikkala et. al., 1987, p. 87). He believed that television, in particular, erodes three distinguishing features of childhood: 1) education (“it requires no instruction to grasp its form”); 2) literacy (“it does not make complex demands on either mind or behavior”) and 3) shame (“it does not segregate its audience”) (Postman, 1982, p. 80).

Postman’s argument rests on the assumption that the act of viewing television, unlike the act of reading, does not draw attention to “ideas, which are abstract, distant, complex and sequential, but to personalities, which are concrete, vivid and holistic” (p. 101). This distinction reflects a modernist view that privileges
knowledge generated by an independent and isolated self over that which can be known through the biological or social body. In binary fashion, he concluded that the act of watching television requires “perception, not conception” and simplified the argument as follows: “…people watch television. They do not read it” (p. 78). As he contended,

To learn to read is to learn to abide by the rules of a complex logical and rhetorical tradition that requires one to take the measure of sentences in a cautious and rigorous way, and, of course, to modify meanings continuously as new elements unfold in sequence. The literate person must learn to be reflective and analytical, patient and assertive, always poised, after due consideration, to say no to a text (p. 77).

The dominant image of literacy in this view is the stable and self-contained text, and reading becomes a way of knowing inasmuch as ‘the book’ defines what there is to be known. As Hoikkala et. al. (1987) suggest, since he was primarily concerned with the threat posed by the rampant visualization of culture, “picture and word are mutually exclusive in Postman’s thought” (p. 87). Therefore, for Postman, the shift in forms of information from “discursive to nondiscursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive” was an inherently “cognitively regressive” phenomenon and therefore, a threat to the three defining conditions of childhood: literacy, education, and segregation by virtue of keeping ‘adult secrets’.

**Postman and the Great Divide**

[T]here is a transition from utterance to text both culturally and developmentally and…this transition can be described as one of increasing explicitness with language increasingly able to stand as an *unambiguous* and *autonomous* representation of meaning (emphasis added, Olson, 1977, p. 258).
Postman was drawing on “Great Divide” theories of literacy that assume “fundamental and far-reaching cognitive differences between literate and nonliterate individuals and societies” (Reder and Davila, 2005, p. 170). In the citation above, Olson (1977) provided a representative example of this sort of theorizing aimed at drawing analytical distinctions between spoken and written forms of representation. These distinctions are thus used to create mutually exclusive categories or dyads, that can, as Davis (2004) has argued, “prompt senses of irresolvable tensions” and radical splits. (p. 194). Reder and Davil (2005) noted that within literacy studies, such divisive dyads have traditionally been used describe the relationship between literate and nonliterate societies (i.e. simple vs. advanced); modes of thought (i.e. concrete vs. abstract); and ways of using language (i.e. utterance vs. text) (p. 171).

Great Divide theories thus conceptualize literacy as a “decontextualized and decontextualizing technology imparting unique influences on human culture and cognition” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p.1). Also called the ‘Literacy Thesis’, this model assumes that the acquisition of literacy, in itself, will have categorical cognitive and social consequences (Reder & Davila, 2005).

Writing around the same time as Postman, Scribner and Cole’s *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981) serves as an important foil for two reasons: it mounted a convincing challenge to the Literacy Thesis (the assumption that literacy has inherent cognitive consequences); and it introduced the notion of “literacy practices” as a socially situated approach to conceptualizing literacy that became a central tenet of New Literacy Studies.

From the outset, Scribner and Cole’s (1981) research was designed to test the Literacy Thesis, but not necessarily refute it. Working closely with the indigenous
Vai people of Liberia, they aimed to “test out the possibility that the acquisition of literacy has generalized intellectual benefits, which are independent of formal schooling” (Stephens, 2000, p. 14). Documenting their fruitless struggle to uncover the ‘generalized cognitive effects’ of literacy throughout their research process, they challenged the cause-effect relationship posited between literacy and cognition undergirding the Literacy Thesis. Ultimately, the autonomous status and inherent cognitive consequences of literacy were refuted in favor of an emergent social-practice perspective. As Scribner and Cole (1981) concluded:

> Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. The nature of these practices, including, of course, their technological aspects, will determine the kind of skills (‘consequences’) associated with literacy (p. 236).

Stephens (2000) suggested that Scribner and Cole’s bracketing of the term “consequences” in the passage above signals an important shift in literacy research. In her summation, what Scribner and Cole’s (1981) work suggests is that “literacy may not have cognitive consequences, but it does have potentialities” (emphasis in original, Stephens, 2000, p. 16). No longer committed to uncovering a general (global) cause and effect relationship between literacy and cognition, researchers were inclined to turn their gaze towards specific (local) literacy practices, and thus, consider the cognitive potentials that might be inferred from them.

Reder and Davila (2005) also recognized Scribner and Cole’s (1981) work as foundational for shifting the gaze from universal attributes to local expressions of literacy. In particular, they introduced the notion of “literacy practices”.
Rather than seeing literacy as a set of portable decontextualized information processing skills, which individuals applied, Scribner and Cole reframed literacy as a set of socially organized practices in which individuals engaged (emphasis in original, Reder and Davila, 2005, p. 172).

Thus, Scribner and Cole’s social-practice perspective marks the beginning of two theoretical shifts in literacy theory and research: a unification of orality and literacy; and a shift in emphasis from text to context. That is, the view of literacy shifts from an autonomous set of skills towards socially situated practices. This shift from the global to the local was also germane to emerging studies in television which also began to challenge the autonomous ‘media effects’ perspective (technological determinism).

Socio-Cultural Studies of Television

Throughout television’s short history, academic and a good deal of journalistic criticism of the medium were dedicated to ‘disciplining’ it as if it were a disorderly child. (Hartley, 1993, foreword to Reading Television)

Fiske and Hartley (1978/1993) tell quite a different tale about the social and culture influences of television in Reading Television. The authors develop a view in stark contrast to Postman’s (1982) mass technology/mass effects determinism. Like Postman, they are concerned with understanding the relationship between popular-cultural media and literacy during a period of social and cultural change. But unlike Postman (1982), Fiske and Hartley defined television in terms of a “human” rather than technological construct and emphasized that its influence (or ‘effects’) “is the result of human choice, cultural decisions and social pressures”. As they elaborated,
The medium responds to the conditions within which it exists….Hence the television discourse presents us daily with a constantly up-dated version of social relations and cultural perceptions (p. 5).

Fiske and Hartley (1978/1993) further suggested that this up-to-the-minute and culturally-sensitive “social function” cannot be performed by more conventional forms such as the novel, or at least not on the mass scale available to television (p. 5).

In the foreword to the 25th anniversary edition, Hartley notes that *Reading Television* was the first book-length study of television from a textual and cultural point of view. The authors (both trained in literary and textual analysis) draw on semiotic theory (Barthes, 1971) and ideology analysis (Hall, 1980) in order to theorize the social and cultural functions of television, and not merely its textuality. It became the seminal text in the nascent field of ‘television studies’.

Fiske and Hartley explored the social and cultural implications of television as both a normative part of everyday life, and potentially, “an agency for defamiliarization”. They borrowed the term from Russian formalist criticism and in their argument, defamiliarization refers to television’s ability to “demystify our perception of reality, which emerges as ‘real-seeming’, rather than as reality itself” (Fiske & Hartley, 1993, p.130). The effect is to “produce in the audience or reader an awareness of the radical inadequacies of the established norms” which, in turn, can encourage a new and critical attitude. (ibid).

For Fiske and Hartley, television-as-technology does not ‘effect’ people, but rather, is a quotidian means of mediating reality (not unlike language) and may better understood in terms of its *effectivity* rather than its effects; an idea Fiske (1987) developed further in *Television Culture*. As he explained,
Television does not ‘cause’ identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others (p. 19).

Rather than the assumed autonomy of television-as-technology, Fiske (1987) offered a conceptualization of “television-as-culture” which draws attention to the ways in which these meanings, and their unequal circulation, are a “part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction” (p. 1). Television, like conventional print-based literary forms, proffers its readers an opportunity to participate in the “symbolic arenas” (Postman, 1982) through which society “maintains itself” (Fiske, 1987).

**Common Threads: Literacy and Media Engagement as Socially Situated Practice**

As an alternative to the autonomous model of literacy associated with Postman (1982), Street’s (1984) ‘ideological model’ rejects the notion of literacy as a set of neutral skills, and instead, sees literacy as practices fundamentally shaped by “socially constructed epistemological principles”. In this conception,

The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always ideological; they are always rooted in a particular world-view…(Street, 2006, p. 23).

Street’s (1984) ideological model is representative of a theoretical turn in the early 1980’s towards viewing literacy as a situated social practice. Challenging both dichotomization and decontextualization, ‘new’ ethnographically-oriented studies of literacy emerged. These ‘New Literacy Studies’ offered a careful consideration of the contexts of local literacy practices from various disciplinary
perspectives including anthropology (Heath, 1983), psychology (Scribner and Cole, 1981) and sociolinguistics (Street, 1984). While inter-disciplinary in focus, these studies share an understanding of literacy in terms of social practices and resources “embedded in specific contexts, discourses and positions” (Street, 1996, p.1).

Ethnographies of literacy continued to flourish in the 1990’s (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Besnier, 1995; Prinsloo and Breir, 1996). Sharing a concern for exploring the “flow of literacy in and around daily activity”, attention was first given to what particular individuals were doing – “what they read, wrote, when, where, how and why”, and then, how these practices were, in part, shaped by broader social, cultural, political, and/or economic structures (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, p. 4).

The same trend in can be seen in the field of television studies as a few seminal texts emerged in the 80’s followed by a more steady flow of audience-centered ethnographic media studies. As Montgomery, Rennie, Brennan and Hartley (2002) point out, media ethnographies of television share a concern for understanding how socially situated variables such as class (Morley, 1980), gender (Ang, 1985), age (Buckingham 2000), family circumstance (Morley, 1986), and ethnicity (Gillespie, 1995) shape the ways in which audiences interact with popular media texts (p. 11).

Early media ethnographers like Ang (who studied fans of the TV show Dallas) and Morley (who documented family viewing practices) argued “watching media texts was a process of negotiation between the text, a given audience and what ideologies, beliefs and values those groups brought to the process” (Montgomery et al., p. 82). Therefore, both media and literacy ethnographies share an understanding of readers/viewers as embedded within specific social, cultural and political contexts. The bulk of this ethnographic work established the
view that television audiences were far from “passive recipients” of meaning, but rather active readers who “accepted, rejected, subverted, and negotiated media texts” depending on the contexts of their reading (Montgomery et al. 2002, p. 82).

THE SUBJECTS OF TELEVISUAL ADDRESS
The discursive mode of address of television can be linked to Althusser’s (1971) notion of “interpellation” as developed by Fiske (1987). In Fiske’s reading, “interpellation refers to the way that any use of discourse ‘hails’ the addressee” to adopt an already-determined subject position. Put another way, ideal ‘reading subjects’ (or reading positions) are predetermined by the text.

Hall’s (1980) “preferred reading theory” is an example of this view and suggests that when viewers’ social circumstances are closely aligned with the dominant ideology of the televisual text, they are more likely to produce dominant (normative) readings. Oppositional and negotiated readings, argued Hall (1980) are necessary when the viewer’s social situation places them outside the dominant ideology. While Fiske (1987) noted that Hall’s theory “overemphasizes class in relation to other social factors” and “implies that the three types of readings are roughly equal”, its value lies in the fact that it “[frees] the text from complete ideological closure” and shifts the emphasis “towards the reader as the site of meaning” (p. 64).

Elaborating Hall’s model, Fiske suggested that rather than thinking of mode of address as a “singular preferred meaning”, it is more productive to consider the “structures of preference in the text” (ibid). This view sees the televisual text as a “structured polysemy” or as Fiske elaborates, “a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others” (p. 65). Most important, these multiple meanings - reproductive,
oppositional or negotiated - are not inherent in the text but must be activated by socially situated viewers. For Fiske, these meanings are *socially determined*; that is, constructed out of the complicity between a socially situated reader and the polysemic text. In this sense, the word determine does not refer to a “mechanistic, singular, cause and effect process” but instead represents the way social circumstances serve to “delimit or set the boundaries” of possible meanings (Fiske, 1987, p. 80). This suggests that reading television is not a matter of “garnering meanings from the text” but rather, is characterized by a more dialogic “process of negotiation between [one’s] existing subject position and the one proposed by the text itself” (Fiske, p. 65-66). As Fiske summarized: “The television text is, like all texts, the site of struggle for meaning” (p. 93).

In sum, both television and literacy are cultural technologies that are better understood in terms of their *effectivity* rather than their effects (Fiske, 1987). That is, both literacy and technology have the potential to “bring about” particular ways of knowing the world, or what Street (2006) calls “socially constructed epistemological principles” (p. 23). Yet, as Street also suggests, these principles are always subject to contestation and negotiation through the meanings and practices of socially situated readers. In the following section, I consider RTV as a particularly rich text for exploring the game-like ways of knowing that characterize both contemporary televsual engagement and situated (participatory) literacy practices (Gee, 2003).

**POST-POSTMAN TELEVISION: THE PARADOXES AND PROMISES OF REALITY TV**

One of the first academic texts to address contemporary television’s flourishing ‘reality-based’ orientation is James Friedman’s (2002) anthology *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*. In this collection, he brings an
interdisciplinary approach to understanding “the representation and containment of issues or events within the squared frame of televisual viewing space” (Friedman, 2002, p. 2). Friedman’s over-arching theme reflects an attempt to consider,

the ways in which reality is both reflected by and refracted through television programming as well as the ways in which television serves to frame and fuel discussions about events in the world (p.2)

Most importantly, Friedman argued, that while reality-based television may proffer viewers a look at “the world” we share with others, their “presentation of events is always, necessarily, a view of that world” (p. 10).

In his own contribution to the collection, Friedman considered both the narrative appeal of and public sphere interactions conditioned by the unscripted events that characterize reality-based television programming. While his examples are limited to sports events and political debates, his argument is that when television spectators are positioned as collective witnesses, and witnessing “involves a kind of narrative in the making: we take pleasure in our own act of ‘reading’ these events as they unfold” (p. 151).

As Friedman suggests, these emergent narratives must be interpreted and understood in relation to the “larger contexts and metanarratives of which they are a part” and thus, the televisual event may “be seen as a site for social interaction, with extra-textual discussions of the issues or events informing and being informed by the narrative interactions” depicted within and surrounding the televisual text (p. 152). And when we interact with others to discuss the experiences of “collective witnessing”, argued Friedman (2001), we “actualize” a discursive community around the televisual event that “would otherwise remain fictive” (p. 152).
Drawing on Sumara’s (1996) argument, the RTV text may be said to “announce a commonplace location – a collecting place – for ongoing interpretation” (p. 49). This ‘location’ can neither be attributed to the text or the reader, but rather represents the recursive relationship between reader and text. RTV instantiates a generative “interpretive location” by encouraging readers to “re-perceive and re-interpret their lived experiences” (Sumara, 1996, p. 21) in relation to the identities and situations represented in the fictionalized text. Stated otherwise, in attempting to negotiate the gaps between the real and the representational in the RTV text, viewers inevitably turn to their own experience to judge the inferred mental machinations of both the participants and the producers.

Pecora (2002) has argued that the rapid popularity of RTV coincides with a willingness to be “participant-observers” of our own lives. What has changed is that contemporary (postmodern) Western culture no longer sees surveillance as a “regulative mechanism of authority”. Instead, surveillance has become a “populist path to self-affirmation” particularly in its ability to present a “source of insight into the current norms of group behavior” (p. 348).

Pecora further proposed that our culture is obsessed with the practice of “testing reality” – a tendency that speaks to the increasingly complex relationship between truth and fiction in contemporary culture. (p. 350). RTV expresses the mounting need within liberal democratic societies to “reveal the norms and limits of individual responsibility and group identity, however exaggerated (and commercialized) the settings that reveal such knowledge may be” (p. 356). The intentional blurring of distinctions between factual/fictional, authentic/inauthentic, public/private that characterizes the RTV format invites the audience to participate in a “real-time”, “self-conscious” sociological experiment in which we are “simultaneously ethnologists and ethnological subject” (Pecora, 2004, p. 353).
As Hillier (n.d.) has suggested, describing RTV in terms of social experimentation is not merely a rhetorical strategy used by producers to legitimize the genre. Even social researchers themselves have identified RTV as a rich data site for studying human behavior under pressure. For example, in a series edited by Matt Smith and Andrew Wood entitled *Survivor Lessons: Essays on Communication and Reality Television* (2003), the program *Survivor* is analyzed as informing, and in the latter case, as challenging, established social scientific models of: social geometry (Godard); the nonverbal communication of trustworthiness (Boone), and social choice theory and political rationality (Wigenbach).

In North America at least, *Survivor* is the iconic version of the ‘social experiment’ genre of RTV programming. The format of *Survivor*, as conceived by creator Mark Burnett, involves bringing 16 strangers together in unknown and often hostile living conditions to compete in tests of mental and physical endurance. This formula – “introduce a diverse group of people, put them into situations bound to induce conflict, and watch them squirm” is a prototypical characteristic of RTV as an experiment in human nature (Smith & Wood, 2003, p. 1). In addition to these pressures, an elimination structure ensures that participants will also need to be socially astute as they negotiate the “tricky field of alliances and betrayals” to avoid being targeted by the group.

Burnett coined the term “dramality” to capture both the appeal and potential contributions of the convergence of drama and reality in experiments like *Survivor* and in a way, he is echoing the assertion of social scientist Stanley Milgram who likewise argued that “good experiments, like good drama, embody veritivities” (cited in Hillier, n.d.) Considering this appeal in psychological terms, Shapiro (2002) concluded, “*Survivor* creates a reality of physical and social stress and then allows us to witness the exposure of human character through the contestants’ interpersonal responses and interactions” (p. 280).
The assumption is that putting pressure on the surface of social reality is one means to access the ‘real’.

*Survivor* can be claimed as a metaphorical staging of the tensions between individual and groups in contemporary societies, displaced into an exotic and pressurizing location that makes these social forces reveal themselves. (Bignell, 2005 p. 71)

Friedman (2001), Hillier (n.d.), and Bignell (2005) are all in their own way highlighting the social implications of the Reality TV text. That is, these are texts that are purposely constructed to invite interpretation and discussion not merely consumption. More colloquially, RTV programs are designed to be debated ‘around the water cooler.’

In particular, they are representative of a folk (or participatory) understanding of popular culture in that they not only encourage, but in many ways require, audiences to appropriate the text according to their own personal needs and uses and sociocultural experiences (Jenkins, 2006; Hagood, 2008). That is, the RTV text *addresses* its readers as subjectively, socially, and ideologically situated meaning-makers engaged in exploring the gaps and contingencies between the real and the representational in contemporary culture.

For example, confessional interviews and unscripted scenes of interaction among participants position the reader intimately and create conditions for a more embodied, personalized engagement. For example, contestants on shows like *Survivor* may find themselves in exotic locales facing unprecedented challenges, but readers assume that these people will also have personal, interpersonal, and perhaps even ethical intentions that render their behavior in these situations more universal or “life-like”. As Bignell (2005) put it:
The situation is staged, interview questions prompt responses to the camera and issues of personality and character are probed. But the action is all true, in the sense that the sequences are not scripted and all the on-screen participants are ‘real people’ rather than performers (emphasis added, p. 69).

In this sense, RTV may be seen as a *hybrid* literary form; an overtly fictionalized representation of ‘the real’ that requires viewers to discern for themselves what is worth paying attention to in the text. Rose and Wood (2006) found that adopting a playful or ironic approach often helped viewers negotiate an “authentic” experience of the inauthentic elements of RTV programs. They suggest that those viewers who reported positive viewing experiences adopted a mode of engagement characterized by “wondering”:

> They wondered why the cast members acted or spoke as they did, they wondered what they would do if in the cast member’s place, they wondered what the producers were ‘up to’, they wondered about what actually happened and what might have been (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 294).

Wonder encapsulates the impetus for reflexivity and doubt evoked by the paradoxical address of RTV. I have suggested that RTV texts are deliberately structured forms that serve to shape readers’ perceptions and experiences in particular ways. And just as teachers select and represent elements of ‘the curriculum’ in particular ways, RTV producers select and re-present elements of the ‘the real’ in a similarly deliberate manner. And as Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2000) put it, “Just as students choose to either engage with or dismiss these proposed structures and materials, so do readers” of RTV (p. 237).
ENGAGING CONSCIOUSNESSES AND ‘NEW LITERARIES’

Sumara (1996, 2002) has developed research methods to condition and represent the complexity of reader’s interactions with literary fictions, with particular attention to how these fictional identifications influence experiences of identity over time. More recently, in collaboration with Luce-Kapler, Dobson, Sumara, Davis (2006), I too have considered the phenomenological experience of self-identity as conditioned by literary engagement in light of contemporary findings in the study of consciousness (Donald, 2001; Edelman, 2004; Thompson, 2001). What follows is a brief excerpt from this work and a consideration of how it might inform my present project.

Although readers are continually interacting with their immediate contexts and contacts, most of these interactions remain at a non-conscious level, with conscious awareness primarily being devoted to the integration of new information. One’s consciousness of self in the present moment (self-identity) emerges not so much from what is presently experienced but, instead, from the interpreted relationships between the remembered past and the projected future; what Edelman (2004) calls the “remembered present.” And although conscious experience depends on embodied sensory perception and a brain to process these relationships into language, these abilities are not regulated by any central processor or under the gaze of a unified observer. Consciousness is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere; subjective awareness is an emergent phenomenon that relies on decentralized, networked relationships between the biological and cultural worlds.

One way in which conscious experience becomes personalized into a sense of self-identity is through the employment of a Theory of Mind (or mindreading ability) to interpret human experience (Donald, 2001; Johnson, 2005; Lodge, 2002). Emerging around age four, mindreading refers to the innate ability to observe, understand and predict the behavior of others. Having a Theory of
Mind allows the child to realize that others have interpretations of the world that may be different from her/his own. This genetic aptitude for building theories of others minds is constantly being updated and adjusted on-the-fly in response to social situations (Johnson, 2005).

While mindreading is a biological capacity, it has co-evolved with culture as a creative process whereby the cognizing subject is able to expand his or her own self awareness by engaging in ‘thought experiments’ about how others create and interpret their self-identity. That is, we become more deeply aware of the contours of our own consciousness by virtue of opportunities to interpret and imagine the consciousness of others.

Donald (2001), Lodge (2002), Johnson (2005) and Zunshine (2006) suggest that the literary novel is our richest symbolic resource for developing more sophisticated (empathic) mindreading abilities. In this context, the notion of cultural texts identified as literary is broadened to include the fictionalized genre of Reality TV, suggesting that like engagements with the consciousnesses depicted in literary novels, empathic engagements with the embodied consciousnesses depicted in Reality TV texts do not merely condition imagined identifications with characters and their situations, but also function to mediate viewers’ sense of self-identity in their everyday lives (Sumara, 2002).

It is important to note that several of the dedicated members of the online fan community Television Without Pity explicitly identified as ‘avid readers’, not just of television, but of traditional fiction as well. They were clearly bringing this rich literary background to their interpretations of the fictionalized Reality TV text.
Just as the notion of “New Literacies” serves to expand the notions of what it means to be literate in a digitized and always social world, perhaps the phrase “new literaries” might serve to signal an elaboration of what is commonly considered literary engagement under relatively new conditions. Researching ‘new literaries’ announces the significance of game-like epistemologies and fan-like discursive strategies for negotiating authenticity in a postmodern milieu.
CHAPTER FOUR - FIELDING FANDOM: VIRTUAL METHODS FOR RESEARCHING ‘NEW LITERARIES’

As it is envisioned here, new literaries research brings both fan-like sensitivity and hermeneutic imagination to the discursive and deconstructive analysis of popular cultural texts and practices. It is informed by recent work in virtual or cyber-ethnographic methods, but it is itself not a virtual ethnography. Rather, it brings a cyber-ethnographically sensitive approach to contemporary reading research by offering a “thick” interpretive account of online readers (RTV fans), interacting with a particular text (Kid Nation), as situated by a particular context (Television Without Pity).

As Mackey (2002, 2003) has argued, now more than ever, reading researchers ought to pay close attention to the evolving landscape of popular literary forms and literacy practices and strive to develop “thick descriptions, theories and analyses of interpretive acts” in online spaces (p. 405). In describing the conditions under which particular readers are reading RTV online, I am seeking to elaborate theories of contemporary literary engagement (i.e. ‘new literaries’) and use this understanding to further elucidate the image of the reading researcher (and ultimately, teacher educator) as fan-tellectual.

CYBER-HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY: FROM PLAYING THE FIELD TO FIELDING PLAY

How does our existence in an endless chain/play of signifiers – an unfixable truth – allow us to maintain a sense of identity and an ability to engage in relationships with others? Do we need some sense of borderline, of boundary, of category, of ‘map’ in order to function? Does meaning require sites of collection and containment?

(Sumara, 1996, p. 74)
In the first chapter, I introduced de Zengotita’s (2005) image of the incessantly-addressed media-saturated self whose agency may be described in terms of a disposition to accident and necessity; that is, an openness to the possibility of “being pulled up short” by the texts of popular culture. The images of graffiti, talking back, misreading and virtual editing were all offered as a ways to describe the reading strategies of the fan-tellectual, who in addressing the ambiguities, gaps, and/or silences in the text, creates “commonplaces” for ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation (Sumara, 1996). In this chapter, I further consider how the speculative and imaginative engagement with RTV announces “a site of collection and containment” (Sumara, 1996, p. 74) that allows meaning to be represented and re-interpreted within a community of other readers.

The phrase *fielding fandom* intends to take advantage of the many entailments of the word field. As a noun, it designates a space, place, or sphere of interest characterized by joint activity. As a verb, ‘to field’ points to the processes of picking up (i.e. fielding a ball), putting into action (i.e. fielding a team) and, responding skillfully (i.e. fielding a tough question). Fielding fandom, then, includes a consideration of the data gathering techniques, representational strategies, and interpretive skills the researcher brings to both *playing the field* and interpreting a particular *field of play*.

Colloquially, to play the field suggests seeking diversity in one’s relationships and experiences without having to make any real commitments. And in baseball, the fielder, more than any other player, is responsible for positioning herself in order to cover the most ground. Playing the field, in both of these senses, entails taking up a strategic position somewhere ‘in the middle’ in the face of contingency and unpredictability.
In her Bourdieuan analysis of beginning teachers’ struggles to incorporate popular culture into the literacy curriculum, Marsh (2006) defines a field as having “its own internal logic and set of accepted discourses that become internalized by social actors who operate within it” (p.164). And, in a hermeneutic sense, identifying a generative field designates the search for “sites for inquiry that situate interpreters in the middle of activities related to some topic of mutual interest” (Sumara, 1996, p. 127). Conceptualizing a particular field of fandom in both critical and hermeneutic terms requires developing both a discursive understanding of and ethnographic sensitivity to the particular conditions of online engagement. It is an orientation that aims to both recognize and articulate the imaginative potential online fandom represents, while also remaining sensitive to the partial and particularized nature of these interpretive accounts (Jenkins, 1992).

I move now to a consideration of one particular online context for reading RTV virtually. Drawing on the central imagery, this is a transitional chapter in the sense that I am moving from a strategic position characterized by playing the field in my encounters with popular cultural texts to a more situated interpretive account of the emergent conditions shaping *Television Without Pity* as a particular field of play (playing field). Put another way, the first three chapters involve my own attempts to read popular cultural texts as a fan-tellectual. In identifying, representing, and re-interpreting some of the influential nodes in the discursive networks that constitute contemporary childhood, like a center fielder, I was attempting to cover a lot of ground.

But now, my interests turn toward conceptualizing the conditions under which other fan-readers interact with the RTV text. In this way, I move toward a more committed position that involves *fielding the play of others* as they represent their readings, misreadings, and occasional re-readings within an interpretive community.
This chapter is both a narrative of methodological decision-making and a situated review of online methodologies. It aims to outline some of the issues, challenges, and assumptions that have shaped what has become a cyber-ethnographically informed approach to reading research focusing on the interpretive and deconstructive analysis of texts produced by RTV fan-readers within a community of like-minded others. The final section provides a descriptive account of the rules of emergent engagement that characterize readers’ interactions in the online fan-community Television Without Pity.

INTRODUCING THE PLAYING FIELD: TELEVISION WITHOUT PITY

Imagine yourself at a friend of a friend's party. You mingle with other guests, strike up some conversations, and generally get along with everyone else even if they might not share the same opinions as you do on everything. You don't go ripping on people for having a different view of something, jumping up and down on the couch and calling them stupid. You'd be shown the door. So it is at TWoP.

We like to say "think twice, post once." Be respectful of your fellow posters, agree to disagree when differences present themselves, and never ever make things personal. Otherwise, you'll get a ticket on the Size-Nine Express.

(TWoP Forums- Posting Manners & Respect)

Television Without Pity (TWoP) is an online fan community devoted to the collective interpretation of contemporary television programming. Creators Tara Ariano (screen name “Wing Chung”) and Sarah D. Bunting (screen name “Sars”) began with a forum for fans of the TV program Dawson’s Creek in the fall of 1998 (DawsonsWrap.com), which then expanded its focus to become MightyBigTV in 1999. In 2002, Television Without Pity (TWoP) was launched and currently houses actively moderated forums for over sixty popular dramatic
and reality-based television programs as well extensive archives of discussions from past seasons and programs no longer on the air (i.e. “Brilliant but Cancelled”). Other features of the website include a movie forum (Movies without Pity), an extensive menu of links to popular blogs dealing with television and popular culture, and even a TWoP wiki page for sharing information about popular shows, characters and actors.

In March 2007, the Bravo Network acquired the Television Without Pity website in order to enhance its “portfolio of digitally linked assets”. As described in a March 13, 2007 press release.

The site attracts more than one million unique monthly visitors - who spend an average of 12.9 minutes on the site during a given visit - and receives approximately 30 million page views a month, according to comScore MediaMetrix and Internal Web Analytics Tracking. By adding TelevisionWithoutPity, Bravo elevates its presence on the web by more than 27% in unique visitors and more than doubles total page views (Blanchard, 2007)

I mention the corporate acquisition of TWoP because this event, along with the institutional ethics approval process, had a significant influence on my methodological decision-making. When I began my research, Television Without Pity embodied a grassroots, fan-driven interpretive community. But once it was sold to Bravo, ethical issues associated with data collection suddenly took on a legal dimension as well. Since I would now be required to embed direct links to the posts cited in my research, ensuring the anonymity of my participants became an impossible task.

But in the context of online fandom, I suggest that readers are deeply invested in inventing ‘reading subjects’ (or subjectivities for reading). In making their private readings public, it is attention they seek, not anonymity. One of the issues this
research considers is how privacy (as an established ethical benchmark) may be otherwise negotiated in online knowledge communities.

I began lurking (reading without posting) on Television Without Pity website in September 2006. As I watched my own favorites like The Amazing Race and Survivor, I followed the discussions of each show on the TWoP forums and took note of interesting interpretations, unanticipated disagreements and novel insights that emerged in the interaction among fans. The data samples I gathered during this time are best characterized as “limit case” examples. As Salvio (2007) argued, such examples are strategically chosen to give special attention to subtle peculiarities that challenge rather than reproduce the representative (normative) standpoint. In this way I was not seeking a representative model of fan activity, but rather, looking for moments of counter-normativity. I brought the same sensitivity to my reading and re-reading of the Kid Nation archives.

Both The Amazing Race and Survivor are familiar contemporary RTV programs, but Kid Nation proved to be a one time only event. Amid the furor of the controversy (much of which arose before the show even aired) and the possible violation of child labour laws, Kid Nation producers chose not to proceed with a second season. Since it is no longer an active program, all of the TWoP discussions around Kid Nation are housed in a read-only archive. This means that forum readers can have access to all of the discussions that took place while the show was on the air, but cannot add to them or alter them in any way.

As originally conceived, this dissertation project was to be a conventional cyber-ethnography of the TWoP community that coalesced around Kid Nation involving three stages or stances: 1) non-participant observation (lurking); 2) participant-observation (gaining insider status); and 3) participant interviews. I intended to study both the textual products of fan activity and the reported
subjective and everyday experiences of fan identity associated with producing them.

Therefore, I had two main data gathering techniques. I created files for each episode thread and gathered some of the ‘limit case’ examples of interpretive activity that emerged in the discussions. At the same time, I identified about thirty fan-readers who seemed to be particularly invested, emotionally and/or interpretively, in their engagements with *Kid Nation* and tracked their involvement in the episode and individual character discussions throughout the season. These readers were the pool from which my eventual interview participants would be chosen.

Ideally, if the intent is to study *both* the products of fan discourse and the subjective experiences associated with producing them, lurking is best tempered by participation where researchers not only observe online cultures, but also become contributing (and therefore visible) members, subject to the same rites and rules of community engagement. In order to understand what others ‘say they do’, the researcher must be a member of the community of practice in which these meanings are situated (Kendall, 1999). I believed that potential interviewees would be much more willing to share information about their fan identities with someone who was obviously engaged with establishing her own.

In my original conception, moving from lurking to participation in an online community would give me an opportunity to establish ‘insider status.’ And as Hodkinson’s (2000) observed in his study of an online Goth community, earning “subcultural capital” within an online community can take a considerable amount of time. Since the researcher can only establish insider status through “what one writes”, gaining acceptance “requires the learning of particular sets of norms for on-line behavior distinct from the values of the subculture as a whole” (cited in Stewart and Mann, 2000, p. 90). In the context of my own research, simply
announcing myself as an avid fan of particular RTV programs would not
guarantee acceptance as an insider in the forums. I would also need to
experience what it is like to share these interpretations within a particular online
community of practice.

However, when it came time to gain ethical approval for this project, moving
from my role as lurker to participant-observer became much more complicated.
The Behavioral Ethics Board recognized that my contributions would likely alter
or affect what happens in the forum discussions, and therefore the participants
would need to know that they are part of a study and consent would be required.
One solution would have been to indicate in my profile that I am doing research,
and make that stance explicit in my postings. But I had reservations about
‘outing’ myself as an academic before I had fully established a fan identity in the
TWoP community. As Hodkinson describes this dilemma in a personal email to
Mann and Stewart (2000):

Posting an announcement of my presence as a social researcher on a
newsgroup could be compared perhaps to making a similar
announcement over the PA of nightclub in which I was conducting
ethnographic work. As well as creating possible hostility it might well
distort the ‘natural’ interactions I am seeking to observe and record (p. 53).

To avoid making the wrong first impression in TWoP (and, of course, to secure
institutional ethical approval), I altered my research project to include only non-
participant observation and individual interviews. This alteration made it
impossible for me to establish the visibility and credibility in the TWoP
community that I felt was necessary for conducting meaningful participant
interviews. How could I earn trust from potential interviewees if I wasn’t visibly
engaged in the kind of practices I would be asking them to describe? There is a
certain vulnerability associated with making one’s private readings public, and I did not feel I was in a position to fully account for these experiences without having the opportunity to first establish a shared fan identity.

Rather than jeopardizing the ethnographic potential of this research – a program I now realize will take many more years to complete – I decided that this dissertation could serve as a more focused, yet fundamental, first step. Focusing exclusively on stage one – non-participant observation – my project now entails two main stances: 1) viewing the interpretive strategies of fans with ethnographic sensitivity; and 2) interpreting fan texts discursively and deconstructively.

So while I originally sought to interpret the reported experience of fan’s identities, I am now concerned with understanding the texts they construct on their own terms, “without recourse to an external, pre-textual reality” (Hine, 2000, p. 53). Hine (2000) suggested that placing the emphasis on the textual products of fan activity seeks to understand the “ways in which contributions are justified and rendered authoritative, and on the identities which authors construct and perform through their postings” (p. 53). That is, based on an interpretive analysis of these constructed texts, what are the discursive subjects of and for reading Kid Nation?

Matt Hills’ (2002) work in fan cultures also suggests that a textual emphasis in virtual ethnography can help challenge the “fallacy of internality” – or, the belief that fans can fully account for their fandom and, as an “in-group”, are a “source of pristine knowledge”. As he posited:

The assumption here is that sense and understanding are securely present inside the fan community, whereas external academic narratives – whether they are psychological, psychoanalytic, or sociological – are
somehow fraudulent or imposed upon the phenomenon that they attempt to explain away. (p. 68)

Clearly, this fallacy of internality influenced my decision not to interview TWoP participants without first becoming a visible member of the community. I was indeed concerned that without earning some sort of visible insider status my work would be seen as “fraudulent”, at least in terms of my ability to accurately represent fan experience.

Rather than a series of setbacks, these ongoing modifications represent one of the key characteristics of virtual ethnography as outlined by Hine (2000). As she puts it, “[it] is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (Hine, 2000, p. 65). In its current conception, cyber-ethnographic sensitivity is brought to the task of identifying the popular “topics” that shape fan-reading and interpreting the emergent interactions that serve to keep the conversations going (Hine, 2000, p. 67). Most important, this project is merely the first phase in a nascent program of research that will eventually seek confirmation and elaboration from TWoP members themselves as they are invited to ‘talk back’ to my text.

In light of all of these modifications, this project now falls under the “minimal risk” category and, in essence, does not require ethical review. But even though in the end I was able to secure institutional approval, the ethics of adopting a non-participant observational role is far from established in the community of Internet researchers. In the following section I review some of the main concepts and issues associated with cyber-ethnographic method and suggest new ways of conceiving situated ethicality in online research.
ADAPTING THE CYBER-ETHNOGRAPHIC GAZE

Also known as virtual ethnography (Hine 2000); cyberanthropology (Mizrach, n.d.); or connective ethnography (Leander, 2008), cyber-ethnography is an adaptive interpretive methodology which involves developing strategies and practices for observing interactive websites and virtual communities in order to gain a fuller understanding of online culture (Hine, 2000; Ward, 1999). Citing Jones (1999), Browne (2003) broadly defined cyber-ethnography as “the methodology applied when researchers examine interaction, communication and community online” (p. 249).

As in conventional ethnography, a cyber-researcher immerses him or herself in a field setting in order to better apprehend the actions, relationships, and understandings that define a particular virtual culture or community. In Hine’s (2000) terms, the primary aim of ethnographic immersion is to become familiar enough “to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives” (p. 5). To do this, the virtual ethnographer must become close enough to the culture under investigation to understand how it operates, but at the same time, possess the theoretical tools to be able to draw back and report on it. Thus, the cyber-ethnographer often operates in a kind of “in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger” to the culture under investigation (Hine, 2000. p. 5).

As I noted in chapter one, Jenkins (1992) used the term aca/fan to capture the hybridized way in which he theorizes fan culture both from the perspective of an academic (drawing on theories of popular culture and educational literature) and as a fan (who has experience with the forms of knowledge and ways of knowing within that community). Not unlike the aca/fan, the cyber-ethnographer comes to understand a virtual community by negotiating between various positions of familiarity and critique.
One of the most important tasks of the cyber-researcher is to make choices as to what will constitute *data*. Drawing on both ethnographic and hermeneutic ways of knowing, my decisions in this regard are not limited by a need to provide representative or normative models of fan texts, but rather, seek the subtle breaches and special cases that serve to reveal what otherwise might remain unnoticed (Sumara, 1996).

At the same time, and in line with Gibson’s (2000) conception of “critical media ethnography”, I am also concerned with “how macrostructures of power pattern, constrain, and are often reproduced within audience interpretations of media texts” (p. 253). That is, how are wider cultural narratives and/or dominant discourses implicated by the interpretive activities of media audiences? Furthermore, what can be learned about the ways in which discourses are (intentionally and unintentionally) reproduced, challenged and in some cases, re-invented in/through engagements with popular culture texts?

The image of the online researcher as a *cyber-fielder* is a useful trope in this context. The cyber-fields of online fandom are unique in the sense that everything is *already available* to the researcher as transcribed text. Beaulieu (2004) cites Thomsen et. al. (1998) who noted that,

> Online [fan] communities present the researcher with *nothing but text*. The ethnographer cannot observe people, other than through their textual contributions to a forum. All behavior is verbal in the form of text. There are no other artifacts to analyze other than text (emphasis in original, p. 154).

If everything is already ‘textual’ and thus, readily available for readers, what exactly is the role of the cyber-researcher? In response to the idea that “transcription is no longer an epistemic gain in a mediated context”, Beaulieu (2004) offered the image of “capturing” to indicate the epistemological
orientation required by online forms of ethnography. Not unlike like catching a pop fly, capturing involves strategically positioning one’s self on the field of play, drawing on experience and embodied know-how in order to anticipate and respond to emergent contingencies.

**To Post or Not to Post: Lurking as Liminal Research Stance**

[L]urking as a research technique is widely condemned by virtual ethnographers. At the very least...lurking is not acceptable since it puts the researcher in a powerful and distant position - the academic is someone who gazes on others, appropriating their actions for the purposes of research

(Bell, 2001, p. 198)

The various posts and threads of discussion encountered on the *TWoP* site constitute a ‘data archive’ for the cyber-ethnographer. Contributions from participants can be read by anyone even if they are not registered members of the *TWoP* community. Mann and Stewart (2000) cite Paccagnella (1997) who pointed out that posting to open forums like *TWoP* are intentionally “public acts” and therefore “deliberately intended for public consumption” (p. 46).

According to the working committee report on ethical decision-making from the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2002), *the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.* (p. 5). Yet, as indicated in the excerpt from Bell (2001), the prevailing attitude towards ‘lurking’ as an unacceptable research stance is one that I had to come to terms with in the context of my own inquiry.

Conventionally, the term lurk refers to behavior or movement that is furtive and concealed from view. In relation to computer-mediated communication, to lurk is to read electronic network texts without contributing or otherwise overtly making
one’s presence known. However, it is interesting to trace the etymology of the word back to its Scandinavian roots. From the Swedish, *lurka*, it is historically associated with a sense of taking one’s time, or to be “slow in one’s work” (OED online). It is this sense ‘deliberateness’ that I wish to bring to an understanding of lurking as the development of a kind of situated ethical know-how in the study of the online fan community *TWoP*.

In response to the now common claim that the phenomena researchers observe are inevitably altered by the very act of observing them, a lurker can be said to represent the ideal ‘invisible non-participant observer’. In reviewing the issues online research poses for ethnography, and in contra-distinction to the sentiments expressed by Bell (2001), Beaulieu (2004) found that “the idea of the lurker as beneficial or even an ideal position for the ethnographer comes up frequently” (p. 146).

Another research advantage in lurking is that it provides an opportunity to observe the practices of a particular culture prior to actually engaging it; that is, it allows the researcher to “case the scene” in order to develop a nuanced understanding of what being a member entails (Beaulieu, 2004). In essence, lurking is a means of engaging in this kind of observational work without actually intervening in the interactions. It is here that the sense of lurking as being slow in one’s work is most promising.

Certainly one of the tacit conditions of engagement in online communities is the acceptance that there will be silent members who partake without contributing. Even in *TWoP*, lurking is a far more common phenomenon than posting. For example, in the forums for *Kid Nation*, the thread created for Episode 1 (“I’m Trying to Be a Leader Here!”, Sept, 19, 2007) received 311 replies (or posts) but had been viewed by 45,550 readers. As Costello and Moore (2007) put it, “[the]
internet requires no quid pro quo. Lurkers are often the stealth compatriots of online communities” (p. 133).

The researcher as lurker does not participate in the community, but rather observes from an invisible, yet socially recognized and acceptable position. Obviously, this urges the researcher to consider new ethical issues that emerge when observations are carried out without informing the community. Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest the researcher-as-lurker needs to make,

distinctions between messages which illustrate the phenomenon under investigation (implying a strong sense of observation on the part of researcher) and those which are used by participants as debating positions (implying a strong sense of ‘claiming their own words’ on the part of the researcher) (p. 46).

That is, is the emphasis on interpreting the *texts* themselves, or the identities that produced them?

For example, Denzin (1999) adopted a “passive lurking position” in his conversational analysis of online text as discourse in a newsgroup for recovering alcoholics. He did not identify himself to members of the online community he was studying, nor did he gain permission to quote from the postings he used in his analysis. His study primarily involved discursive textual analysis, but his guiding ethic also posits “in the arena of cybertalk, meaning is given in the responses one speaker-writer makes to another” (Denzin, 1999, p. 110). As he further distinguished, “[it] is a mistake to read cyberwriting as if it reflects a direct connection to the conscious meanings and intentions of the writer” (ibid, p. 112).

Simply put, meaning cannot be ‘fixed’ by either its textual representation or the intentions of its author but emerges in the context of conversation with other speaker-writers. Rather than containing stable claims to knowledge, or
announcing fixed identities, the act of posting points to emergent possibilities for knowing that arise from the poster’s commitment to participate in these conversations and engage in collective meaning-making.

Sharf’s (1999) discussion of her ethical decision-making while doing naturalistic discourse research on the Internet revealed a different approach. She chose to personally email each of the members whose posts she was analyzing in order to seek their informed consent. In these emails she provided a brief personal introduction and description of the research, identified the quotation she wished to use, and offered to share the full draft with the consenting participants. For Sharf, this method was time-consuming but it helped her reconcile ethical concerns around the appropriation of ‘someone else’s words’. While my current project follows Denzin, my long-term research goals will incorporate Sharf’s approach as I invite particular *TWoP* fans to respond to ideas I develop here.

**Towards an Ethic of Lurking**

Like the choice of methods, the exact shape of any ethical framework is context-specific; what’s important is that it must be in tune with the field site, and must be accountable.

(Bell, 2001, p. 199)

Leaning (1998) suggested that “rather than seeking to satisfy a set of abstract and possibly theoretically inapplicable ethical codes” it might make more sense for cyber-researchers to “concentrate on methods that seem in tune with the world in which we exist” (cited in Beaulieu, 2004, p. 147). Lurking is indeed a “valid action” in online fan communities, and in this sense, it “fits the local environment better than interviewing or any other method” (ibid). Lurking calls for a situated ethicality that is sensitive to the immediate context in which research is taking place.
Yet, as Steinberg (2005) has noted, Western ethical thinking tends to privilege an “ethics of what” which seeks to articulate “what human beings are or should be” and then derive “principles of conduct from these conclusions” (p. 112). These principles of human duty are used to maintain a more-or-less coherent boundary between the rights and freedoms of individuals and the social responsibilities inherent in the environments in which they act. Particular and partial experiences are subjected to reductive “models” of moral conduct based on a fundamental belief in the “underlying order of things” (Steinberg, 2005, p. 119).

In contrast, Varela’s (1999) theory of ethical know-how asserts that “who we are” at any given moment (including our morality) is dependent upon what “other things” and who “other people” are to us (p. 10). As he further argued: “[we] always operate in some kind of immediacy of a given situation. Our lived world is so ready-at-hand that we have no deliberateness about what it is and how we inhabit it” (p. 9). Our action in these lived-worlds is often a form “immediate coping” with the situation at hand that does not rely on calculated reason or deliberation. Put another way, ethical action is not the product of an isolated moral judgment, but rather is a social process guided by an emergent, evolving, and situated capacity to respond appropriately to what is confronting us (p. 64).

In sum, an ethics of what relies on and perpetuates an image of a “central I performing deliberate, willed action” (Varela, 1999, p. 5) while an ethics of how re-conceives this “I as virtual”; that is, as an “emergent property of a complex, distributed process mediated by social interactions” (Varela, 1999, p. 62). For both Varela and Steinberg, truly ethical behavior is not initiated internally and then “acted out” according to a set of pre-determined moral “precepts” (Varela, 1999, p. 30). Rather, it emerges as embodied know-how and moment-to-moment moral sensitivity.
I bring this notion of an emergent ethical know-how to my role as (somewhat reluctant) non-participant observer. In this way, I avoid justifying my choices and interpretations based on an accepted and external ‘code of conduct’, or an idealized notion of the autonomous researcher that can be separated from the complicated web of relations that constitute ‘the researched’. But yet, is it possible to develop this sort of embodied, situated moral awareness without actually participating in the community one hopes to understand? Can one be ethical without making an actual commitment?

Even though I am not (yet) a contributing member, I believe that the close reading experiences I have gained as a fan-tellectual and now bring to the role of lurker have prepared me to bring embodied know-how and ethical sensitivity to the task of capturing and interpreting fan-produced texts in the context of TWoP. Most of all, this involved developing context-sensitive strategies for representing and re-interpreting the meaning that emerged in the unplanned and unpredictable interactions among particular readers and various ways of reading together. Not unlike reading the transcript of a classroom conversation, reading the TWoP discussion threads closely allows me to concentrate on the generative interactions among ideas rather than identities. And reading closely, as Gallop (2000) asserts, is itself an ethical endeavor.

For Gallop, close reading does not instantiate an “ethics for reading”, but rather, evokes a kind of “reading for ethics” in which close encounters with oft-unnoticed elements of the text become a “means to a more just treatment of others” (p. 17). This notion of reading for ethics is central to my conception of the lurker as an acceptable research position in the context of ‘new literaries’ research. Lurking that employs close reading strategies to avoid simply re-affirming or reproducing what is already known about fan texts and practices is ethically-grounded in that it is oriented toward recognizing what otherwise might remain unnoticed.
In the final section of this chapter, I describe the ethos of collectivity and rules of emergent engagement and that characterize reading television as a *TWoP* fan; that is, closely and without pity. As an educational researcher, I am especially interested in what happens when the diverse close readings of other fan-readers are brought together, juxtaposed and contested without any overt pedagogical intent. Obviously, more information will be noticed and given attention to within an interpretive community, but the question is, how is this information being used? Is this attention to detail being used to re-affirm existing preconceptions or to challenge them? How might research characterized by collective close encounters and an emergent reading for ethics challenge the oft-normalizing effects of educational experience?

**A KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY FOR READING REALITY**

As social spaces for pooling the various strategies of fandom, sites like *TWoP* can also be conceptualized as “knowledge communities” (Levy, 1997). Applying Levy’s understanding of collective intelligence to the sites of fandom, Jenkins (2006b) describes knowledge communities as: characterized by voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations; reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments; and, held together by the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge (p. 27).

Not unlike communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or interpretive commonplaces (Sumara, 2002), such spaces have the following characteristics in common: 1) meaning emerges in the generative interplay between individual interpretations and shared social practices around a cultural artifact, 2) activity is oriented by participation and possibility rather than individual proficiency, and 3) ways of knowing and forms of knowledge are negotiated in context and
experienced in use (Hine, 2000). That is, knowledge in such communities is collective (no one knows everything); participatory (everybody knows something); and emergent (arising in the interactions between the knower and the world-to-be-known) (Davis, 2004).

Most importantly, expansive interpretive possibilities in the context of knowledge communities require that participants are free to represent their various ways of knowing, but that these representations are also shaped by (subject to) shared social practices and a particular ethos of collectivity. As Jenkins (2006b) elucidated:

> Ways of knowing may be as distinctive and personal as what kinds of knowledge we can access, but as knowing becomes public, as knowing becomes part of the life of the community, contradictions in approach must be worked over if not through. (p. 45)

Individual contributions to the TWoP forum arise from self-interested attempts at representing personal knowing and knowledge, but once they become part of the collective, their possible meanings emerge in the interactions between individual knowers and alternate ways of knowing. In other words, meaning emerges in the responses one reader-writer makes to another (shaped by the interpretive context of reading) and therefore cannot be fully predicted by the author nor exhausted by the reader (Denzin, 1999). In the life of the TWoP community, the conflicts that sometimes arise in these interactions may serve to unsettle or disorient distinctively personal (or egocentric) ways of knowing.

But this argument is not meant to conflate participation with learning. Jenkins et al. (2007) proposed that coming to terms with the emergent conditions of “participatory culture” is one of the main challenges confronting education in the 21st century. Meeting this challenge involves creating opportunities for learners
to “recognize and articulate the different assumptions that guide their behavior” as communicators and participants in various informal learning communities (Jenkins et al., p. 17). In this way, learning within the participatory framework of *TWoP* is *provoked* rather than determined. As participants engage in and share the kinds of discriminatory practices and interpretive strategies that allow them to engage the RTV text, they inevitably encounter other ways of knowing that may compel the emergence of a novel response.

As developed by those working in the interdisciplinary field of complexity studies, the process of emergence (also known as self-organization) is used to describe the way in which complex systems are able to bootstrap their own diversity, from the ‘bottom-up’ so to speak, in response to novel challenges from their environment (Davis, 2004). Cities, humans, brains and even consciousness itself has been described in terms of a complex system (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Johnson, 2001, 2004, 2005). Most important, complex systems have no orchestrator or central controller; instead, adaptations emerge in the ongoing interactions between the system and its environment. That is, the products of an emergent event can never be fully anticipated. The complex learning system (i.e. reader) must *choose the triggers* from the environment it will respond to. Participation may occasion learning, but it cannot guarantee it.

**Rules of Emergent Engagement In *TWoP***

There are various sites available for discussing contemporary television programming online. (e.g. [www.realitytvworld.com](http://www.realitytvworld.com), [www.tvgrapevine.com](http://www.tvgrapevine.com)) but what distinguishes *TWoP* from these other sites is the relatively high standards for participation placed upon forum contributors. For example, members are advised to read at least 15 pages of previous discussion before adding a post so as to avoid repetition and dead-end commentary. Careless errors in punctuation and spelling and ‘point-form’ posts are admonished. As media critic Stevens
puts it: “[the] site's expectation that its readers be thoughtful writers, too, is a refreshing change from the usual blog ethic of egalitarian mediocrity” (Stevens, 2007).

Individual participants in the *TWoP* forums are designated both by a self-chosen username and an awarded ranking determined by the volume of their past contributions to the community. In this way, status is incurred by reaching a particular level of participation or presence in the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just Tuned In</td>
<td>0-9 Posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel Surfer</td>
<td>10-99 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal Viewer</td>
<td>100-199 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Archivist</td>
<td>200-349 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couch Potato</td>
<td>350-999 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanatic</td>
<td>1000-4999 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker</td>
<td>5000+ posts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the highest level are the “Network Executives” who are moderators employed by the website and assigned to particular forums. “Recappers” are responsible for providing “recaps” (moment-by-moment analyses) of each episode for the forum community. These summaries are typically more than 6000 words in length and combine varying degrees of story-board specificity with ample doses of “snarking” (snide remark). Stevens (2007) describes these elaborate recaps as a particular genre of writing that simulates the experience of watching the program with a “pop-culture-savvy” guide beside you.

Most importantly, the Network Executives are extremely active monitors of the forum. They review all content posted and maintain the right to edit or delete content that is deemed inappropriate, off-topic or otherwise counter-conducive to the spirit of collective engagement. These moderators are often diligent filters and, in fact, *TWoP* has been criticized for its sometimes heavy-handed or
didactic tone in dealing with participants' transgressions (TWopSucks). It is clear that the presence of the moderator maintains the comparatively high standards of participation required of TWoP forum members, but when it comes to generating new (and emergent) forms of knowledge these rules of engagement appear to be more enabling than constraining.

Structures that support the emergence of novel, unanticipated possibilities can be described as “enabling” or “liberating” constraints (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). Specifically, such guidelines for productive collectivity are not “prescriptive” (in the sense that they dictate what must be done), but rather, are “proscriptive” (or “expansive”) in that they point to what might be done under the constraints of a set of shared assumptions that outline what must not be done. (Davis et. al.. p. 193).

In this way, guidelines for emergent engagement in collective spaces are not unlike rules that guide any team sport. As in any sport, some rules are necessary to define a collective identity and establish shared goals but, at the same time, they must be flexible enough to accommodate the randomness and disruption that are necessary for novel responses to emergent possibilities.

In the TWoP community, the rules for engagement are organized around establishing the do’s and don’ts of collectivity, and many are articulated in proscriptive terms; that is, establishing what should not be done. For example, under the heading “Good Manners and Respect”, the TWoP site offers the following guidelines:

- DON’T use ‘um’, be snotty to another poster, or make the argument personal.
- DON’T present your opinions as facts.
• DON’T post the same opinion over and over in the hopes of wearing other people down or ‘winning’ a discussion; just move on.
• DO know the difference between differences of opinion and personal attacks.

As a whole, these rules are meant to ensure that the ‘tone’ of engagement is characterized by collective possibility rather than performances of individual proficiency; a key characteristic of participatory cultures as outlined by Jenkins and his collaborators (2007). Individual contributions necessarily arise in self-interest, but are shared in service to the community.

As Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) put it, proscriptive or expansive rules are not completely restrictive nor completely liberating but instead, organized around a joint project rather than individuals. As in all sports, rules have no regard for individual players; it’s the game that matters.

For instance, an important distinction is made between “differences of opinion” and “personal attacks” in the TWoP community. This distinction recognizes that diversity in interpretations is essential to collective emergence and the hope is that when these individual contributions are juxtaposed and allowed to ‘bump up’ against each other, new interpretive possibilities will arise (Davis et al., 2008). But, it is the ideas and interpretations that must interact, and not necessarily the people (or personalities) behind them. This important distinction is also addressed in the rules of the TWoP forums that warn participants to avoid taking disagreements personally or presenting their opinions as facts. Simply put, there is no room for absolutes in knowledge or opinion in this particular fan community.
A Framework for Fielding Emergent Learning

As noted earlier, all of the discussion around the characters and situations in Kid Nation is housed as a read-only archive. The main archive is divided into two sections: “Kid Nation General Gabbery” and “Kids”. The first section includes threads (or topics) for each of the thirteen episodes as well topics created by TWoP members throughout the season. For example, the topic created for episode 6 “Bonanza is Disgusting” (the focus of my analysis in chapter six) contained 288 posts and was viewed by 26,292 readers. Some of the fan-generated topics that emerged include: “The Ethics of Kid Nation: Lord of the Flies of Plain Country Living” (51 posts, 11,397 views), “Potential Crushes and Innocent Flirtation: Kid Nation Relationships” (55 posts, 14,555 views), “Speculation: How will TPTB (‘the powers that be’) Interfere this Week?” (42 posts, 3325 views), and “Ideas for a Better Kid Nation” (59 posts, 6011 views). Based on the number of views, it appears that discussion of social issues and relationships in the context of Kid Nation may not necessarily generate more posts, but is definitely more popular with readers.

The part of the archive simply titled “Kids” contains threads created for almost all of the forty Kid Nation participants. Obviously, with a cast that large, not all of the kids were featured equally. This section includes 31 threads and 2313 posts, with a handful of popular kids generating most of the response. For example, the thread created for controversial Taylor, a ten-year-old beauty pageant queen from Georgia, contains 353 posts and had been viewed 44,189 times.

During the first half of the season, Taylor’s character received a lot of camera time, which garnered her more than her fair share of attention in the TWoP forums. My decision to focus on Taylor and a few key events in the development of her character was influenced by the work of Nancy Baym (2000) in an online forum devoted to fans of the soap opera All My Children.
Her analysis of the rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s) fan community was limited to posts made in response to a particular story line involving a character named Carter Jones over a ten-month period.

The first data set (chapter five) is limited to posts made to the episode threads and the thread devoted to discussing Taylor directly (TWoP Forums_Kids_Taylor: “She’s a Brat! Deal With It!” from September 19 (episode 1) to October 24, 2007 (episode 6). I offer illustrative examples under the following categories in order to capture the various ways in which Kid Nation forum participants were reading Taylor as: 1) a stereotypical pageant queen, 2) a prototypical Queen Bee/Mean Girl, 3) a parodied performance, 4) a paradox, and 5) a personality type (i.e. ‘thick-skinned’). Implicit in many of these reading subjects is also an attempt to understand Taylor’s behavior as the product of a particular kind of parenting.

In seeking to explore the reading subjects TWoP readers used to engage with Taylor’s character, chapter five begins by drawing attention to the cultural “Discourse models” they implicate, and sometimes challenge (Gee, 2005). Discourse models reflect what is “essential”, “typical”, or “normal” in a given socio-cultural environment (Gee, 2005). In Gee’s account:

They are always oversimplified, an attempt to capture some main elements and background subtleties, in order to allow us to act in the world without having to think overtly about everything all at once (Gee, 2005, p. 61)

In this sense, Gallop’s (2000) notion of close reading may also be a way of challenging the “prototypical” (or normative) models we implicitly employ to make sense of the world. Prototypical simulations are evoked when a certain situation is taken to be “typical” or “normal”, and like reading for principle ideas in a text, details are ignored in favor of continuity and coherence. These
simulations are based on our embodied experiences, but over time, have been “edited to capture what is taken to be typical or essential” and operate more or less unconsciously in our day-to-day lives (Gee, 2005, p. 73).

The example Gee offers is the model evoked when we hear the word wedding. The immediate images are likely to be conventional: a bride and groom, an elaborate gown, perhaps flowers, and most likely, a church. But what if the wedding ceremony involves two women or two men? Suddenly, the ‘typical’ doesn’t fit, and we are forced to take a closer look at the situation, and adjust and elaborate our models accordingly (Gee, 2005, p. 57). This detail-seeking orientation enables us to devise “special-case simulations” which are elaborated versions of our prototypical models that arise when one chooses to pay close attention to, and make sense of, particular and oft-unseen details. By closing in on the contextual specifics of a given situation, already-known prototypical models may be disrupted, tested, elaborated and refined.

Chapter five includes examples of both prototypical and special-case reading subjects that arose around Taylor’s character. In chapter six, however, I move from considering the subjects of reading to an interest in the subjects for reading Taylor. In episode 6, a particularly emotionally ambiguous event (what came to be known facetiously as ‘the false imprisonment of Taylor’) generated much higher volumes of talk about Taylor in the TWoP forums. The second data set is limited to posts made to the Episode 6 thread and the Taylor thread from October 24 to October 31, 2007. Under the umbrella of close reading strategies, I offer posts selected to illustrate the various ways of paying attention that emerged in response to this televisual event. These include: pre-reading (interpreting embodied/pre-linguistic experience); intra-reading (drawing on subjective experience); inter-reading (considering the televisual event in terms of its cultural/social/ethical implications) and re-reading (reading as un-doing).
To be clear, I do not intend to suggest that all *TWoP* participants are engaging in close reading. Rather, my argument is that when individuals *do* share their strategies for context-dependent meaning-making, possibilities for deeper, more ethically-sensitive engagements with ideas, identities, feelings, and situations emerge for the entire community.

In this context, to be ethically-sensitive is to employ strategies of engagement that do more than simply re-affirm the ‘typical’ and the ‘already-known’. To reiterate Gallop’s (2000) argument, reading for ethics involves disrupting already-held conceptions and stereotypes in order to “see” or “hear” and explore what is “really there” in the text (Gallop, 2000). That is, it is to ask once again: *What is (re)ally going on here?*
CHAPTER FIVE - BEYOND THE INNOCENT AND THE UNRULY: READING CHILDHOOD AS A DISCURSIVE NETWORK

We need ways of reading which see texts for what they really are – partisan discursive constructs offering particular meanings and modes of understanding.

(Weedon, 1987, p.172)

Reality TV is a nodal point at which different discourses within and outside television culture have temporarily come together in an unstable conjunction

(Bignell, 2005, p.171).

After introducing Taylor vis-à-vis one of her more memorable early performances in *Kid Nation*, I discuss her character in terms of generative node in a network of discourses around contemporary childhood in general, and more particularly, girlhood. To consider childhood in terms of a network points to the inter-connected yet decentralized meaning-making abilities and Discourse models *TWoP* readers employ in a moment-to-moment responsiveness to the demands of the discursive situation.

Read discursively, the character of Taylor in the context of *Kid Nation* can be seen to produce a variety of ‘reading subjects’ or subjects-to-be-read from the text. With this in mind, I offer several interpretive heuristics or situated ‘ways of thinking’ about Taylor that emerged in the context of the *TWoP* community. These include reading Taylor through various Discourse models (i.e. a stereotypical pageant queen; a Queen Bee/Mean Girl) and in more situated
terms (i.e. a parodied performance; paradox; and the embodiment of a particular ‘attitude’).

The chapter concludes by linking the interpretive practices and creative possibilities associated with these reading subjects to Fiske’s (1987) understanding of television as a *producerly* text that openly plays with the boundaries between the real and the representational. The guiding questions for this chapter are: What ‘reading subjects’ are contemporary RTV texts like *Kid Nation* proffering viewers? And more importantly, what reading subjects are *invented* when previous ways of thinking and existing Discourse models no longer seem adequate?

**SHE’S A BEAUTY QUEEN, DEAL WITH IT!**

Authority is like lipstick. What looks fine on a grown woman may look hideous on a child.

(Posted Oct. 3, 2007 @8:37 pm, Kids_Taylor Forum [Post#70])

Identified on-screen as “a beauty pageant queen from Georgia”, 10-year-old *Taylor*, was the youngest of four kid leaders pre-chosen by the producers of *Kid Nation*. As an original member of Town Council, her responsibilities included choosing the members of the Yellow District (which, not surprisingly, was also the youngest team), leading them in showdown challenges, and representing their interests at Town Council meetings. Mid-way through the season, an election was held and Taylor lost her seat on council to fellow Yellow District member, 10-year-old Zach (Episode 5, “Viva La Revolucion!”, October 17, 2007). Yet prior to and even after her defeat, Taylor had a significant influence both in Bonanza City and in the *TWoP Kid Nation* forums.
“Deal with it!” became the catch-phrase for Taylor’s attitude towards leadership in the context of Kid Nation. An entire episode (Episode 3 “Deal With It”, October 3, 2007) was devoted to various situations in which Taylor felt compelled to apply her no-nonsense philosophy to organizing life in Bonanza City. The following is an interpreted and scaled-down version of the very detailed re-cap of Episode 3 provided by M. Giant on the TWoP forum for Kid Nation. I relied on this re-cap to organize my own remembered impressions after watching this episode, and to obtain direct quotes from the characters. As noted earlier, re-caps are very detailed scene-by-scene accounts, and at over 6000 words, are extensive and often snarky transcriptions of key events in each episode.

In Episode 3, the Pioneer Journal recounted how the original 1885 Bonanza City struggled when its townspeople began spending all their time and money in the Saloon. The Council conceded that the kids did seem to be spending a disproportionate amount of time nursing root beers, so at the next Town Hall meeting, they announced a 9:30 curfew. Not surprisingly, a shouting match erupted. Channeling her pseudo-parental voice, it is the youngest leader, Taylor, who has the final word: “Quiet! Nine-thirty is our curfew! If anyone’s got a problem with it, sorry, but you’re going to have to deal with it.”

Another opportunity for Taylor to display her curt leadership skills presents itself when all four teams complete the showdown challenge in the time allotted. This means they have earned a town reward, and in this episode, they are offered the choice between a community microwave (and cocoa) or 40 pizzas. The Council is advised to go off and discuss their decision, but it’s clear the majority of shouting kids left behind want those pizzas. Yet again, it is Taylor who is the voice of pseudo-adult authority: “The pizza’s what we want. The microwave’s what we need”. When the other council members remind Taylor that the consensus was clearly in favor of the pizzas, she sticks to her guns and
reasserts that it is the Council’s job to make a decision, not the town’s. And if they are unhappy with that decision, they will just have to ‘deal with it’. As Taylor herself puts it in a confessional interview, sometimes “You have to be bossy to get people’s attention”.

The final segment of the episode is the town meeting where once again, Taylor takes center stage. This week her Yellow District won the showdown (which means they are not required to complete any particular chores). Taylor defends the mounting attack by declaring “We earned upper class and we don’t care if people are mad at us or not”. The rest of the town is mad; not because the Yellow District won but because they have a history of not completing their chores even when they are required to do so. The kids had finally had enough of her ‘deal with it’ approach and are no longer hiding their disapproval. The animosity reaches its pinnacle and Taylor, bearing the brunt of it, begins to cry. Rather than eliciting sympathy, Taylor’s tears prompt someone in the crowd to yell: “Taylor, you’re doing a bad job” Deal with it!” The crowd awaits Taylor’s response, and after a few more tears, she finally says she’s sorry, although it’s tough to tell whether her fellow pioneers are buying it. The tense scene ends with Taylor declaring that the Yellow District is going to “start helping clean up the town”, a sentiment that finally earns the kid’s applause and encourages a tearful Taylor to flash one of her pageant-perfect smiles.

READING SUBJECTS
“The moment of reading,” suggested Fiske (1987) “is when the discourses of the reader meet the discourses of the text. When these discourses bear different interests, reading becomes a reconciliation of this conflict” (p. 82). One way to think about Kid Nation is as a deliberately structured node in a network of discourses that serves to influence audience perceptions and evoke particular experiences about childhood. In this way, the televisual text both frames the
subjects-to-be-read and *subjects* its readers to particular discourses within the text.

The phrase reading subjects (as a noun) refers to the way in which techniques of production, commonsense narratives, and the interpretive activities of readers all work together to define the subjects that can be read *from* the text. The characters in the RTV text become subjects *of* reading characterized by a complex discursive textual structure. Building on Fiske’s (1987) argument, reading subjects in this sense refers to a discursive socio-political orientation that understands character to be “a series of textual (and intertextual) relations” (p. 154).

A discursive (or structuralist) reading orientation highlights how character functions as a “metonymic representation of social positions and the values embodied in them” (p. 158). These representational categories are “not inherent in the text, but are ways of thinking” and as Fiske (1987) concludes, “explanation must be sought for them in the social relations of reading” (p. 160).

Reading the character of Taylor discursively is not an attempt to identify who she is, once and for all, but rather, is characterized by a willingness to participate in the discursive network that emerges around her. This reflects a poststructuralist understanding of the relationship between language, meaning and discourse wherein,

> The individual is both *the site* for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a *subject subjected to* the regime of meaning or a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly (emphasis added, Weedon, 1987, p. 34).
Reading _subjects_ (as a verbal phrase), therefore, refers to the ways in which the text invites the reader to both recognize and read character as “the representation of psychologically layered and motivated individuals” (Fiske, 1987, p. 160). Such a “realistic” reading of character, according to Fiske, “proposes that the world is made sense of through the perceptual and cognitive processes of the individual (originally the character as individual, but finally the individual viewer”) (ibid). Rather than negotiating a discursive network, reading _subjects_ emerge in situations where readers are compelled to invent particular subjects _for_ reading.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate an understanding of “realistic” (Fiske, 1987) or “personalized” (Baym, 2000) reading strategies to account for the ways in which hybrid forms like RTV also condition various embodied and ethically-sensitive reading positions (or subjects _for_ reading). In some cases, readers may be seen to be working through their various experiences of being “pulled up short” by the RTV text.

However, in this chapter the focus is on Taylor as a subject _of_ reading shaped by a socio-political understanding of character as a network of discourses. A discursive approach to reading Taylor-as-subject is a “means by which sociocultural experience, the text in question, and its intertextual relationships are brought together in a productive moment of interaction” (Fiske, 1987, p. 18). Capturing these productive moments of interaction involves both discursive analysis and hermeneutic imagination.

As Sumara (1996) described it, “[the] hermeneutic imagination seeks to illuminate the _conditions_ that make particular interpretations possible and, further, to describe what conditions might alter our interpretations” (emphasis in original, p. 124). The categories I offer for reading Taylor-as-subject are products of an interpretive strategy that aims to capture (temporarily re-present)
the interpretive conditions of reading her character in the *TWoP* forums. At the same time, it also seeks the “subtleties” and “special-cases” in these conditions as a way of pointing to ways in which reading Taylor-as-subject may also encourage reading for ethics, or as Vinz (2000) put it, reading to become “(other)wise”.

I have argued that RTV text is a deliberately structured node in network of discourses that serves to influence audience perceptions and experiences in particular ways. In the following analysis, my task is to identify and pay attention to the ways in which Taylor-as-text facilitates various connections between nodes in the discursive network that characterizes contemporary childhood in general, and girlhood in particular. Put another way, in noticing, strategically juxtaposing, and deconstructing these particular posts, I am attempting to capture an image of an ever-evolving network of discourses (some deliberate, some emergent) that coalesced around Taylor’s character.

It is important that my interpretative accounts of these examples drawn from the *TWoP* be seen as tentative and strategic rather than representative. Since I have not confirmed these interpretations with the individuals who produced them, this is clearly an ethically tenuous reading position. But to reiterate, an ethnographically-sensitive hermeneutic approach to researching popular cultural texts and practices is more about tracing emergent topics, capturing transitory meaning and imagining possibilities for learning rather than providing a model of fan identities or ways of knowing.

In this way, I make no claim to understand the poster’s intentions in choosing to read Taylor a particular way in the context of the *TWoP* community; instead, I note how individual contributions are situated within a much a larger network of meaning, and therefore point to possibilities for new meaning to emerge in the interaction among them. Simply put, in conditions of complex emergence,
meaning cannot be traced to any one individual. Therefore, the ‘reading
subjects’ associated with Taylor are invented heuristics for capturing the socio-
cultural intertextuality of Taylor-as-subject through the discursive network that
coalesced around her without making any claims to represent the “pre-textual
reality” (Hine, 2000) of the readers who actively participated in it.

Returning briefly to Fiske’s (1987) argument, the reading subjects linked to
Taylor are not “inherent in the text” but rather, emerged as particular “ways of
thinking” brought forth by individual readers in the community of *TWoP*. And as
Jenkins (2006b) argued, when various personal ways of thinking and knowing
are made public in knowledge communities like this, “contradictions in approach
must be worked over if not through” (p. 45).

Again, this distinction does not equate participation with learning. To learn, the
reader must recognize how the gaps and unnoticed details in the RTV text
compel her to recognize and elaborate already-established ways of thinking. To
learn, the reader must be oriented by a need to negotiate *what’s (real)ly going
on.*

As part of a larger knowledge collective, the readers who post about Taylor are
doing so out of self-interest, drawing on personal ways of knowing and norms of
social experience to interpret her character. Yet, by implicating a wider network
of discourses, these posts also point to possibilities for *new meanings* to emerge
when these various ways of thinking are allowed to ‘bump into each other’ in
liberating ways (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000). In such conditions,
learning cannot be determined or predicted, but rather, must be provoked.
DEALING WITH TAYLOR IN *TWoP*

Mere minutes after the premiere of *Kid Nation* aired, the following post was the first to comment specifically on Taylor’s character by drawing attention to her signature line in the episode:

“‘I’m a beauty queen, I don’t do dishes?’ Man, an adult would never be able to get away with that, but I’m more inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt here. I’m guessing her parents really pushed that mindset on her.

(Posted Sept. 19, 2007 @ 9:07 pm. Episode 1 Thread, [Post#8])

This post implies a commonsense distinction between the more flexible and forgiving social contracts of children versus those of adults. This strategy of distinguishing the adult experience from the child’s was common in the *Kid Nation* commentary and tended to draw on (and in this case, reaffirm) ‘normative’ binaries between childhood and adulthood. For example, implicit notions of the child as socially incompetent, cognitively immature, and/or biologically unformed, all work insidiously to maintain the either/or boundary between the experiences of the child relative to what an adult might experience.

In this case, the reader announces an inclination to give Taylor “the benefit of doubt” primarily because she is seen as a product of a particular kind of parenting. In fact, assumptions about parenting (insofar as it designates the desirable relationship between the immature child and adult authority) can be seen to be woven into all of the ‘reading subjects’ that emerged around Taylor, particularly her identity as a beauty pageant queen.
Taylor as Pageant Queen

In the *TWoP* forum discussions, there was little doubt that Taylor had been deliberately typecast as the metaphorical ‘pageant queen’ and therefore would either have to contend with, or actively appropriate, the cultural entailments this particular stereotype embodies in contemporary society. For example, sensational media events like the murder of six-year old JonBenet Ramsey, pageant-based documentaries (*Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen*) and RTV docu-soaps like TLC’s *Toddlers and Tiaras* speak to the intertextuality of ‘the child as pageant queen’ as a particular node in the larger discursive network of childhood.

Discerning whether Taylor was a willing performer or victim of this stereotypical identity in the context of *Kid Nation* characterizes much of the discussion about her in the *TWoP* forums. The following post (in response to Episode 3 “Deal With It!”) thread makes these tensions explicit.

Did you all notice that in every episode Taylor has mentioned her pageant queen background??? Makes me wonder how much of that aspect of her identity she embraces, how much her parents have emphasized it to her (at least for the purposes of her appearing on the show), and how much of it reflects the coaching of the producers?

(Posted Oct. 4, 2007 @ 11:53 am. Kids_Taylor Thread - [Post#99](#))

Phrased as an interrogative and including the impetus for ‘wonder’, this post is good example of how RTV readers use details from the text to explore the gaps or otherwise unnoticed tensions in the text. This post identifies at least three possible influences shaping Taylor as a pageant queen. For the first three episodes at least, Taylor was indeed using her identity as a pageant queen to define what she was and was not willing to do in the context of Bonanza City.
Beauty queens don’t do dishes, and they don’t scrub outhouses either. Deal with it.

But as her on-screen caption indicated, there is no doubt that producers were taking advantage of this already-recognizable aspect of her pageant-queen personality, and as this poster suggests, they may have even “coached” her to turn it up a notch. Finally, this poster wonders, does Taylor truly “embrace” this “aspect of her identity” or is she the product of a particular kind of parenting that has constructed this identity for her?

Taylor as Queen Bee/ Mean Girl
Another Discourse model used to read Taylor’s character is the image of the Queen Bee, first introduced by Wiseman (2002) and popularized by the feature film Mean Girls (2004).

Taylor seems like a prototype of a "mean girl". The mute but pretty friend enhances her reputation and supports her. I don’t think you would catch her hanging with the PETA girl, for example. She *really doesn't* care what others in the town say about her. When she is older, if she continues in this vein, she might do some token stuff to make herself look better, but she still won't really care.

(Posted Oct 12, 2007 @ 3:15 pm Episode 3 Thread Post#142 )

In this post, the distinction between the “mute but pretty friend” (i.e. Sidekick) and the PETA girl (i.e. Wannabe) indicates that for this reader at least, Taylor is at the center of the social girl-archy in Bonanza city. In Wiseman’s analysis, the “Sidekick” is the second-in-command to the Queen Bee and the Wannabe is someone on the perimeter of the clique trying to work her way in.
As McRobbie (1991) first pointed out and Landry (2008) elaborated, the images of Queen Bees/Mean Girls, Sidekicks and Wannabes are “cultural scripts” proffered by popular media, and “thus a girl’s status among other girls is highly contingent on her ability to consume and perform the versions of femininity as contained within these scripts” (Landry, 2008, p. 28).

In her connection to “pageant queen” and “mean girl”, Taylor becomes a discursive node through which both stereotypical images and commonsense assumptions can be recognized as cultural constructions (or scripts), and by paying attention to subtleties and special-case features, the proffered Discourse models may become sites for articulating a response to the paradoxical address of Reality TV that requires interpreting the gaps and tensions between ‘real people’ and the discourses through which they are re-presented.

Put another way, Taylor instantiates a generative node or “hub” around which existing cultural narratives and novel interpretations may be collected. In the following examples, however, the subjects-to-be-read through Taylor are invented rather than invoked.

**Taylor as Parodied Performance**

In the thread created specifically for discussing Taylor’s character, one poster suggested that Taylor’s “I’m a beauty queen, I don’t do dishes” comment was intended to be “tongue-in-cheek” rather than obnoxious.

To make a joke excuse about being a beauty queen and thus above doing dishes took a remarkable grasp of irony for a child of her age. She also seemed remarkably self aware during her pageant speak world peace spiel. I wonder if being involved in pageants has actually increase her understanding of more adult concepts.

(Posted Sept. 20, 2007 @ 3:52 pm. Kids_Taylor Thread - Post#8)
This reader sees her performance of the pageant queen cliché’ in the episode premiere as a self-reflexive parody of sorts, and considers Taylor’s self-awareness to be “remarkable” given her age. And like the previous example, this poster is prompted to wonder how life on the pageant circuit has influenced Taylor, in particular, by introducing her to “adult concepts” (i.e. irony?) she otherwise might not experience at her age. This post introduces the possibility that pageant experience is not necessarily negative, but rather, might actually spur on the early development of social and cognitive competence.

The next post also points to this possibility by drawing attention to the ways in which the attitudes and expectations of the pageant world might have actually strengthened Taylor’s character. This post appeared in the Taylor discussion thread after the “Deal With It” episode aired and actually served to fuel further controversy in reading Taylor. In the discussion that follows, I trace a few of the exchanges that were sparked by posts made by one particular reader whom I’ve designated by the pseudonym/acronym “DOT” (Defender of Taylor).²

Like the reader who considers Taylor’s performance as a parody, DOT offers a counter-normative (non-typical) reading of the role of pageant experience in shaping Taylor’s character.

² Since I am legally required to embed direct links and URLs for the posts in my text, it is impossible to completely protect the anonymity of the online persona who contributed these posts. But in order to draw attention to the stance taken by the reader rather than his/her identity, I have chosen to use a pseudonym/acronym (Dot = defender of Taylor)
I don't think she's an innately bad person. I get the impression she's self confident to a fault and used to being on the other end of the "deal with it" attitude as a beauty pageant contestant. She's a perfect example of the positive qualities that pageants can develop in a young woman as well as the negative. There's a certain "let's get down to it" quality and self assurance that allows her to march right up & speak her mind (no matter how unpopular) that I appreciate and know comes from her competition experience. But then there's the "I'm too beautiful to do real work" mind state that is very troubling.

(Posted Oct 4, 2007 @ 8:58 am Kids_Taylor Thread Post#89)

DOT’s post suggests that Taylor’s resolve and forthright nature indicate a sense of self-assurance borne of pageant competitions. But yet, these positive qualities are sometimes overshadowed by her “to a fault” self-confidence. So for DOT, Taylor is both a poster child for and the pretentious by-product of the paradoxical pageant experience.

It is important to note that the above example reflects a view that was quite contested in the TWoP discussions concerning Taylor. For example, the next reader responds specifically to the arguments DOT makes about the potential benefits of pageant experience by quoting portions of it, and fuels the inquiry further by posing yet another question.

In this case, highlighting the developmental deficiencies of the child is a means of asserting the importance of parents in determining the circumstances under which appropriate lessons are to be learned.
I know this gets down to some deep issues about both pageants AND child rearing overall, but I think part of the squick factor is that a brash attitude like that is seen as kind of unnatural for ANY ten year old by a lot of people.

Those "positive qualities developed by pageants" come off as lessons that kids should be learning more naturally, over a longer period of time, in a greater variety of environments. And also, to many, lessons that should be learned when they are a bit older, because they are too easy to misunderstand at a younger age. **Can you really count on a 10 year old to understand the distinction between confidence and arrogance?** Heck, its hard enough for an 40 year old to do so. At the very least, there's an instinct that kids should have at least gone through puberty before they face those issues.

(Posted Oct 4, 2007 @ 11:58 am Kids_Taylor Thread, Post#100)

The “squick factor”, as this reader puts it, speaks to the way in which Taylor’s self-entitled behavior in the context of *Kid Nation* was considered by some readers to be disturbing, or at least, uncomfortable to watch. This was a common reaction on the *TWoP* forum, with many readers juggling between actual disdain for Taylor and a sense of guilt for being unable to resist directing their criticism toward a child.

For some, the solution was to shift the blame for Taylor’s behavior from Taylor to her parents. That is, from this perspective, it is the parents’ responsibility to ensure that the line between confidence and arrogance is eventually drawn, “naturally”, “over time” and in a “variety of environments”. In particular, Taylor’s parents were criticized for allowing her to become so deeply invested in her beauty queen image at such an impressionable stage in her identity development.
DOT's second post clarifies her position in this discussion by likewise acknowledging the importance of the role parents play, but in this case, in terms of imparting values rather than protecting the child from the too-quick and easily misunderstood lessons of the adult world.

To a degree yes, I think we coddle children way too much and underestimate their intelligence. Imo, you have to breed confidence and assertiveness in a child from a very young age and at the same time teach them humility and kindness....

(Posted Oct 4, 2007 @ 1:44 pm Kids_Taylor Thread Post#101)

In all of these examples, readers have employed Taylor's character as a frame for expressing popular (and unpopular) conceptions of the beauty pageant environment and the role/responsibility parents have in shaping the attitude and behavior of the child. While there is evidence of both developmental (i.e. cognitive deficiency) and deterministic (i.e. social immaturity) discourses about the child at work, DOT's non-typical perspective introduces another frame for understanding Taylor; one which is particularly well-suited to both the format of RTV and the contested status of the child in contemporary popular culture.

Taylor as stereotypical beauty queen, Mean Girl, or over-indulged child were reading subjects proffered by the Kid Nation text. But what follows is yet another example of a situated or invented subject-to-be-read from Taylor.
Taylor as Paradox
In another post made several weeks later, DOT summarizes his/her opinion of Taylor’s character in terms of a willingness to embrace her inherent paradoxical nature.

Frankly, I agree with her "Deal With It" attitude though she should use it to enforce a work ethic rather than a lazy attitude. I suspect that there are many areas (especially related to pageant life) where she is not coddled. She's got this weird combination of being spoiled & not spoiled”.

(Posted October 18, 2007@11:02 am. Episode 5 Thread - Post#145)

And DOT was not the only reader to recognize the paradoxes shaping Taylor’s character in the context of Kid Nation. The next reader concurred by drawing attention to the Kid Nation website pictures that clearly illustrate the “juxtaposition” that characterizes Taylor’s personality.

As one might expect, the Kid Nation website profile contains several photos of Taylor sporting a pageant crown and other obviously professional shots likely drawn from her modeling portfolio. Yet, one photo stands out as representing yet another side of Taylor. Here, she is shown decked out in full camouflage hunting gear, proudly clutching the claws of a dead turkey nearly as tall as her. This following post describes the experience of viewing these images.

...here she is in a creepy junior-beauty-queen dress; here she is holding on to a bloody carcass...That’s an odd combination of pampering and not so much pampering.

(Posted October 18, 2007 at 6:30 pm. Episode 5 Thread - Post#195)
This “odd combination” of pageant gowns and bloody carcasses speak to the paradoxical nature of Taylor’s character, and at the same time, represents the ambivalent attitude many *TWoP* readers had toward her. As the previous examples show, *TWoP* readers struggled to understand Taylor’s character and drew on various discourse models (i.e. pageant queen, “Mean Girl”) to make sense of her behavior. But for the most part, these normative (prototypical) models failed to capture the special-case features of Taylor’s character. Understanding Taylor as a paradox was one means of negotiating this ambivalence.

**Taylor as “Thick-Skinned”**

It is DOT again who introduces a novel interpretation of Taylor that aims to address the inadequacies of already-existing models for making sense of her behavior (i.e. either a spoiled brat or a victim of pageant-obsessed parenting). Avoiding this binary reasoning, DOT describes Taylor idiomatically as having “thick-skin”; an image that attempts to highlight her potential in terms of cultivating this desirable personality trait.

Following the theme of paradox, the expression ‘thick-skinned’ can refer to someone who is either insensitive or unaffected by the needs and concerns of others, or to someone who immune to criticism and not easily offended. Likewise, Taylor’s mantra – Deal with It! – may be read as either indicating callous disregard or forthright leadership skills. Since it captures both brat-like ignorance and self-assured confidence, the image of Taylor as “thick-skinned” is evidence of a novel interpretation that may provoke other readers to re-consider her behavior and potential in terms other than either/or.
DOT’s description of Taylor as thick-skinned was not necessarily embraced in the Kid Nation community. Some suggested that this trait is only evident in situations where she is being “properly called out” by her peers. DOT responded to this critique by suggesting,

I think its Taylor has thick skin period. Whether it helps her ignore being properly called out or withstand being improperly treated, she's got a self confidence and assured spirit that would be an asset to the character of many people. Its just about how she's using this strength. To me its not necessary to dismiss the positive qualities in the child because she's not doing positive things with them. In that regard she is only 10 and I've personally seen former spoiled brats turn into very decent people - just as I've seen spoiled brats go on to be rotten adults. We don't know what the future holds. To write her whole life story now based on 10 year old bad behavior which essentially (imo) boils down to laziness and a bossy streak seems very premature.

(Posted Oct 18, 2007 @ 12:41 pm. Episode 3 Thread, Post#187)

Taylor’s attitude, in this case, is considered to be her strongest asset. As de Zengotita (2005) argues, in an environment characterized by media-saturation and incessant flattery, “attitude” represents the “fundamentals of posture and gesture… that makes details of expression and deportment into a coherent identity” (p. 98). In a world of whatever, “attitude comes as close to authenticity as the ethos of reflexivity allows” (ibid). Attitude, for de Zengotita, reflects “the ethic of a society of surfaces” and its primary role is to “unify the improvised performance of a life” (pp. 99-100). That is, it is “preadapted to inhabit a virtualized world, to move on always, to glide over moments, to sustain itself across engagements, to be just what it is and nothing else” (pp. 98-99).
Taylor’s ‘thick-skin’ allows her to perform a particular identity that is both socially situated and always evolving. Through it, we can understand her inclination to behave a certain way, but more importantly, we can also imagine what she might become.

Identifying Taylor in terms a particular attitude reflects a postmodern understanding of the child and a counter-normative approach to the socio-cultural (and incessantly mediated) construction of childhood. As de Zengotita posited,

> What a mediated childhood essentially entails is this: as kids learn to be Jonah or Jenny [or Taylor], they also learn to be ‘kids’. They assume a status that stands on its own, that is self-conscious and self-validating because it exists in a representational world that reflects back on itself (de Zengotita, 2005, p. 57).

And not unlike the fine line between “arrogance” and “self-confidence”, a self-celebrating attitude characterized by ‘thick-skin’ can be read as impervious callousness or nascent self-assurance. The point is that some Kid Nation readers were invested in determining how the subjects-to-be-read from Taylor are both socially situated and connected to a larger network of discourses that constitute contemporary childhood.
**KID NATION AS A PRODUCERLY TEXT**

The *TWoP* reader who pointed out the “odd combination” that Taylor is by drawing attention to pictures of her in pageant gowns and hunting gear was also able to recognize the polysemic potential such paradox entails. As s/he put it,

> This show wouldn't be nearly as interesting without such a colorful little kid, and we're all bound to have different reactions to her. That's what makes these discussions fun. To me, it's fascinating to hear how someone who is intelligent and articulate can watch the same footage as me and come to a very different, very interesting conclusion.

(Posted October 18, 2007 at 11:30 am. Episode 5 Thread - Post#159)

For Fiske (1987) a defining characteristic of the television text is this polysemic potential. This is not to suggest that *Kid Nation* offers a “boundless or structureless” multiplicity of meanings, but rather, that the “text delineates the terrain within which meanings may be made and proffers some meanings more vigorously than others” (p. 15).

As a form of social experimentation and a forum for cultural conversations, *Kid Nation* is clearly designed to draw attention to its own artifice and therefore produces a network of reading subjects that implicate the reader in the process of representation. Rather than ‘duping’ the reader into accepting the status quo, *Kid Nation* represents a blend of both the “documentary and fictional modes” that openly plays with the difference between the representational and the real in televisual discourse (Fiske, 1987, p. 95). As a “producerly” text, *Kid Nation* does more that invite identification and familiarity with its reading subjects, it encourages the “more cognitive pleasures of participation and production” (ibid).
But again, it is important to avoid conflating participation with learning. More specifically, learning is *enabled* (rather than determined) by the participatory framework of the *Television Without Pity* knowledge community and the “producerly’ nature of the *Kid Nation* text. As readers employ various discriminatory practices and interpretive strategies to engage with RTV text, and these ways of knowing become public, as Jenkins (2006b) asserts, “contradictions in approach must be worked over if not through” (p. 45).

In this way, opportunities for new learning emerge when already-equipped readers begin to respond to particular triggers or provocations in the context of reading with others. These acts of noticing may serve to reveal the inadequacies of previously held beliefs as members take advantage of the opportunity to “recognize and articulate” the assumptions that undergird their engagement with *Kid Nation* in the context of a knowledge community (Jenkins et. al. 2007).
CHAPTER SIX - SUBJECTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR READING CHILDHOOD

Through the eyes of a child, the world we know as a construct becomes a mysterious necessity once again. In this way, children connect us to the real.

(emphasis added, de Zengotita, 2005, p. 43).

READING SUBJECTS RE-VISITED
In the context of this chapter, the phrase ‘reading subjects’ denotes the subjectivities enacted for reading through the use of various reading strategies. In the previous chapter, I explored a discursive approach to reading that understands character as a network of overlapping and sometimes conflicting discourses. In this chapter, I want to re-visit the notion of reading subjects in a more active sense; that is, as pointing to the way in which reading RTV instantiates both a subject-to-be-read and a “subject subjected to” the possibilities inherent in the text (Weedon, 1987, p. 34). In this way, the subject-for-reading addresses the embodied, subjective, social and recursive sense of identity the reader brings to negotiating the discursive networks that form around the RTV text. (Fiske, 1987).

Fiske (1987) and Mansfield (2000) outline common usages of the word ‘subject’ that also serve to categorize three main reading positions (or subjectivities) in the context of the Kid Nation discussion forums. I review these various understandings of subjects-for-reading as corresponding to the strategies of intra-reading, inter-reading, pre-reading and re-reading.
**Intra-Reading: The Subject as I**
The most common sense of subject denotes the “subject of grammar” or “the origin of actions, feelings and experiences that we collect together and report as our lives” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 3). This understanding of the reading subject as the ‘narrated I’ shapes an orientation characterized as *intra-reading*. Drawing on the Latin prefix “intra-” (meaning on the inside, or within), this approach draws on personal experience and identification strategies to make sense of the RTV text.

In her work with online soap opera fan communities, Baym (2000) described a similar reading orientation in terms of “personalization”. By this, she refers to the ways in which readers make the content of the program personally meaningful by “making sense of the story in terms of the norms by which they make sense of their own experiences” (Baym, 2000, p. 71). That is, readers “project” their own experiences onto the text, and in doing so, are attempting to imagine what’s going on inside the character’s head. In sum, intra-reading refers to practices bred of familiarity and associated with identification, and therefore, are most often oriented toward re-affirming “what one already knows” (Gallop, 2000).

**Inter-Reading: The Social Subject**
A more socially situated conception, the politico-legal subject “understands us as recipients of, and actors within, fixed codes and powers” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 4). Put another way, the subject is assumed to be bound by shared a “social contract”. Fiske (1987) likewise suggested that this understanding (i.e. loyal subject) carries “connotations not just of socially determined behavior and the attitudes that go with it, but also a sense of identity that originates from outside, rather than inside, the individual” (p. 49).
This understanding of the subject as a social construction corresponds to the strategy of "inter-reading". Again, this conception draws on a Latin prefix (inter-meaning between, among, in the midst of, mutually, reciprocally, together, during). This reading orientation is characterized by a tendency to focus on the "shared structures that delimit our social interaction (and embody our values)" (Mansifeld, 2000, p. 4). Fiske (1987) defined the social subject as an orientation that does not understand subjectivity to be "inherent in our individuality, our differences from other people", but rather, as the "product of the various social agencies to which we are subject, and thus is what we share with others" (Fiske, 1987, p. 49).

In the context of the Kid Nation discussion forums, reading strategies associated with an understanding of the socio-political subject produce discursive readings like the ones discussed in the previous chapter. In this context, however, the focus is on how a socio-political subjectivity is invoked in order to interpret a particular social experience rather than a fictionalized representation of character.

Pre-Reading: The I as an Embodied Mind
The notion of pre-reading is offered as a heuristic for understanding the various ways some TWoP participants appear to be exploring and experimenting with the extra-linguistic, situated, and unconscious aspects of human behavior as mediated by the Kid Nation text. This close reading strategy represents interpretive engagements concerned with the potential meaning of pre-linguistic (or embodied) aspects of communication such as facial expressions, gestures, and emotional displays.

This strategy is associated with an understanding of the subject as an embodied mind. As Mansfield (2000) suggests, no matter how hard we try to capture a
sense of our selves as intentional subjects, “we remain an intense focus of rich and immediate experience that defies system, logic and order and that goes out into the world in a complex, inconsistent and highly charged way” (p. 4). Steinberg (2005) described this fundamental paradox as the “fiction of a thinkable world” and suggested that rather than clinging to the image of ourselves as “thinking bodies”, we are better served by the image of “bodies that think” (p. 23).

Put another way, the human person as thinking subject does not/cannot transcend its own embodiment, but rather, is a “body-subject” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960). As Grumet (1988) suggested, Merleau-Ponty used this term to capture the biological and phenomenological mutuality (“double embodiment”) that characterizes human consciousness. Within this conception, the doubly embodied body-subject “is the very possibility of contact, not just with others, but with oneself – the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge” (Abram, 1997, p. 45). In this way, the pre-reading subject is an emergent “I” that does not pre-exist the event of reading, but rather, is co-created with it.

**Re-Reading: The Recursive I**
The Latin prefix *re-* is used to designate either repetition (i.e. to do something again) or backward motion (i.e. retrace one’s steps). In this context, *re-reading* does not simply mean reading again. It does, however, mark a return to the text as an act of *undoing* or as *beginning again*. More specifically, re-reading originates from a recursively elaborated position that takes into account the ways in which our interactions with the fictionalized text have altered our lived experiences in part, through our “repeated textual involvements” over time and with other readers (Sumara, 2002, p. 121).
Re-reading highlights the “ongoing reflexivity” that conditions our interpretative engagements with shared texts and avoids the temptation to “fix” or “close” meanings once and for all (Luce-Kapler, 2004, p. 75). In this way, re-reading is more a disposition than a process; more like “un-reading” than reading again. It is the “measure of a shifting sense of subjectivity” that is not oriented toward reaching the end of interpretation, but rather, toward the experience of reading as a beginning, again (ibid).

In the context of the TWoP community, re-reading represents a willingness to be “pulled up short” by the Kid Nation text. In allowing the text to reveal the blind spots and preconceptions that have settled into everyday ways of knowing and thinking, re-reading opens readers up to the possibility that there are other ways of knowing and thinking that may be more just. In short, re-reading manifests an inclination to become (other)wise (Vinz, 2000).

In the examples that follow, all four of these subjects-for-reading or reading subjectivities are employed to read what can be characterized as an emergent occasion in the context of Kid Nation. While intra-reading and inter-reading primarily draw on the processes of identification and already-established norms of social experience, pre-reading and re-reading situate the reading subject in phenomenological and hermeneutic terms.

ENABLING EMERGENT ENGAGEMENT
From the Latin words “out” and “to dip”, emergence conjures images of rising out of something within which one was previously immersed. Used figuratively, emergence describes the way in which ideas, images and memories can sometimes “rise into notice, come forth from obscurity or concealment” (OED).
In its link to emergency, it connotes “an unforeseen occurrence; a state of things unexpectedly arising, and demanding immediate attention” (OED).

With respect to the RTV text, Hill (2002) found that such emergencies are coveted content for viewers who eagerly anticipate that “moment of authenticity when real people are ‘really’ themselves in an unreal environment” (p. 324). And while Chambers was originally referring to the social impetus provided by conventional literary texts, his argument also speaks to the ways in which the networked images and unpredictable emergencies of the RTV text compel a similar need for articulation and reconciliation. In this view,

> talk [about texts] is guided by immediate need; by the need of the participants to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the need to articulate new thoughts, the need to ‘bring out’ from ourselves disturbing elements provoked by [the text] so that we can externalize them – hold them out, so to speak, where we can look at them and gain control of them (Chambers, 1993, p.42).

When “talk” is considered in terms of emergence, it can also be seen to shape an attitude of online collectivity that is sensitive to recognizing and accommodating those unforeseen events that spark new learning. The thread here is that emergent knowledge cannot be predicted or controlled, but rather, is noticed by the learning system as it is learning. As Capra (2002) explains, a complex learning system (i.e. the TWoP community; individual participants) always maintains the freedom to decide what triggers (or, in some cases, what “emergencies”) from the environment it will respond to even though the possibilities for response are determined by the system’s structure or embodied history. Put another way, a complex system cannot be directed to learn, it may only be disturbed (Maturana & Varela, 1987).
In this sense, learning requires the experience of disorientation to encourage the system to elaborate its own resources, thus expanding its ability to respond to a broader range of contingencies in the future.

The following example represents an emergence(y) that arose in the context of *Kid Nation*. Some viewers were notably disoriented by the ambiguity of this scene, and therefore were compelled to use close reading strategies to make sense of the event. I chose this event because it was clearly an unplanned and emotionally-charged situation. The popularity and impact of this televisual moment in the *TWoP* forums may be seen as emblematic of an overall cultural fascination with the experience of the child, not as a symptom of nostalgia or a yearning for innocence, but rather, as a unique gateway to the space between the ‘real’ and the representational (de Zengotita, 2005).

It is not my intent to take sides in these accounts or critique the validity of any one argument. Rather, I offer these various examples of pre-reading, intra-reading, inter-reading, and re-reading strategies to show how the emergence of possible meaning around this televisual event is embodied by particular subjectivities, situated by socio-political subjects, and articulated through various discourses. While the subject enacted for reading varies in each of these orientations, all are examples of close reading practices that may engender opportunities for the reader to either reaffirm or disrupt his/her own projections of what’s typical or expected in the televisual text.

**The False Imprisonment of Taylor**

While Taylor garnered her fair share of attention in the *TWoP* forums, talk about her reached its climax after episode 6 “Bonanza is Disgusting” aired on October 24, 2007. In this episode, the newly de-throned Taylor is trying to make the transition from Council member to regular old pioneer. The Town Council now
consists of two original leaders (Laurel and Anjay) and two newly elected representatives: Guylan (11) and Zach (10) who defeated Mike and Taylor respectively in the previous episode.

Although she was relatively graceful immediately after her defeat, this episode begins with a confrontation between the Zach and Taylor that seems to indicate she is still harboring some resentment. The climax of the exchange occurred when Taylor (in Mean Girl-esque fashion) tells Zach that everybody hates him and accuses him of sporting a “unibrow”.

As the title indicates, the environmental theme drew attention to the growing pile of trash and discarded food accumulating in Bonanza City. Gently goaded by the Pioneer Journal, the kids decide to put together a ‘trash task force’ to haul the garbage out of town and bury it. Given Taylor’s questionable work ethic in the past, it is no surprise that she has been nominated, along with her sycophant/Sidekick Leila. Reluctant participants at first, Taylor and Leila eventually run off while the rest of the group is busy digging although Leila later sheds her sidekick status, tells Taylor she’s on her own, and returns to the task of disposing trash.

The group decides that Taylor’s punishment for shirking her garbage duties will be to haul enough water to fill the town reservoir (which to be fair, is a monumental task for one person). Reluctantly, Taylor appears to acquiesce and we watch her filling two pails with water. M. Giant, the Kid Nation recapper for TWoP, describes the pivotal moment thus,

And then Taylor, walking back with the pails sets them on the ground, calls out to Zach, deliberately tips the water over into the dirt, and snots, “Oops, my bad” walking away from the dumped buckets.  

(“Taking Out the Trash”)
This event sets up the scene that came to be known on the *Kid Nation* episode 6 thread as “the false imprisonment of Taylor”. Other monikers (some more value-laden than others) included: the door scene, the hostage scene, the no-leaving-the-room thing, and the bullying scene.

Again, I draw on M. Giant’s description of this heated televisual event in his recap. As the reader will note, interjections of writer’s own opinion are evident as he recounts the events of the scene and this summary text is not meant to represent ‘what actually happened’ or imply a position of relative authority. It’s offered as an illustrative example of the genre of “recapping” that Stevens (2007) describes as simulating the experience of watching the program with a pop culture-saavy guide beside you.

In the doorway of the Yellow girl’s bunkhouse, the Council confronts Taylor (with Leila hanging around as well for some reason). Laurel hearkens back to her friendship and comfort to Taylor at the beginning and Taylor blames Zach and Guylan for making it “torture” ever since they took over. Taylor tries to walk out, but Zach and Anjay hold the door shut, Zach calmly telling her she needs to stay. That’s not cool. Taylor decides to go out the back instead. She’s almost out before Anjay runs up to the door and slams it shut in front of her leaning his body against it to hold it closed. Okay, over the line. Anjay knows it too, which might explain the terrified grin he’s sporting right now. “ANJAY!” Taylor screams at him, and kicks at his shins. Laurel wisely calls off Anjay and advises Taylor to “take a walk and cool off” ("Taking Out the Trash")
STRATEGIES FOR READING REALITY TV’S EMERGENCIES

In this brief scene, one ambiguous non-verbal cue in particular sparked significant disagreement in the TWoP forum and that was Anjay’s facial expression. Early in the Episode 6 thread, the following reader is the first to articulate a situated meaning of Anjay’s “grin” as he held the door shut in front of Taylor.

I don't think I would have minded Anjay blocking the door if he hadn't had a huge shit-eating grin on his face at the same time. It seemed like he was getting a kick out of imprisoning her. Yeah, Taylor's a brat, but that just put me off the guy.

(Posted Oct 24, 2007 @ 9:22 pm · Post#30)

According to the wiktionary definition, the origin of the phrase “shit-eating grin” is rather ambiguous and it may be used to indicate either a genuine broad smile (e.g. smug happiness) or a covert fake smile (e.g. trying to hide or get away with something). This initial post appears to read Anjay’s expression as one of “smug satisfaction” in being able to exert some kind of authority over Taylor. Another poster concurred with this assessment, further suggesting,

Anjay wasn’t offering anything constructive (then or at any point, as far as I can remember) No ideas. No solutions. Just there to intimidate. He enjoyed being powerful as a member of the pack lording over Taylor. He seems pretty weak-willed.

(Posted Oct 24, 2007@9:31 pm · Post#34)

Another reader, however, offered a situated discernment that suggested Anjay’s expression was neither smug nor fake, but rather incredulous. In this way, his expression was considered to be more like an unconscious reaction than an intentional attitude. This reader is drawing on personal experience to forge a
connection between his/her lived experience and an interpretation of the televisual event.

I thought he looked terrified and kinda “Holy moley, what have I just done?” kinda smile, the smile I have before I jumped off the high board. I doubt he wanted to imprison her, he just wanted to do his duty.

(Posted Oct 24, 2007@10:17 pm · Post#44)

For all three of these readers, this nonverbal cue becomes an important way of addressing the gaps opened up by the RTV text. If one sees Anjay’s expression in terms of smugness or intimidation, then one is more likely to identify with Taylor in interpreting the events of this scene. However, if Anjay’s smile is characterized by harmless incredulity, one is likely to identify with the frustrated Town Council in their fruitless efforts to deal with Taylor.

In terms of the strategy of pre-reading, all three of these readers are attempting to understand the ways in which both Anjay’s body language and facial expressions have the potential to reveal his ‘true intentions’ in emergent terms. That is, these televisual events are not pre-planned or scripted but rather arise spontaneously in the fictionalized situations created by the RTV program. And not unlike the observational researcher, the reader is able to witness both the intentional and unintentional actions of embodied consciousnesses as they respond to these emergencies, and interpret them accordingly.

But in the final example, the reader is also relying on the strategy of intra-reading by creating a personal analogy between Anjay’s expression and her or his remembered feeling of anticipation/anxiety associated with jumping off a high board. The reader imaginatively identifies with Anjay and provides a comparable personal example in order to interpret his behavior using recognizable norms of
experience. In this sense, s/he is using the text as means of confirming already-established norms of social experience.

In another example of *intra-reading*, one poster admits to being “really surprised” by the strong reaction to this scene on the *TWoP* forum, suggesting that it essentially boils down to “what people consider normal/acceptable behavior among kids”. As s/he recounted,

> When I was Taylor's age, my brother and cousins would do the exact same no-leaving -the-room thing to me, only for fun, not in order to get me to listen to them. Heck, the situations were so similar I got deja-vu watching the scene. And my cousins were certainly bigger than Anjay at the time. I was hardly traumatized. So the scene didn't disturb me at all. The boys laid off the second Laurel told them to, and Taylor seemed like the more violent one to me in the confrontation.

(Posted 0ct. 25, 2007 @12:25 am. Episode 6 thread Post#82)

Other posters agreed with a sibling-like explanation for the kids’ behavior in this scene. That is, for many readers, this scene was nothing more than an example of the kind of things “all kids do” and thus, far from scandalous or traumatizing. These readers are seeking to interpret the text in terms of a naturalized or typical childhood experience. Put another way, they were reading to reaffirm what they already knew about children and the experience of childhood.

Anjay’s body language wasn’t the only point of contention that arose in this brief scene. Equally controversial was the fact that Taylor attempted to kick Anjay when he wouldn’t comply. And once again, “DOT” presents the initial counter-normative view that would serve to fuel much of the discussion in the Episode 6 thread as well as the thread for discussing Taylor’s character.
She kicked Anjay because he was physically blocking her from leaving the room despite her telling him she wanted to go. Taylor was willing to "fight" her way past him and I liked that. I'd rather that than see her cry & fall apart when being pushed around by someone bigger than herself. Girls especially need to learn to strongly bark at someone to back the hell off and/or fight if need be. I ain't mad at her for that.

(Posted Oct 25, 2007 @ 1:21 am Episode 6 thread Post#87)

DOT characterizes Taylor’s response as self-defense and in the phrase “girls especially” introduces a socio-political dimension to this event that was both supported and contested in the TWoP discussions. In a counter - response to DOT’s post, another reader argues,

First, she didn't actually kick Anjay, she only threatened to.

Second, who says that the only other response is crying and falling apart? The idea that resorting to violence to get your way is a good personality trait for young girls to learn is disturbing. She could have walked away, or kept telling Anjay to open the door, or gone back to the other door, but she did not have to threaten him with violence. If it had been a boy threatening to hit a girl for holding the door (perhaps unlikely, but it could happen) he wouldn't be praised for not backing down, he would be condemned for being too vicious.

(Posted Oct 25, 2007 @ 1:38 am, Episode 6 thread, Post#93)

Along with DOT, this reader is considering the scene in terms of implicating a gendered understanding of ‘appropriate’ aggression. As introduced earlier, identifying Taylor through the image of the ‘Mean Girl’ suggests that female aggression is most often understood to emerge in “hidden” and “relational” rather than physical terms. As Landry (2008) noted, relational aggression
(gossip, name-calling) or meanness is often normalized in girl culture as a more socially acceptable ‘feminine’ way to channel aggression (p. 18). There appears to be a double standard at work here in suggesting that “resorting to violence to get your way”, although not a typical female form of aggression, is being encouraged in Taylor’s defense.

Yet another reader completely rejects the assumption that this event can be viewed in terms of the ‘gender politics’ that undergird the previous arguments. As s/he put it,

It feels like a totally false parallel, and I think over-dramatises it in a way that only an adult perspective can. There’s a huge gulf between scared and pissed off, and I don’t think Taylor was anywhere near scared. I think she was utterly infuriated.

(Posted Oct 25, 2007 @ 3:54 am Episode 6 Thread, Post#106)

This post suggests that bringing an adult perspective to a socially situated event involving children, in a way, misappropriates its significance. Not unlike the binary reasoning that sustains a conception of the child as either innocent or unruly, this reader notes there’s a “huge gulf between scared and pissed off” and in this event, this reader is unable to see Taylor as either vulnerable or a victim. In a way, this reader challenges the strategy of inter-reading that serves to draw attention to the wider social, political, and even legal implications of this televisual scene.

In the post that follows, however, the “big issue” of the episode is clearly linked to a conception of the socio-legal subject:
Lots of good points made, and I won't repeat them, but I do want to observe that, strictly speaking, depriving someone of his/her free movement is illegal. It's called "false imprisonment," and it doesn't matter whether you're locking yourself into the room with them or not. It's a form of violence and it's legally justified to use (reasonable) violence in response, to free yourself. I know these are kids, and I know Taylor is a brat deserving of sanction, but freedom to move is the most basic freedom--she is allowed to disengage, to go where she wants without having to use force to get there.

(Posted Oct. 25, 2007 @ 1:55 pm Episode 6 Thread Post#168)

This post introduced the rhetorical device “the false imprisonment of Taylor” (often used glibly by other posters) to designate the subjective, social, political, legal, and even ethical implications that were invoked to read this particular televisual event. In a way, once Taylor’s subjective experience is re-framed in socio-political terms, this reader is able to identify with her not as an angry little girl, but rather, as human being with a universal “freedom to move”.

In yet another example of inter-reading, the following reader frames the event in terms of the ‘social experimentation’ format implicit in Kid Nation.

Now that she’s out of the council, she’s been separated from her town identity. And now she’s even more clearly doing things in her best interest rather than the lip service she paid for the town’s best interest (on the council) or for her team (being lazy is in the best interest of Yellow, in some ways). So Taylor represents the self-centered individualist at odds with the community.
And she’s being called out on it, which brings the community together in their opposition to her behaviour and implicit values. Community over individual self-interest becomes the ethos, and Taylor, ironically, is helping to develop that.

(Posted Oct. 26, 2007 @ 11:54 am Kids_ Taylor Thread Post #259)

This reader appears to be linking Taylor’s “self-fashioning” to the “lessons and tests of citizenship” offered by the experimental context of Kid Nation (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 16). As Ouellette and Hay (2008) have argued, the experimental form of RTV programs like Kid Nation constitute “civic laboratories” in which “human subjects are tested on their ability to master certain technologies of citizenship, and to fashion themselves in relation to particular civic virtues” (p. 16). For this reader, Taylor’s character represents the “tension” between individual and collective interests in the building of community and highlights the “civilities and incivilities of participation, belonging and membership” (ibid, p. 186).

As various readers employed the strategies of pre-reading, intra-reading and inter-reading to generate and represent their interpretations in the knowledge community of TWoP, collectively, new insights were provoked. And while there is no official “leader” in the Kid Nation forums, there certainly are some participants who appear to be very influential in perturbing seemingly normal accounts of social experience and commonsense understandings of human behavior. Posters like DOT create conditions for robust (rather than merely reproductive) interpretations to emerge by encouraging other readers “to see what they don’t already know” (Gallup, 2000, p. 11).

The final example offered here represents the strategy of re-reading wherein these emergent perturbations can be seen to in fact alter or spur an elaboration of the previously established relationship the reader has with the ‘fictionalized’
character of Taylor. And as Sumara argued (1996), interpreting the way in which our interactions with fictionalized texts evolve through re-reading “helps us to more deeply understand what it is like to exist relationally amid texts and other readers. It is an act of hermeneutics” (p. 85).

On Taylor: I’ve been one of the biggest Taylor hatahs; but with this episode I actually finally saw something admirable about the kid. That's perhaps a bit ironic since she was clearly behaving very badly throughout the *entire* episode. I couldn't help thinking though that this is one tough little girl. Unlikeable brat but clearly independant with her own strength. It's one thing to be obnoxious and mean when you're a popular queen bee girl. To keep it up when her power's been lost and it's clear everyone has turned against her, however, shows quite a bit of fearlessness. She might actually turn out to be an accomplished woman someday *if* she ever learns to use her powers for good instead of evil.

(Posted Oct 25, 2007 @ 1:02 am Episode 6 Thread Post#86)

In self-identifying as a former Taylor “hatah” (hater), this reader is implying that up until this point, s/he was satisfied with reading her character in terms of already-established (and predominantly negative) Discourse models of “beauty pageant queen” and “Mean Girl”. In this way, this reader’s initial reception of Taylor was likely limited by preconceptions (or what Gadamer (1997) calls pre-judgements) about who or what she represented in the context of Kid Nation.

Yet in attending to the “irony” of the situation with a disposition to re-read Taylor’s character, it may be argued that this reader is un-doing his or her previous understandings and now willing to “read the text wrongly...in the
service of getting it right” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 130). There is no indication that s/he suddenly chose to “see something admirable” in Taylor.

Rather, it may be suggested that this televisually mediated emergence(y) created the conditions for previously unnoticed and unconsidered understandings to emerge. And once interpreted, this moment of emergence led to new insight and awareness of Taylor not just in terms of certain subjective, social, or political discourses, but more importantly, as a socially situated self-in-the-making.

TAYLOR AS THE PARADOXICAL POST-POSTMAN CHILD
In conventional discourses, the child is often “idealized”, “institutionalized”, and even politicized in terms of a “deficit state of becoming that exists and has meaning in relation to the adult it will arrive to be” (Besley, 2003, p. 156). While the biological and psychological differences between adults and children are significant, argued Besley, more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which these differences are “constructed by society and in turn negotiated by individuals” (ibid).

A postmodern (or post-Postman) approach, therefore, pays special attention to “children’s confusions, multiple subjectivities, agency, and/or struggles with power” (Janzen, 2008, p. 291). Rather than privileging either subjective or social experience, it emphasizes the space in between and recognizes children as competent and contextually-embedded social actors in their own right (as both beings and becomeings) (Holloway & Valentine, 2003, p. 5).

Despite Postman’s (1982) warning, this rich reading archive suggests that television has not “disappeared” childhood, but rather, in this case, produced a
particularly generative node for negotiating the ever-evolving and increasingly inter-textual networks that constitute childhood in contemporary society. *Kid Nation* emerged as a productive “civic laboratory” wherein the tenuous spaces between the subjective and social status of the ‘child’ could be interpreted, articulated, tested, and potentially *re-read*. 
CHAPTER SEVEN - FANAGOGY AND TEACHER EDUCATION

PLAYING ON THE HOME FIELD

The meaning of creativity is bound to reflexiveness; the desire to dialogue with a range of perspectives, to see things as if they could be otherwise, and to take up, as well as encourage, the interpretive risks that learning demands.

(Britzman, 2003, p. 187)

At the end of chapter one, I introduced several key questions that presented themselves throughout the course of this inquiry: What are the main features of teacher education conceived of as fanagogy? And, what might a curriculum of and for fan-tellectuals look like? In this final chapter, I am returning to the home field of education, so to speak, in order to consider how my experiences in embodying the role of fan-tellectual have helped shape a deeper understanding of fan texts and practices in participatory cultures and announced a need for similarly inventive reading subjects and strategies in the context of teacher education. Once knowledge is understood as being "co-created" with experience, the role of pedagogy changes from neutral transmission to creative transformation. (Sumara, Davis & Iftody, 2003).

The notion of fanagogy combines an understanding of pedagogy as “the site for the invention of new subjects and new subjectivities” (Sumara et. al., 2003, p. 63) with an understanding of fandom as a “rich and complex participatory culture” wherein the subjective experiences of watching television are transformed into social interaction and cultural activity (Jenkins, 1992).
For Jenkins (2006a), fan activity is not merely interpretive, but more importantly *generative*, as fans’ collective engagements often involve the production of newly imagined and sometimes unanticipated meanings in response to the shared text (p. 140). I suggest that the conditions that support such inventiveness and creativity, in both fandom and teacher education, involve ongoing engagements with familiar texts and discourses and through the “simple practices of interruption, juxtaposition, and resymbolization” (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2000, p. 196).

I address the first question in terms of identifying how the structuring experiences of fandom might inform an emergent and participatory understanding of learning and knowing in the context of teacher education. And secondly, in imagining a curriculum informed by fanagogy, I consider how my identity and experiences as a fan-tellectual might inform my future practices as a teacher educator.

**THE INVENTIONS OF (FAN)AGOGY**

In order to begin considering how the structures and aims of teacher education may be informed by the inventive subjects and subjectivities of online fandom, three characteristics of Jenkins’ (1992) conception bear repeating in this context. In his view, fandom is characterized by: 1) a particular mode of reception, 2) a particular set of critical and interpretive practices, and 3) a willingness to participate in an alternative social community (pp. 277-278). I suggest that it may likewise prove useful to begin conceiving the teacher education classroom in terms of an “alternative” (i.e. non-normative) social community oriented by inventive close reading practices and game-like ways of knowing.

In suggesting that fandom represents a specific mode of reception, Jenkins (1992) noted “fan viewers watch television texts with *close and undivided*
attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance” (p. 277).

This embodied reception process is then translated into social interaction when fans share the meanings generated by their strategies of attention with others. Not unlike pedagogy, fan activity requires a social dimension. “For the fan”, Jenkins argued, “watching the [television] series is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption” (p. 278).

Likewise, in the education of teachers, individual readings of a shared text are only the beginning of learning, not a marker of learning itself. And as Gallop (2000) warned, most reading in academic settings merely ‘projects’ (or reaffirms) what readers already know onto the text. Opportunities must be available for readers to represent their individual close readings so that unnoticed and seemingly insignificant details, once acknowledged collectively, might provoke all readers to become (other)wise. Inventive pedagogy requires that everyday ways of thinking about and reading popular cultural texts be interrupted by deliberate practices of discernment and interpretation (Davis et. al., 2000).

Secondly, these critical and interpretive practices of fandom are all at once “playful, speculative, subjective”. Jenkins understands the work fans do to “resolve gaps, to explore excess details, and undeveloped potentials” in the televisual text as a kind of transitional work. According to Jenkins, fans focus on the “particularity of textual detail” draws them “far beyond the information explicitly present and toward the construction of a meta-text that is larger, richer, more complex”. (p. 278).

Another way of conceiving this collaboratively conceived meta-text is in terms of a discursive network that incorporates already-established forms of knowledge with newly invented and always-evolving subjects and subjectivities. A fan-based mode of interpretation characterized by talking back and reading wrongly finds both pleasure and possibility in the “excess details” and “undeveloped
potentials” of popular cultural texts and embodies a desire to know or learn differently.

Yet in the context of teacher education, the assumption that identities and knowledge are stable, self-contained entities still persists (Britzman, 2003; Sumara et. al., 2003). In this way, the fundamental tenet of “inventive pedagogies” is that they deliberately interrupt the familiar and taken-for-granted, and in doing so, create conditions where both knowledge and identity are experienced “in-the-making” (Ellsworth, 2005). That is, as co-emergent phenomenon. Fanagogy, then, is both an inventive and counter-normative event that seeks to “create the experience of the learning self by putting inner thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, desires and ideas in relation to outside others, events, history, culture, and socially constructed ideas” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 37).

And finally, in suggesting that fandom instantiates an “alternative social community” Jenkins points to “Utopian” understandings of popular culture and its ability to “provide symbolic solutions to real world problems and felt needs” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 281). As he elaborates, fandom does not offer an “escape from reality” but rather, instantiates the opportunity to envision “an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society” (p. 280). To associate teacher education with fandom is to suggest that ideally, the teacher education classroom may be conceived as a site of social imagination rather than reproductive transmission.

It is important to note Jenkins’s caveat to what he admitted is a naively Utopic vision of fandom. In his disclaimer, he noted that his intent was not to “assert that fandom necessarily represents a progressive force or that the solutions fans propose are ideologically consistent and coherent” (p. 284). “A poached culture,” he elaborated, is also “a patchwork culture, an impure culture, where much that
is taken in remains semidigested and ill-considered” (p. 284). What is required is a situated reader who is willing to ‘scratch beneath the surface’ of this patchwork culture in order to reveal the discursive networks and normalizing narratives thriving underneath. This is the defining characteristic of the teacher as fan-tellectual who depends on a “kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted” and who willingly puts herself “on record and on the line” (Said, 1994, p. 20).

I must admit I found it interesting that Jenkins chose to use the term “mundane” rather than everyday, commonplace, or quotidian in the previous passage, and in trying to hone my own close reading skills, I was compelled to make sense of this breach in my expectations. The latter terms represent the meanings I initially read into the passage, but in resisting the easy reading that favors the normative over the particular, I discovered that the term “mundane” is often used by fans to pejoratively refer to non-fans, who in their preoccupation with the everyday, lack imagination and insight. (Wikipedia) Given his aca/fan identity, Jenkins’ choice is intentionally ambivalent, and clearly designed to privilege his affiliation with the “alternative” (i.e. non-normative) discourses of fandom.

Another way to conceive the alternative social community of fandom is as an “anomalous place of learning” (Ellsworth, 2005). These are spaces that, at first glance, do not appear to conform to conventional educational structures and practices which tend to conceive knowledge as “a thing already made” and the knower as “a locatable point of view or subject position from which meanings are made” (Ellsworth, 2005, pp. 5-7). Rather, they are considered, “peculiar, irregular, abnormal or difficult to classify” pedagogically (ibid). Most important, in Ellsworth’s terms: “The learning self that these anomalous places of learning invite to participate” in effect “does not preexist its involvement” (p. 7). This means that the learning self is experienced as an emergence in the act of
intentionally engaging with (participating in) an alternative knowledge community.

For Lather (1991), rejecting the essentialist notion of the learning self as a stable subject position is one way de-center the hegemonic discourses that have been relegated to commonsense in teacher education. As she argued,

pedagogy becomes a site not for working through more effective transmission strategies but for helping us learn to analyze the discourses available to us, which ones we are invested in, how we are inscribed by the dominant, how we are outside of, other than the dominant, consciously/unconsciously, always partially, contradictorily (p. 143).

Fanagogy, as inventive structures and inventing strategies for learning through and with popular culture in teacher education, creates a site for interrogating these hegemonic discourses (or meta-narratives). These spaces are ones where learners can begin “to see ambivalence and differences not as obstacles” but rather as constituting “the very richness of meaning-making” (Lather, 1991, p.145). Such pedagogy, in Lather’s terms involves employing “strategies of displacement” that may serve to foreground and challenge the normative myths of the isolated learner and the assumed neutral passage of knowledge-as-object from teacher to learner.

This sort of strategic displacement of knowing and learning requires a pragmatic stance toward knowledge as an emergent network rather than inert object. Drawing on complexivist notions, Davis and Sumara (2006) have argued that all representations of knowledge are part of a larger “distributed network of meaning” and thus “have no meaning or identity in themselves” (p. 34). They suggested that the “best a knowing agent can do” is to engage these representations pragmatically by asking: How useful are they? What do they do? What do they entail? What do they foreground and what do they defer?”
In participatory cultures like fandom, knowledge does not exist “out there” waiting to be documented, but is instead “understood to inhere in [the] interactions” between knowers and the world-to-be-known (Davis, 2004, p.101).

Not unlike Davis and Sumara’s (2006) pragmatic assessment of emergent and distributed networks of knowledge, Ellsworth (2005) advocated an equally situated stance towards the experience of the learning self: “What is happening? What is it meaning? What am I supposed to make of this? What is it making of me?” (p. 67). This orientation, in part, is also a hermeneutical one since it conceives learning to be much more than neutral accumulation of information by an isolated mind. Rather, it is complicated by the “dialectical interplay between ourselves and traditions which we find within ourselves because we are linguistic beings” (Gallagher, 1992, p. 116).

With the proliferation of new social software technologies and online knowledge communities we now have more opportunities than ever, as Gadamer (1997) put it, to “fall into” conversation with others, and thus, are more likely to experience knowledge and self in these emergent, pragmatic and hermeneutic terms. As a both a way of knowing and form of knowledge-generation that bootstraps and exceeds the intentions of its participants, conversation requires a “logic of open-ended relationality” and serves to address the both the knowledge produced and the “learning self as an emergence” (Ellsworth, 2004, p. 57). Simply put, “no one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 383).

In contemporary contexts, the emergent and collaborative nature of conversation makes it an apt metaphor from which to explore the implications of a participatory epistemology in which knowledge is no longer experienced as something ‘out there’. Ellsworth (2005) cites Rachjman (2000) to note that to be
in conversation is to “think [and] imagine…in relation not to ‘things made’ but to ‘things in the making…to think, and to think of ourselves, ‘experimentally’” (p.1).

In *What is Curriculum Theory*, Pinar (2004) expressed concern for ways in which the image of the “complicated conversation” he and others offered in 1995 to describe the field of curriculum studies has become increasingly “formalized and abstract” and thus removed from the emergent and participatory nature the “everyday sense of conversation signals” (p. 186).

Why are teachers not permitted, indeed encouraged, to show students that academic knowledge is not self-contained, that it often reaches out toward and back from life as human beings live it? Why is not the school curriculum a provocation for students to reflect on and think critically about themselves and the world they will inherit? (Pinar, 2004, pp. 186-187)

With Pinar’s concern at the forefront, I now turn to a consideration of how a curriculum of and for fan-tellectuals in teacher education might engender the means of “[reaching] out toward and back from life” in order to understand, reflect on and think critically about it in participatory, emergent, and ideally, counter-normative terms.

**FAN-TELLECTUALIZING TEACHER EDUCATION**

The popular media and culture educate children in schools and students in universities as much as formal educational processes, texts and structures. How we shape and present ourselves and how we ‘read’ others is strongly influenced by the media and consumer culture that accompanies electronic texts of identity. Today, the ‘canon’ of worthwhile cultural knowledge is the televisual text. If we can accept that this is the case for children in schools today and for the students who sit in our classes, then it seems that not to teach with and about popular cultural and media texts is pedagogically and politically irresponsible.

One means by which teacher educators can address the pedagogical and political (and to this I would add ethical) imperative to “teach with and about” popular cultural texts is in adopting the role of fan-tellectual. To reiterate, the image of the fan-tellectual draws on Jenkin’s (1992, 2006a, 2006b) work in conceptualizing fan identities and activities and Said’s (1994) notion of the “amateur intellectual” who in a spirit characterized by opposition rather than accommodation (or “unmasking” rather than transmission) refuses to be swept along by cultural stereotypes, “half-truths” and “received ideas” (Said, 1994, p. 23).

I have described the epistemological stances and discursive practices of the fan-tellectual as being oriented by: the wisdom of grafitti (Grumet, 1988), talking back (hooks, 1989; Vinz, 2000); becoming (other)wise (Vinz, 2000); reading wrongly (Weber & Mitchell, 1995); and in some cases, a openness to being “pulled up short” by texts of popular culture (Kerdeman, 2003). Taken together, these can be said to represent what Giroux (2001) has called a “pedagogy of disruption” that draws attention to popular culture as a generative site of struggle. As he explained:

Such a pedagogy would raise questions regarding how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of the real than others or how certain meanings take on the force of commonsense assumptions and go relatively unchallenged in shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations (pp. 78-79).

Tillman and Trier (2007) identify two main strategies for invoking a “pedagogy of disruption” through popular cultural texts: 1) deconstructive readings (i.e. textual analysis) and 2) shared readings (i.e. collective engagements with the text). In many ways, this project has involved a situated exploration of both of these strategies as they relate to the text of Kid Nation text as a kind of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2001).
Adopting the role of fan-tellectual and oriented by the discursive network that coalesced around *Kid Nation*, I interrogated some of the “normalizing fictions” (Britzman, 2003) and binary tendencies (child/adult; Dionysian/Apollonian) that continue to shape the cultural construction childhood in contemporary society. I suggested that enduring commonsense assumptions about childhood (as a state of otherness characterized by anxiety and risk) have historically been, and in many ways continue to be, entwined in conservative notions of the uses and usefulness of both literacy and popular media.

In offering my own deconstructive readings of the Miley Cyrus/*Vanity Fair* scandal, mainstream media reports of ‘No Child Left Behind’ and the ethical controversies surrounding the initial reception of *Kid Nation*, I suggested that sometimes what appears normal (and therefore functions as true) may in fact be more problematic than what appears to be scandalous or ethically tenuous when it comes to the popular representation of childhood. As I argued, each of these texts served to ‘pull me up short’ in such a way that I was compelled to consider what’s *[real]ly* going on here?

But this project also considered the collective conditions under which popular texts like *Kid Nation* are read, misread and re-read. And in doing so, I had to make deliberate choices as to what would constitute my “data” for this analysis. In limiting my focus to the character of Taylor, by no means have I exhausted the pedagogically disruptive potential of the *Kid Nation* text. That is, the strategies of deconstructive analysis I employed and collective readings I re-presented here are but the beginning of an ongoing commitment to re-conceptualizing contemporary literary engagements and “reading for ethics” (Gallop, 2000) as a means to a more “just treatment” of the child within the discursive networks of popular culture.
This commitment to “reading wrongly in the service of getting it right” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) will carry on in my practices as a teacher educator. As my students and I endeavor to read, misread and re-read popular cultural texts as a like-minded community of fan-tellectuals, employing game-like ways of knowing and situated discursive strategies to negotiate the gaps between subjective and social, the real and representational, my hope is that together we may arrive at a more ethical understanding of teaching that is oriented toward “creating the conditions for the emergence of the not-yet-imaginable, rather than about perpetuating entrenched habits of interpretation” (Davis & Sumara, 2007, p. 64). That is, teaching to become (other)wise (Vinz, 2000).
REFERENCES


(Eds.), *Handbook of Research on New Literacies* (pp. 531-551). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.


Street, B. (2006). New literacies, new times: How do we describe and teach the forms of literacy knowledge, skills and values people need for new times? In J. Hoffman, D. Schallert, C. Fairbanks, J. Worthy, and B. Maloch (Eds.), *55th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 21-42). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.


http://www.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2008/04/30/miley_and_mindy/  


APPENDIX A: URLs FOR DATA SET

Page 115
(Posted Oct. 3, 2007 @ 8:37 pm, Kids_Taylor Forum Post#70)
Retrieved July 13, 2009 from

Page 122
(Posted Sept. 19, 2007 @ 9:07 pm. Episode 1 Thread, Post#8)
Retrieved July 13, 2009 from

Page 123
(Posted Oct. 4, 2007 @ 11:53 am. Kids_Taylor Thread - Post#99)
Retrieved July 13, 2009 from

Page 124
(Posted Oct 12, 2007 @ 3:15 pm Episode 3 Thread Post#142)
Retrieved July 13, 2009 from
http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?s=793d00708196a9086d5ca54e4171c36b&showtopic=3159047&st=135

Page 125
(Posted Sept. 20, 2007 @ 3:52 pm. Kids_Taylor Thread - Post#8)
Retrieved July 13, 2009 from
APPENDIX B: CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL VERSION 1

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dennis Sumara
INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Curriculum Studies
UBC BREB NUMBER: H08-00844

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:

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<td>Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)</td>
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Other locations where the research will be conducted:
This research will be conducted in an online fan community devoted to the collective interpretation of contemporary television programming. The website "Television Without Pity" (TWoP) hosts a variety of discussion forums where fans can pool their responses to a particular program. This is a public site and membership is not required to read the discussions. Registered members of the TWoP community can post their own comments and respond to the comments of others. Members are designated by non-identifiable usernames and "ranks" based on the number of posts they have made. Each forum has its own moderator hired by the website (called a Network Executive) who is responsible for monitoring the content of the discussions, deleting if necessary, irrelevant or inappropriate material. Once a member has posted at least 10 comments, they have access to an internal messaging system whereby they can contact other members directly.

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Tammy (bzd)

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) - "Engaging Imagined Identities: a study of experiences of consciousness as mediated by 'reality' television"

PROJECT TITLE:
Fielding Fandom: Participatory Media Culture and 'New Literary' Experiences

REB MEETING DATE: April 24, 2008
CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: April 24, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:

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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
APPENDIX C: CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL VERSION 2

![Certificate Image]

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK RENEWAL**

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**INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:**

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</tr>
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Other locations where the research will be conducted:

This research will be conducted in an online fan community devoted to the collective interpretation of contemporary television programming. The website "Television Without Pity" (TWoP) hosts a variety of discussion forums where fans can pool their responses to a particular program. This is a public site and membership is not required to read the discussions. Registered members of the TWoP community can post their own comments and respond to the comments of others. Members are designated by non-identifiable usernames and "rank" based on the number of posts they have made. Each forum has its own moderator hired by the website (called a Network Executive) who is responsible for monitoring the content of the discussions, deleting if necessary, irrelevant or inappropriate material. Once a member has posted at least 10 comments, they have access to an internal messaging system whereby they can contact other members directly.

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**

Tammy Ttbody

**SPONSORING AGENCIES:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) - "Engaging Imagined Identities: a study of experiences of consciousness as mediated by ‘reality’ television"

**PROJECT TITLE:**

Fielding Fandom: Participatory Media Culture and New Literary Experiences

**EXPIRY DATE OF THIS APPROVAL:** May 5, 2010

**APPROVAL DATE:** May 5, 2009

The Annual Renewal for Study have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following: