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Foreword

BY Kara Wittman & Pam Bromley

The origin story of the essay as a form is perhaps familiar. In the late 16th century Michel Eyquem de Montaigne took the word from the French essayer, “to try,” to describe the writing with which he was experimenting in his retirement from political life: roaming, curious, digressive; associative, critical (most of all of his own ideas and perceptions), and deeply, devotedly engaged with the self, the world, and the self in the world.

Since that first volume of Essais in 1580, the essay has been defined, written, read, and redefined over and over again across the continents. For some it is a free, ecstatic way to explore the self; for some it participates in describing the fabric of a nation; for some it is an urgent intellectual and political force; for others its critical, playful essence resists definition, and in so resisting, resists totalization. For all, it is, as the essayist Gabriel Zaid puts it, “the laboratory itself, where life is put to the test in a text.”

We celebrate here excellence in that rich diversity of writing that tests the world and its ideas, engages critically both with the received and the new, and works in prose through urgent and complex arguments, thoughts, and perceptions. The essays in essay represent only a small portion of the fine critical writing here at Pomona College; we honor these for their critical insight, analytic precision, and rhetorical force, as well as for their playfulness, daringness, and willingness to experiment.

The ID1 essays represented in this volume go through a rigorous selection process: they are nominated by faculty members teaching ID1, the first-year Critical Inquiry Seminar at Pomona College. They are then read by a group of the Writing Partners working in the College’s Writing Center and narrowed down to a small selection of finalists. Finally, the winning papers and the honorable mentions are selected by the Writing Program faculty.
We would like to thank all of those individuals involved in the process, and to thank as well the writers represented in this inaugural volume. Without further ado, then, we introduce *essay: critical writing at pomona college*.

*Monday, October 2, 2017*

*Claremont, California*
In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates engages in dialogue with Meno, a man who questions whether virtue can be taught. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates and Meno grapple with the definition of virtue, whether it can be taught, how to distinguish between knowledge and true opinion, and finally the ramifications of this distinction regarding their previous questions. They finally agree that virtue is the ability to guide “rightly,” or in a manner that is both good and useful; they also agree that it can be taught only if virtue comes from knowledge, and cannot be taught if it comes from true opinion. They define true opinion as correctly believing something to be right without understanding it, and knowledge as knowing something to be right due to a deeper understanding of it.

Near the very end of the dialogue, Socrates illustrates a point to Meno using the statues of Daedalus as an example. In Greek mythology, Daedalus was a brilliant architect and sculptor who built the famous Labyrinth of Crete, and whose statues seemed so real that they could run away if not chained. Socrates said to Meno:

> It isn’t worth a great deal to own one of [Daedalus’s] creations if it’s loose; like a runaway, it will not stay. But it is worth quite a great deal when bound, for his works are very beautiful. What am I getting at? This bears on true opinions. For in fact, true opinions, as long as they stay, are beautiful possessions and accomplish all that is good, but they are unwilling to stay very long. They run away from the soul of a man, so that they are not worth much until someone binds them by reflection on the reason for them. And that, my friend Meno, is recollection, as we agreed before. When bound, they in the first place become knowledge; and secondly, they abide. That is why knowledge is more to be valued than right opinion: Knowledge differs from right opinion by its bond. (31)

This brief passage encapsulates all of Socrates’ argument and reveals through an apparent contradiction that Socrates may have meant rea-
son when he said recollection; both the encapsulation and revelation have implications for other parts of the dialogue.

The unchained statues of Daedalus represent Socrates’s definition of true opinion. While the statue may be beautiful, it isn’t worth a great deal because it isn’t bound to its owner and could disappear. This corresponds to true opinion, which, although worthy to possess and virtuous in its practice, is impermanent. As a teacher cannot pass on what he does not truly know and understand, true opinion cannot be taught. Conversely, the chained statues of Daedalus represent Socrates’s definition of knowledge. The statue is both beautiful and valuable because it has been secured to its owner. This corresponds to knowledge, which is just true opinion that is bound to the soul of a man by reflection on why it is true. Knowledge is therefore permanent and, as a teacher can pass on what he does truly know and understand, it can be taught.

The definition of true opinion as represented by the unchained statues of Daedalus sheds light on Socrates’s brief conversation with Anytus, a prominent politician and military leader, during the dialogue. Socrates asks why some of the sons of the most virtuous and powerful men of Athens turned out to be quite unlike their fathers, spoiled and ignoble. Socrates uses this example to show Anytus that virtue cannot be taught; however, like the statues of Daedalus, we can conclude instead that the virtue of these statesmen was temporary and unchained to reality—virtue of true opinion—and so they could not pass it on to their sons because they themselves did not truly understand it.

The definition of knowledge as represented by the chained statues of Daedalus also shows what Socrates may think about reason. The chain that binds true opinion to the soul of a man, Socrates says, is recollection. However, he also defines this chain as “reflection on the reason” for true opinions (31). Here, he appears to be contradicting himself. Socrates tells Meno that true opinion becomes knowledge through recollection—remembering things that have already been learned in a past life—and also that true opinions become knowledge through reflection on the reason for them.
Examining this contradiction in light of the Daedalus statues analogy reveals that Socrates is probably talking not about recollection but instead about reason. Socrates tells Meno that he has “heard from men and women who are wise in things divine” that “the soul is immortal, and has been born many times, and has beheld all things in this world and the world beyond, there is nothing it has not learnt” (12-13). According to Socrates, these religious figures taught him the belief of recollection, and the main tenet of this belief is that all humans already know all knowledge through their past lives; therefore, what we call learning is actually just recalling something that we knew in a past life. However, later in the dialogue, Socrates classifies both religious figures and poets as those who have true opinion, as opposed to knowledge. It therefore seems that Socrates must not regard their teachings as knowledge, since they could only be telling him their opinions that are unchained to reality. Why would Socrates tell Meno something that he thinks is likely false? There must be some point he was trying to make. If we replace what Socrates calls “recollection” with reason, then the contradiction is solved: reason is the same thing as “reflection” on why things are the way they are, and Socrates’s statements to Meno are now consistent and have no contradictions.

If we assume that Socrates meant reason when he said recollection—as he may have—it makes more sense of his “demonstration” with the slave boy, another participant in the dialogue. Socrates commands Meno to “pay close attention” to “whether it appears to you that [he] recollects, or learns from me” (12). Socrates then walks the boy through basic geometric principles in regard to the area of a square. He never outright tells the boy an answer to a question, but instead guides the boy using other questions. Socrates says that the boy is recollecting these things, but his guidance makes it clear that the boy is using his reason instead of recollection to discern what is true and what is false.

Although replacing reason with recollection in this example makes more sense, a question still remains: why would Socrates call it recollection if he meant reason? One possible answer is that he wanted to teach Meno but did not think Meno would be mentally capable
of truly understanding how reason would be the chain to tether true opinion to oneself. If we assume this is true, then Socrates simply wanted to instill a true opinion in Meno. Socrates must realize that Meno will only believe this for a time, and it’s interesting to note that Socrates still encourages Meno to “persuade your host Anytus here of the things of which you yourself are now persuaded” (33). Socrates knows that Meno only possesses true opinion on this matter and so will therefore be unable to teach Anytus any of what the dialogue was about, but still Socrates encourages him to try to do so.

The statues of Daedalus analogy also helps to explain why Socrates suddenly focuses on people who are “divine” (33) at the very end of the dialogue. He calls “soothsayers and seers, and the whole race of poets” as well as the politicians “divine and inspired” (33). Just before he deems them so, however, he says that they are divine because “without possessing intelligence they bring a multitude of important things to successful issue in what they do and say” (33). Socrates is therefore saying that, without possessing knowledge, all of these men are virtuous; as he only lays out two ways to be virtuous, he must then mean that holding true opinion and being regarded as divinely blessed are the same.

Works Cited

Corners’ drummer plays right in the pocket; every up-beat feels like another collision as I get my first taste of a mosh pit in a few months, my first ever in Los Angeles. A “standard” hardcore beat, when executed precisely, a sweaty, stumbling thing, excites fans like no house music can. Our shape is that of a frenetic, volatile circle surrounded by calmer, more predictable bystanders; an inverted hurricane. The vocals tear through the snare pulse, right until a break, and then they cut to half time. That’s the moment where the energy in a mosh pit tends to *woosh* out like air from a balloon, so I head toward the edge of the circle.

Some of the pit keeps going, which is fine, of course—that’s their prerogative. As I make my way out, I spot this lanky blonde kid out of the corner of my eye. He shoves me back into the pit. It is common at shows for those standing outside a mosh pit to defend themselves—to push those who come flailing out of the circle back in—but there is a huge difference between self-defense and risk-free participation in the mayhem. What he does is the latter: though I’m walking slowly to the perimeter, he feels compelled to push me as hard as he can. What’s more, from his position at the edge of the circle, he has the means to do so while avoiding any danger himself. There’s no reason for me to collide at high speed, face-to-face with some girl, but I do, because the blonde guy thought it would be fun. But maybe it was a mistake, I think as I reorient myself. Maybe he really meant to simply steer me back towards the pit—maybe he really thought I was going to slam into him, spoiling his decision not to be involved in our dancing. Maybe, except…he’s *laughing*. He’s taking pleasure from launching defenseless persons while putting himself in no real danger, for surely if I were to grab his arm and fling him into the pit he would appear the “victim.” But to me, he’s just a coward. I hope he enjoys it as I press my sweaty middle finger into his face.

There are some basic ethical principles that must be followed in such
a crowd to actually make it “fun.” For the most part, they’ve been uniform across the shows and venues I’ve attended. If someone falls, pick them up; if someone is being too aggressive, you can return the favor until they back off. In most punk settings, it isn’t considered acceptable to be intentionally throwing punches at people who are just trying to slam dance. I say this all the while understanding that ultimately, a mosh pit is still a designated area for people to be more violent with each other than they can be elsewhere, and not everybody is going to come into the pit with the same perspective on what is or isn’t okay. Still, most people would agree that the point of a mosh pit is to have a good time while dancing in a way that feels cohesive with the tone and message of the music the band is playing—not to get hurt. And all would agree that if you’re dishing it out, you’re going to have to take it.

I want to put my feelings about this subject into some context. Punk shows were my favorite nights of high school. They were where I learned to come out of my shell, the first thing I ever did that a teenager might call “going out,” and in that sense punk shows helped me grow. I started high school as a heavily introverted music geek who spent most of his free time at home. I finished as someone who was, admittedly, still a huge dork, but one that could, in fact, socialize. My first show was on September 12th, 2009, the first Saturday of 9th grade. I remember the date because I have a growing collection of ticket stubs thumbtacked to my wall in New York. My older brother went with me to see Streetlight Manifesto, a poppy, commercially successful ska-punk band with a remarkable knack for catchy hooks and tight horn lines. There are two things I very clearly remember seeing on the subway ride home. One, the soles of my Converse had separated from the cloth all the way around the heel. And two, nothing had ever left me with that kind of elation before in my life. Never had I felt so intimately connected with the music that I loved as I did that night, screaming lyrics and trying to keep my feet under me in my first mosh pit. Though my tastes shifted over the next four years, across all varieties of shows I felt an important connection with the power of live music and the sense of comfort and companionship
present in an engaged crowd.

I don’t want to give the impression that a mosh pit offender in some way ruined that connection when I went to see Corners. But it frustrates me when people take a setting that’s supposed to be about freedom and release and turn it into a power trip. It’s like popping someone’s playground ball because you’re too afraid to play a game of four-square. It occurs to me as the least punk thing a crowdmember can do because it subjects others to your own fancies while disrespe...

This sort of consideration is something I haven’t previously afforded a punk show. Looking at punk with a more critical eye, I’m starting to better understand why it’s so important to me. One of punk’s most novel concepts, to me, is that it seem to attract people who hold Fat Mike’s ever-so-eloquently stated ideology. The weirdness of social interactions in middle school had left me somewhat socially jaded. It seemed so senseless to me that kids to whom I’d done no wrong would go out of their way to be cruel to me. Punk created an environment where I could release some of that frustration in a way that was acceptable to the people I was with. It was an environment that always excited and entertained; it still does. Even though this first L.A. show wasn’t put on by a band I knew or cared much about, and even though I have a lot less social frustration now than I used to, it made me think about why I got into punk—to have a place where I wouldn’t have to deal with things that put me on edge. It wasn’t about the violence; it was about feeling safe. That’s why I felt so angry toward the smug kid shoving people around. He was violating the sanctity of my safe space. If that had been my experience at the start
of 9th grade, punk shows would have seemed no better than middle school. I wouldn’t have been as enthralled with the crowd or the music, I wouldn’t have found that release, and I wouldn’t be as comfortable with myself.
1. INTRODUCTION

El Salvador has a long history of emigration, and in particular, emigration to the United States. There are several constant themes throughout the history of the Salvadoran diaspora. Many immigrants leave because of the lack of opportunities and weak government institutions in El Salvador that create a violent and impoverished environment (Interview 1). Immigrants in general would rather be in El Salvador than the US, but the circumstances of inequality and need in El Salvador fuel a culture of emigration to better an individual’s life. Along those lines, the Salvadoran diaspora has remained connected to the homeland, especially through remittances. Remittances have always been a constant and important aspect of Salvadoran immigration. The Salvadoran diaspora has a culture of remitting; more than 70% of Salvadorans in the US send remittances (DeSipio 12).

Official remittances currently account for about 16% of El Salvador’s GDP and about 16% of Salvadoran families receive remittances (Villacrés 41). Unofficial remittances may make those numbers higher. Remittances are incredibly important to supporting the Salvadoran economy, a fact that has not escaped the notice of the Salvadoran government and immigrants themselves. Because of the importance of remittances to El Salvador, it is essential to understand why immigrants send money and how they use their power, identity, and organization in the US to affect remittances flows. It is also important to investigate how the diaspora positions itself as more than just “money

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1. I interviewed three people from Salvadoran hometown associations and Central American immigration support organizations in Los Angeles. They are anonymized for this publication.
machines” (Coutin 55) but also as transnational, engaged citizens. This paper will first investigate the notion of a transnational citizen to explain why Salvadorans remit. It will then explore the development potential or downfall of remittances to conceptualize the effectiveness of the diaspora’s actions. Finally, it will look specifically at the efforts of the diaspora and the Salvadoran government to leverage remittances as a tool for development. The diaspora uses remittances to connect with El Salvador and fulfill their responsibilities as family and community members. The culture of remitting instills a sense of economic and moral responsibility in the diaspora that can be channeled towards development. This engagement in turn reinforces the legitimacy of the transnational citizen.

2. TRANSCATIONALISM: CROSS BORDER CONNECTIONS

Workers originally migrated around El Salvador and Central America to work in agriculture jobs primarily in coffee, sugar, and cotton (Baker-Cristales). The first major wave of immigrants to the US came after World War One as workers moved to follow jobs in the shipping channels and ports. The influx concentrated populations of immigrants in cities such as Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and New York City. Immigrants then continued to come to the US looking for job opportunities and to escape political persecution. The largest single wave of immigrants was in the 1980s during the Salvadoran civil war. Salvadoran activists immigrated to the cities with previously established Salvadoran populations. Activists fled political persecution while thousands of other citizens escaped the extreme violence, brutality, and economic hardships associated with the civil war. Though the civil war ended in 1990, the socioeconomic inequality, weak government institutions, and violence persist in the present day. Immigrants continue to come to the US; currently, about one-fourth of Salvadorans live outside of El Salvador. Because of this long history and concentrated populations, the Salvadoran diaspora is well established in the US today.

2. This section draws from Chapter 3: Genesis of Salvadoran Migration to the United States in Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano by Beth Baker-Cristales.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol1/iss1/1
Due to its high emigration rate, El Salvador is becoming a transnational state. A transnational state is one in which its citizens are not defined by borders but instead by the “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec 447). The concept of the transnational citizen is useful in understanding why and how the Salvadoran diaspora continues to engage with the homeland. Transnationalism is more than merely possessing dual citizenship; it is actively engaging in state and social activities across borders (Marcin 533). Official and private discourses establish El Salvador as a nation without borders. For example, in 2002, the then-vice president Carlos Quintanilla Schmidt said, “El Salvador is no longer only El Salvador with the six and one-half million inhabitants who live in Central America. Today, El Salvador is wherever there is a Salvadoran” (Coutin 57). These discourses centralize the idea that to be Salvadoran is to migrate and that Salvadorans living abroad are more Salvadoran than those in the country because they sacrifice for their country and have more unity and connection to El Salvador (Coutin 56). Immigrants are referred to as hermanos lejanos, or distant brothers, emphasizing that even though they are not physically present, they are still an intimate part of the country. While other diasporas may lose connection to the homeland over time, the constant flow of first generation migrants helps reinforce the strong sentiments towards El Salvador and the strong transnational identity of the diaspora.

The Salvadoran diaspora establishes its place as transnational citizens in the social, political, and economic realms. In the social realm, the diaspora organizes events in the US for Salvadoran holidays, sustains a tourist industry to El Salvador, and is promoted in the media. The main Salvadoran newspaper, La Prensa Gráfica, has a section on its website devoted to Salvadorans living abroad called Departamento 15. This is a play on geography; El Salvador is divided into 14 departments, so those outside the country make a 15th for the country. Additionally, La Prensa Gráfica and another Salvadoran daily, El Diario de Hoy, publish editions in the US because immigrants want to read Salvadoran news (Baker-Cristales 77). In the political realm,
Salvadorans have lobbied for voting rights in Salvadoran elections and the Salvadoran government lobbies the US government to provide Salvadorans in the US with Temporary Protected Status to improve their opportunities and ability to engage with the homeland. Finally - and the main focus of this paper - in the economic realm the diaspora sends remittances to support family, friends, and investments.

Remittances can be powerful tools for supporting a weak economy. In El Salvador, where they account for 16.4% of the GDP, remittances support a developing economy by adding money it would not otherwise have. While the recent financial crisis and the weak US economy have taken their toll on the amount sent, remittances are still slowly growing even as other forms of capital have declined. In 2013, remittances were 140% larger than foreign exchange reserves in El Salvador (World Bank 2013). However, although the monetary amount of remittances is large, there is debate about the development potential of remittances. Worldwide, remittances are mainly used for “unproductive” purposes: daily household needs, education, and healthcare. In El Salvador, about 81.7% of remittances are used for immediate household needs while only 9.2% are used for “productive” investments such as purchasing land, opening a small business, or investing in the community (Baker-Cristales 136). These productive uses would help to develop the economy more than using remittances for purely consumption. There is a common perception that remittances lead to laziness, a lack of motivation to work, dependence, and free spending and hence are detrimental to developing economies (Kent 202). Remittances are shown to decrease labor participation and labor income (Funkhouser 5), increasing the image of dependency and laziness. Remittances may also increase real estate rate appreciations and increase volatility (Acosta et al. 87). Moreover, while the influx of money aids those that receive it, remittances are an unequal mode of development; those from towns without migrants or those without migrant family members or family members who remit do not receive the benefits of remittances. Ironically, it is often the poorest populations that do not have the resources to migrate and will therefore not
have external remittance inflows (Baker-Cristales 139). Additionally, there is concern that the external support from remittances allows the Salvadoran government to avoid truly fixing the internal economic issues (Landolt 234).

Kent however, takes issue with the assessment that remittances lead to laziness; she argues that many receivers of remittances are women, children, and the elderly who would not normally work outside the home (203). Remittances are essential to individual quality of life and decrease household poverty. The influx of money increases access to food, education, health care, and investment opportunities such as businesses and land. The money goes directly to those who use it to improve their lives. However, those finding are offset by the acknowledgement that receiving external money may increase dependence on remittances and developed countries (Mitchell 22) and leaves recipients vulnerable to volatility in the sending country (Acosta et al. 183). That said, it is important to keep in mind the importance of remittances to individual families and the potential remittances have for development. Remittances can be a lifeline in times of crisis, as they generally do not decrease in financial crises as foreign aid, national labor markets, and exports decline (Cohen and Sirkeci 15).

4. Realities for the Diaspora: Remittances as Family Lifelines

Scholars may debate about the long-term value of remittances, but the diaspora sees the positive impact their remittances have for improving the quality of life for their friends, families, and communities in El Salvador. Regular remittances can be an enormous benefit for families. Sonia, a Salvadoran woman whose mother migrated to the US when she was eight recounted how remittances helped her family survive:

Before she left, when we could, we would eat, and if we couldn't, we didn't, right? But then, since there were five of us, when she went to work over there [in the United States], she sent us money, but it was just a little bit, right? But it was enough for school and food. We didn't dress well or anything, we just recycled the same clothes over and over, right? So, but yes, there was always money for food and for school… Every month she would send $150 (Abrego 141).
While the amount and frequency of remittances is extremely variable across households with some receiving regular remittances and others receiving none, as a whole, those receiving remittances generally have lower poverty levels than average. In this way, remittances are pragmatic, a necessary economic benefit to families to be able to buy food, pay for education, or invest. However, social ties and a desire for connection and involvement in El Salvador also motivate the senders. In their interviews with Salvadoran migrants in New Jersey, Bailey et al. found that remitters and transnational citizens were “riddled with social obligations motivated by the guilt and responsibility felt by many… who wanted to do more for those ‘left behind’” (134). Remittances are a way to continue to connect to the homeland and fulfill the expected and desired responsibilities of migrants to their families and communities.

Remittances serve to extend the migrant household into a transnational family. Separated families can maintain unity through money transfers. Patterns of sending overall reflect Salvadoran family structures. This is seen in indicators of who remits the most; those with family in El Salvador, especially those with minor children, remit more than those who do not have close family in El Salvador (Funkhouser 141). Additionally, in the age of migration, women have become the heads of households in El Salvador as men migrate to work in agriculture. When women immigrate to the United States, they remit more than their male counterparts. This imbalance speaks to the gender expectations and different ways of connecting to family and to the homeland. Salvadoran gender norms make women the caretakers of the household and thus more connected to their children and families than men are (Abrego 10). The result is that women in general feel the need to remit more than men do and remit larger amounts even if they earn less. Remittances allow participation in the family while being physically absent.

5. The Structure and Work of Hometown Associations

Because many of the first immigrants to the US during the civil war were political advocates, the Salvadoran diaspora has strong history
and knowledge of organizing (Interview 2). The advocates formed active community organizations that empowered Salvadorans to form coalitions, call for their rights, and connect with other Salvadorans (Interview 3). As Salvadorans realized after the civil war that they would not return to El Salvador, they naturally, and effectively, started forming organizations or committees within in the existing organizations that would facilitate and strengthen transnational connections between the United States and El Salvador. One of the ways in which they have increasingly organized is through hometown associations or HTAs (Interview 1). While only about 4% of Salvadorans in the US are members of HTAs (DeLugan 90), the phenomenon still points to social, emotional, and political ties migrants wish to maintain or those they may develop in their new status as transnational citizens.

HTAs are organizations of migrants from the same hometown that come together for social events and to raise money for their hometowns in El Salvador. They are mainly driven by social and family networks and grow from a desire to maintain links to El Salvador and those from their hometown. They provide an essential platform for maintaining one’s identity as Salvadoran. Having the opportunity to meet with others from the same town, engage in cultural activities, and aid each other in times of need reinforces the bonds between immigrants. Sending money and building projects reinforces their connections to the homeland. By engaging in organizations, individuals can make their identity as transnational Salvadoran citizens more concrete and differentiate themselves from others in the larger community (Orozco 7). Even second-generation Salvadorans wish to establish these connections with El Salvador to learn about their pasts and understand their present and future (Coutin 59). The ability to connect with El Salvador is essential to forming an identity in the United States.

That said, however, it is important to remember that many others have no desire to connect with El Salvador at all. Those who migrated as young children may have no connection or memory of their country of origin. Those who do remember may feel that El Salvador failed them and the memories of violence and lack of opportunity create
an aversion to the state. Salvadorans are also discriminated against in the Latino community in Los Angeles and this might want to hide their Salvadoran origins. Still others with unstable legal status avoid connecting to El Salvador to show their commitment to the US and to avoid appearing foreign. This behavior creates public distance from El Salvador that is maintained even if they still do send remittances (Coutin 62-63). While this paper focuses on those who do desire a public and multifaceted connection to the homeland, there are those who have no desire or resources to do so. Participation in HTAs is voluntary and their success depends on the commitment of the members.

For those that are involved, HTAs are important not just for engaging in social connections, but also to work to help their towns solve their root development and poverty barriers through charitable projects (Interview 3). In this way, the diaspora can improve the disparities in El Salvador that forced them to leave their homes. A member of Comité Puerto El Triunfo articulated these values: “We as hometown associations [are] trying to solve problems, help the community, trying to give back” (Interview 1). They emphasized that Salvadorans are still connected to their hometowns and migrated not because they want to leave their homes, but because of unfortunate circumstances in El Salvador: “We are here because there is a lack of opportunity there” (Interview 1). The personal connections with lack of opportunities and struggles for resources create a diaspora that is very willing to help their homeland in any way they can. Some of the second generation or those who have lived most of their lives in the US also feel this responsibility. Roxana, a Salvadoran woman who immigrated to the US when she was four, desires to engage with El Salvador personally. She feels “like we need to work to change things here, we also have that responsibility over there. You know, we still consider that part of us enough to where we need to do something to improve things there” (Coutin 60). As with many diaspora groups, HTAs originally organized around a cause such a natural disaster or a lack of a basic need in their hometown. Immigrants were personally impacted by the lack of opportunities and the resulting violence as many immi-
grated because of these reasons. The diaspora intimately understands the needs of the community, their responsibilities as immigrants, and the ways they can help improve the situation.

HTAs send collective remittances to fund projects and investments. Collective remittances, sent by a group, are more effective for development than individual remittances. With a large sum of money, it is easier to put the money towards a project or investment rather than allocating money to individual families to use as they wish. The idea is that the projects can impact the community more than the small individual sums could. The projects HTAs fund are focused on short-term poverty reduction and long-term development. Generally, projects have the goal of increasing opportunities in the town. For instance, the Comité Puerto El Triunfo donates laptops to schools to improve education and opportunities for students in El Salvador. They give money for towns to buy tools they can use to make souvenirs, increasing revenue from tourism and providing job opportunities for citizens. They donated tools for a town to make their fruit harvesting and processing more effective and tools to make souvenirs from the byproducts (Interview 1). Additionally, the money given by HTAs can be audited by outside agencies to make sure the town is using it for the intended project. For a $20,000 development project, the hometown association may give $8,000 the first year and monitor the money to make sure the town is making good progress in the project before giving $8,000 the next year and the final $4,000 a third year. This grant structure creates incentives to work on the project and highlights the need for larger scale development rather than just subsistence. These projects reinforce the involvement migrants have in the town while also helping to identify and solve critical community needs.

6. Salvadoran Government Involvement in Remittances and Development

The Salvadoran government has been taking steps to capitalize on the diaspora’s connection. The government is actively trying to increase remittance flows and increase the development efficacy of
these remittances. One of the most important steps the Salvadoran government took to improve remittance transfers was to make the dollar the official currency. First, this makes international investments more stable. For remittances, it lowers the transfer costs and reduces corruption from companies deciding exchange rates (PROESA 2013). More money can go to families rather than being lost in the transfer process. On larger development, the Salvadoran government wishes to expand and channel the diaspora’s connection, desires to improve El Salvador, and their resources. The Ministry of the Exterior is trying to employ, “a new approach in the diplomatic and consular service aimed at providing comprehensive protection for Salvadorans abroad and their families will be encouraged, as well as to restore and strengthen its ties with the country, to participate actively in the process of development” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador 2013).

Members of the Salvadoran diaspora are attractive targets for aiding development because they are already engaged and their intimate ties to El Salvador make them more likely to be committed investors in the long term. The government tries to make migrants feel welcome while encouraging them to invest money and energy in the country. Along those lines, the government formed the General Directorate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2000 to serve as the link between the government and the diaspora. The Directorate aims to encourage economic ties and integration, community and local development, and cultural and educational ties. The government publishes a newsletter to showcase HTA projects and government collaboration. The Salvadoran government has also established the Social Investment and Local Development Fund (FISDL) where HTAs can petition for funds for their projects and FISDL assesses the value and need of the projects. This program amplifies the impact HTAs have. By 2006, 45 projects were aided by FISDL. HTAs give about 16% of the money for these projects and the average cost of each project was $278,689.73, an immense amount to flow into a community (Orozco 19). These programs serve several purposes for the different actors involved. The HTAs can expand their projects and give even
more back to their communities with FISDL’s aid. For the government, these programs help channel diaspora money into projects it thinks are worthwhile for the country. It can encourage development and possible future investment from Salvadorans living abroad. These programs reinforce the value of the transnational citizen and encourage them to maintain connections and continue to send money back to El Salvador. Perhaps most importantly to the government, these programs cast them in a good light by showing it is trying to develop the country and help the people rather than just their own political party.

Though the government has promoted several programs and has experienced success, there is a general lack of trust in the government that limits the efficacy and scale of the programs (Interview 1). Governmental institutions are still weak, corrupt, and highly polarized between the left Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and right National Republican Alliance (ARENA). Citizens feel that politicians make promises during the elections that they never keep. Moreover, the government is neither able nor willing to decease the extreme inequality, violence, and lack of opportunities; in fact, these problems are growing worse. Migrants personally know the failure of the government to care for its citizens and thus many do not believe that government programs would actually help HTAs. Many HTAs prefer to work around the government rather than with it. They instead use other connections to direct their money where it should go.

7. Conclusions

The links the Salvadoran diaspora maintains to El Salvador through remittances show that emigration does not weaken a state through globalization or loss of productive workers. Rather the state can expand into a transnational, borderless realm (Landolt 237). This idea holds hope for El Salvador as its citizens continue to emigrate to find work, escape violence, and follow family out of the country. In their new physical locations, but same nationalistic spaces, transnational citizens are organizing to strengthen ties to their host country and forge stronger identities as Salvadorans. When working through these
transnational channels, immigrants are still an essential and present part of their families and communities in El Salvador. Remittance patterns reflect family structures and could work to maintain some of the structure and responsibilities of families across borders. This ability to maintain a continuation of the family and preserve a sense of unity is essential to keeping a transnational connection and a feeling of responsibility and rights in the country of origin.

Furthermore, the case of HTAs shows that the diaspora can use its connections, knowledge, and base to leverage its transnational power to solve the major problems of development in El Salvador. HTAs benefit the transnational citizens by providing cultural and social places to connect with others and benefit those in El Salvador by helping to improve their towns and opportunities. Diasporas are uniquely situated with the knowledge, passion, resources, and organizing power to make direct change in the ways they see fit. They have the essential connections to work with community members in El Salvador that other organizations may not have. While the work of HTAs is not perfect, they have been effective in working towards developing their hometown communities and building communities in the US.

An aspect not deeply explored in this paper is that of Salvadorans who do not wish to engage with the homeland or do not have the resources to do so. More work should be done to analyze why and how some choose to not to engage in hometown associations or other community groups and how engagement changes over time and through generations. Answering these questions will illuminate important divisions and challenges of the diaspora. These conclusions would help guide US national policy, diaspora organization plans, and individuals’ mindsets to help Salvadorans best thrive in the United States.

El Salvador is working to embrace its transnational citizens as they become increasingly important in the culture, politics, and economy. While remittances do have drawbacks for development and transnational connections are not a perfect substitute for a complete present family, the diaspora is doing what it can to improve El Salvador into
the future. Future research should be done to assess how the diaspora’s current engagements have impacted development and how the diaspora’s engagements change as new migrants settle in the US and establish multigenerational Salvadoran American communities. As we have seen, the Salvadoran diaspora is highly adaptable and creative; in the end, the diaspora in the US will determine how to most effectively use its position to improve lives across borders.

Works Cited


No phrase signals the beginning of a story like “once upon a time.” According to Jessica Tiffin, “‘Once upon a time’ signals a transition to a different reality from our own,” a reality in which magic reigns over logic, good always conquers evil, and hope defies doubt (13). In contemporary culture, the phrase “once upon a time” appears in diverse forms of narrative, from the romantic comedy film to the romance novel, all seeking to parody or draw upon the conventions of fairy tale. While the fairy tale is often dismissed as children’s literature, its prevalence over thousands of years in societies across the globe reveals the cultural and psychological significance of narrative in general. As Cristina Bacchilega writes, no matter how much fairy tale is “belittled,” it nevertheless manages “to accomplish a variety of social functions” for adults and children alike (3).

Recently, popular culture has witnessed the appropriation of fairy tales as adult texts in the form of postmodern fairy tales. Through the modes of film, television, and literature, classic tales a parent might read to a child have been revisited and rewritten, whether to complicate, challenge, or update their original themes for a new audience. One clear exemplar of the postmodern fairy tale is the television series *Once Upon a Time*, which self-consciously modifies the plots and characters of well-known tales to suggest an alternative version of the fairy tale’s defining characteristic: the happy ending.

The series *Once Upon a Time* manipulates the narrative construction of time, rejecting linearity as a core characteristic of the traditional fairytale plot and the Labovian narrative itself. The program’s post-
modern approach to temporality, in conjunction with its exploitation of the fairytale canon, complicates the traditional conception of the happy ending and reveals its significance in modern-day narrative. In redefining the happy ending for a postmodern audience, Once Upon a Time reveals one of the diverse functions of narrative as a way to find closure and meaning in a reality that is far from Fairyland.

In the analysis that follows, I utilize a diverse body of research to examine how the postmodern portrayal of time in Once Upon a Time complicates the conception of the happy ending and illuminates its function in narrative. First, I describe the elements of the fairytale genre and explore the differences between a traditional fairy tale and a postmodern fairy tale, classifying Once Upon a Time as the latter. Drawing from Bacchilega’s Postmodern Fairy Tales and Tiffin’s Marvelous Geometry, I investigate the postmodern fairy tale and the series Once Upon a Time as a metanarrative. Then, using Ames’ characterization of popular television programs, I explain how the genres of the postmodern fairy tale and the television series overlap to contribute to the complication of fairytale norms. Finally, I show how the nonlinear construction of time in Once Upon a Time modifies the traditional happy ending for a postmodern audience. Due to the complexity of the series’ plot after more than three seasons on the air, I focus on the pilot episode of the first season of Once Upon a Time in my analysis. Although I draw some evidence from later episodes to discuss how the conceptions of time and the happy ending evolve over the course of the series, the first episode, which establishes the narrative framework of the series, offers sufficient evidence for most points of my analysis.

While most people could identify what Tiffin calls “fairy-tale themes,” fairy tale as a genre resists a strict definition apart from a description of its elements (26). Bruno Bettelheim emphasizes magic as a major element of the fairy tale or fairy story, a magic that exists without explanation, yet does not purport to be plausible or realistic. According to Bettelheim, “fairy stories do not pretend to describe the world as it is, nor do they advise what one ought to do,” even though another distinguishing trait of fairy tales is their unambiguous moral distinction between good and evil (25). The fairy tale does not delineate a
moral code so much as it suggests that such a code can be an effective tool for facing the real world. Finally, Bettelheim separates fairy tale from myth by characterizing their respective endings: while myths generally end in tragedy, fairy tales unfailingly end with a version of “happily ever after” (37). Although Bettelheim’s work concerns fairy tale as a resource for children on the path to psychological maturity, his analysis of classic fairy tales provides a loose definition of the genre that encompasses both traditional and postmodern versions.

Some characteristics of the classic fairy tale, however, do not translate to postmodern renditions of the stories. According to Bacchilega, postmodern fairy tales “hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale,” not only updating the details of the well-known narratives for the current audience, but exposing the flaws and gaps in the original “narrative and gender ideologies” (23, 50). By retelling traditional tales with a contemporary twist, these versions of fairy tales self-consciously critique their own tired motifs and render age-old tales applicable to contemporary life. This self-consciousness, and thus the classification of postmodern fairy tale as metanarrative, relies on Bruner’s concept of genericity (14). Bruner tells us that genres are simultaneously “loose but conventional ways of representing human plights” and “ways of telling that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways” (15). Therefore, we recognize fairy tales through both their familiar plots and their conventionalized forms. As metanarratives, postmodern fairy tales employ the genre’s familiarity and interactions with its own “highly structured tradition” in their “postmodern deconstructions” of classic themes (Tiffin 3). Tiffin asserts that the postmodern fairy tale can “acknowledge and reproduce some characteristics [of traditional fairy tales] while self-consciously choosing to reject or modify others,” maintaining the fairytale structure just enough to be recognizable as a reinterpretation (8, 3).

The television program Once Upon a Time serves as a prototypical postmodern fairy tale in today’s popular culture. The program’s premise is introduced by the text that appears on the screen at the onset of
the series’ first episode:¹

Once Upon a Time
There was an enchanted forest filled with all the classic characters we know.
Or think we know.
One day they found themselves trapped in a place where all their happy endings were stolen.
Our World.
This is how it happened… (Horowitz, Pilot)

The series opener exhibits the metafictional aspect of postmodern fairy tale as well as the complication of traditional plots. The phrase, “Or think we know” appears in the same frame as the sentence referring to “all the classic characters we know,” but approximately five seconds later, first establishing the program’s relationship to traditional fairy tale before problematizing it. Once Upon a Time relies upon its title as a recognizable cue for the initiation of a fairy tale, assuming that the audience registers that the “classic characters” mentioned in the opening text are fairytale characters. Therefore, Once Upon a Time employs fairytale tropes to establish the viewer’s expectations before any other audiovisual content appears. The series later breaches the expectations created by the fairytale canon to construct a narrative, or metanarrative, that is both unique and tellable (Bruner 11). Furthermore, the opening text echoes Bettelheim’s characterization of fairy tale in its acceptance of magic: the second frame of the episode refers to “the enchanted forest” almost in passing, suggesting that the existence of magic in the story world should be both expected and unquestioned by the audience, once again relying upon the banality of fairy tale for the viewer’s accommodation. In the episode’s third frame, the opening text accomplishes its final purpose by signaling acknowledgement of the central tenet of fairy tale, the happy ending. By establishing that the fairytale characters, or their postmodern reinterpretations, have been trapped in a new world where “all their happy endings [have been] stolen,” the text invokes the viewer’s preconceived notions of happy ending and indicates that they will be modified by the subsequent narrative. Throughout the series, Once

¹. The text appears in white font on a black backdrop with no audio accompaniment.
Upon a Time draws upon viewers’ knowledge of classic fairy tales to redefine happy endings in a world apart from the enchanted forest, “Our World.”

Later in the first episode, Once Upon a Time blatantly draws attention to its identity as a metanarrative, a fairy tale about fairy tales, through the character of Mary Margaret. As the postmodern incarnation of Snow White, Mary Margaret plays a crucial role in the series. At the beginning of the narrative, Mary Margaret, along with the other residents of the Enchanted Forest, has been transported to the real world by the Evil Queen, losing her memory in the process. The lives of familiar characters like Red Riding Hood, the Huntsman, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, and her Prince Charming intertwine in the Enchanted Forest, constructing a complex postmodern modification of well-known fairytale plots. As stated in the opening of the pilot episode, the Queen rewrites these traditional tales and steals the characters’ happy endings by transporting them to Storybrooke, Maine, a fictional town in the United States, where they forget their origins and connections with one another. However, Mary Margaret discovers a book of fairy tales that describes her past and that of the other residents, a physical manifestation of the series’ metanarrative. Mary Margaret serendipitously gives the storybook to the Queen’s adopted son, Henry. Even though he was born in the “real world,” Henry realizes that the stories relate actual events that have taken place in a different reality from his own. Unaware of the storybook's literal truth, Mary Margaret considers the fairy tales “a way for us to deal with our world, a world that doesn’t always make sense” (Horowitz, Pilot 29:00). With this statement, Mary Margaret expresses one of the functions of fairy tale and of narrative itself, validating the series’ interpretation of the genre and rendering it an example of metanarrative, a story about the power of narrative.

While the numerous plotlines and characters of Once Upon a Time do not readily lend themselves to summarization, an explanation of some of the major characters and relationships will be useful for understanding my later argument. Notably, Henry’s birth mother in Once Upon a Time happens to be the show’s protagonist and the
daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, sent to the real world as an infant just before the curse strikes. Prophesied to save the residents of Storybrooke from the curse and restore the happy endings, the protagonist, Emma, grows up an orphan who knows nothing of her fairytale heritage. However, Henry, the child she gave up for adoption, discovers her identity through the enchanted storybook. Now ten years old, Henry appears outside of her apartment on her twenty-eighth birthday and convinces her to accompany him back to Storybrooke. Through realizing that the fairy tales in the book are true, Emma finally breaks the curse and restores the memories of the residents, triumphing over the Evil Queen and reuniting her family.

Since Once Upon a Time is not only a postmodern fairy tale, but a popular television series, the program’s structure adheres closely to Ames’ characteristics of “programs currently creating the most engaged fan communities,” including “multiple plot threads (often stopping and starting up again) spanning large durations of time, a thickening of characterization and a multiplication of cast members, and a heavy reliance on audience intellect” (8). These distinguishing traits contribute to the series’ postmodern construction of fairy tale and happy endings. While fairy tales in the traditional sense generally include a clear plotline, morally unambiguous characters, and linear temporality, Once Upon a Time complicates these conventions as well as the traditional plots themselves through the characters’ interconnected stories. Since the narrative locates characters from traditionally disparate fairy tales in one place, the relationships between characters grow more complex, blurring the distinction between “good” and “evil.” Furthermore, with multiple, simultaneous plotlines, Once Upon a Time not only rewrites classic fairy tales to connect to one another, but also challenges the “linearity of plot” that Tiffin claims “characterizes fairy tale” (12).

Playing with narrative temporality in this way allows the series to construct a new story out of familiar tales. In every episode, Once Upon a Time oscillates between the present plot, generally following Emma and Henry, and a retrospective telling of events that have occurred prior to the present action and have some causal or the-
matic relationship to it. For example, the temporality of the pilot episode alternates between the events immediately leading up to the Evil Queen’s curse on the Enchanted Forest and the night, more than twenty-eight years later, when Henry finds Emma (Horowitz, Pilot). The series’ nonlinear construction of time contributes to the intricate network of relationships among traditionally unrelated fairy tales and their characters. Consequently, the present-day setting of the main plot thread is not the only element that updates the classic tales for a twenty-first century audience: the narrative’s form speaks to the fragmented nature of the postmodern self. In a “culture of instantaneity,” the technological innovations that allow us to interact with anyone around the globe make our own social relationships much more complex than those in a classic children’s tale, complicating the “plotlines” of our life narratives (Ames 9). Therefore, the structure of Once Upon a Time relates the fragmented adventures of its characters to the viewers’ lives, promising that the fragments fit together into one coherent, overarching narrative that, undoubtedly, leads to a happy ending in one way or another.

Adding to the already complicated temporality generated by its various plotlines, the series occasionally suspends time. For instance, when the curse transports the fairytale characters from the Enchanted Forest to Storybrooke, they continue to live from day to day, though they never age. Furthermore, the characters have no long-term memory of the past, only false identities generated by the Queen’s magic, and therefore no historicity. As Henry tells Emma when they arrive in Storybrooke, “time’s frozen here” (Horowitz, Pilot 16:10). With no history and no direction for their future, the characters remain suspended in the present, symbolized by their failure to age. Moreover, the clock tower in Storybrooke remains frozen at 8:15. Only when Emma decides to comply with Henry’s wishes and stay in town, beginning her journey from doubt to belief that will ultimately break the curse, do the hands of the clock move again. By suspending the characters in time, the Evil Queen not only erases their knowledge of the past but, as the prologue promises, steals their “happy endings,” implying that such an ending is impossible without moving forward...
in time. With the symbolic movement of the clock’s hands as Emma takes her first step in restoring the happy endings, the narrative signals that time has started moving forward again for the residents of Storybrooke. In *Once Upon a Time*, the progression of time signals the transition from stagnancy to change. According to Ames, “although time may stand still narratively on occasion, it always progresses in terms of the world”; therefore, the series constructs a variable temporality that occasionally “freezes” or progresses in a nonlinear fashion, but a change in the characters’ situation and thus the eventual forward motion of time is inevitable, as in our own reality (163).

As Bacchilega points out, “the stories we tell produce and find us in the past, and enable us to live through the present’s uncertainties by projecting us into the future” (24). The nonlinear temporality of *Once Upon a Time* reflects the human experience of the world, specifically a postmodern representation of that experience, and offers closure with the assurance that time still has direction. This direction propels us, as characters in our own narratives, from one ending to a new beginning. For example, the pilot episode begins with the happy ending of the classic tale of Snow White, when Prince Charming wakes her from eternal sleep with “true love’s kiss.” When considered with the paradox of time starting again as Emma begins her quest to “bring back the happy endings,” it becomes clear that beginnings and endings merge in both the series’ construction of time and its reconstruction of the happy ending. Like the fairytale characters trapped in Storybrooke, the narrative implies that we need to continue moving towards the future if we are to experience “happily ever after.” The postmodern fairy tale and metanarrative of *Once Upon a Time* offer reassurance that the fragmented past and present yield a meaningful future, as the end of one adventure signals the beginning of another. The happy ending, therefore, is that life goes on.

The most common type of happy ending, in traditional and postmodern fairy tales alike, manifests this element of continuity: the attainment of true love. According to Bettelheim, the happy ending “dissipate[s] the fear of death” by affirming the possibility of never-ending love (11). In *Once Upon a Time*, Snow White and Prince
Charming have a mantra that they “always find each other”; when, in the first season finale, the curse is broken and they remember their love for one another, Snow White declares, “You found me!” (Horowitz, A Land 38:26). With the recurring motif of losing and then finding each other again, Snow and Charming exhibit the continuity promised by the happy ending. The attainment of true love implies the beginning of a relationship that will last indefinitely, ensuring contentment in the future if not a form of eternal life. As Bettelheim argues, the promise of everlasting adult love helps children to cope with mortality through the static perpetuity of the traditional happy ending. On the other hand, the postmodern fairy tale appeals to the contemporary audience by framing the happy ending as a cycle of life's conflicts and resolutions, made meaningful by “true love.”

The reinterpretation of classic fairytale characters reconfigures another aspect of the traditional fairytale ending: the realization of justice. In most traditional fairy tales, only the protagonists, the morally superior “good” characters, have the privilege of a happy ending; in fact, the generic ending “and they lived happily ever after” implies that “they” refers only to the heroes while the villains have been defeated once and for all, punished not necessarily by death, but by the denial of a happy ending. Once Upon a Time partially conforms to this convention, as conveyed by Mary Margaret’s conviction that “good will always win” over evil (Horowitz, Pilot 37:14). Nonetheless, the series qualifies this assertion by muddling the distinction between good and evil: so-called heroes sometimes make mistakes, commit murderous acts, or succumb to their human selfishness. Likewise, characters traditionally considered villains are given backstories which reveal that they were not always evildoers, merely characters with good intentions in unfortunate circumstances who gave in to human weakness for power or revenge. Regina, known as the Evil Queen, articulates the series’ portrayal of villains, claiming that “evil isn’t born, it’s made… and so is good” (Chambliss 34:02). The implication that “evil” characters, like heroes, have been shaped by their choices and circumstances suggests that their lost humanity can be regained. The characters of Rumpelstiltskin and Regina best illustrate this potential...
for change. In the third season of *Once Upon a Time*, Rumpelstiltskin expresses the conventional reasoning of the fairytale ending, lamenting, “… I’m a villain. And villains don’t get happy endings” (Horowitz, Going Home 27:52). However, in the act of sacrificing himself to save the town from a different villain, Rumpelstiltskin fulfills the role of the hero and earns a second chance at a happy ending, later manifested in a kind of rebirth.

Regina also demonstrates the moral ambiguity of characters in *Once Upon a Time*: toward the end of the series’ third season, Regina joins forces with Emma, Prince Charming, and Snow White, the series’ original protagonists, to defeat the Wicked Witch of the West, eliciting Henry’s assertion, “You’ve changed. You’re a hero now” (Chambliss 22:46). By complicating the fairy tale’s one-sided characterization of villains, *Once Upon a Time* reflects the multiplicity of the postmodern self. In its provocative argument that villains, too, can have happy endings, *Once Upon a Time* further complicates the traditional ending with the proposition that different characters can have nonconflicting happy endings in their own right. Moreover, the reframing of the “happy ending” as continuous rather than final assures the audience that transformation is ever possible. A happy ending in the postmodern fairy tale is thus reinterpreted as a second chance rather than a final judgment.

Through its nonlinear temporality and status as a metanarrative, *Once Upon a Time* modifies the traditional happy ending to suit the postmodern conception of the world, rendering it more meaningful for a twenty-first century audience. However, the series also chooses to accept some of the classic conventions of the happy ending, emphasizing the timelessness of the tradition. The traditional happy ending as a conclusive event leading to an unchanging state maintains its relevance today by validating the hope of positive outcomes in our own autobiographical narratives. There is a need “to have something to look forward to, to anticipate future outcomes based on past and present activity” (Dunnigan). Happy endings fulfill that need: the fairy tale provides a mode of anticipating future outcomes by evaluating human actions in a vastly altered context, the enchanted world
reflecting, as Tiffin states, “essential human experiences” (11). Tiffin also asserts that classic fairytale endings create closure through “an artificial oversimplification… rather different from the messy, ongoing matters of real life” (14).

On the other hand, the postmodern fairy tale of *Once Upon a Time* offers closure through its parallels with messy reality. Through its fragmented temporality and subsequent reframing of the happy ending, the series *Once Upon a Time* creates a sense that its story has no ending, only a continuity that mirrors the human experience. As in our own life narratives, every resolution in *Once Upon a Time*, through the passage of time itself, leads to a new complication. Nevertheless, the protagonists do not lose hope of regaining their happiness: Snow White and Prince Charming will find each other, Emma will reunite her family, good will overcome evil. With the continuity that may characterize the postmodern “happy ending” as a “happy new beginning” comes the hope that even those who have committed villainous acts can achieve self-redemption and earn the right to happiness. *Once Upon a Time* therefore perpetuates the optimistic worldview of the fairy tale, suggesting that righteous acts are ultimately rewarded and malicious actions are ultimately punished, while breaking down the categories of “good” and “evil” to suggest that everyone has the option to become a “hero” and therefore live a fulfilling life.

The characterization of happy ending in *Once Upon a Time* exposes the desire for stability and closure in an ever-changing, postmodern world. Through the continuity of the happy ending, the narrative assures the audience that while the stability of one happy ending may be lost, it can be regained through the next happy ending, or “happy new beginning.” As Mary Margaret confirms, “believing in even the possibility of a happy ending is a very powerful thing” (Horowitz, Pilot 29:37). The magic of the postmodern fairy tale, therefore, does not reside solely in fairy dust and curses, but in its power as a narrative to give meaning to the fragmented components of human life and to promise that, essentially, we will all live happily ever after.
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Hark, the herald angels sing! On Tuesday, millions of American families huddled around their T.V. sets to watch the world-famous Victoria Secret Angels walk the runway in the 20th annual Victoria Secret Fashion Show. This year’s show featured 15 Victoria’s Secret Angels, along with dozens of other models parading up and down the catwalk for an audience of 500 million people worldwide. We saw Lily Aldridge in a $2 million fantasy bra, 75 different runway looks, and no women of Asian descent among the 15 Angels—and maybe that’s a good thing.

There has been grumbling that the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show does not feature models that represent ethnic minorities. As one writer for VH1 complained, “Why isn’t anyone else pointing out that after over 15 years, there still aren’t more racially diverse ladies representing the brand?” (Ferber). Another writer recently stated that, in “the newest class” of Angels, “there are no Asian models on the list. And as an Asian-American woman, this was deeply disappointing” (Builder).

Victoria’s Secret has rarely featured any models of Asian descent, and there has never been a Victoria’s Secret model of “Angel Status” who identifies as Asian or Asian American. When Chinese model Liu Wen appeared in a Victoria Secret fashion show in 2009, she received considerable attention for being the first Asian model on the Victoria’s Secret runway—her appearance was hailed as ‘empowering’ for Asian women. But was it really?
While some viewers may find it disappointing that no Asian woman was selected to appear in this year’s show to project Victoria’s Secret image of the ideal woman, the absence of an Asian woman among the Victoria’s Secret Angels is a positive thing for Asian-American female empowerment. Strutting the catwalk in tight underwear, towering high-heels, and eight-foot plastic wings would be more crippling than empowering, because Asian women have been objectified and fetishized for centuries.

To understand this phenomenon, one does not have to look any further than the dramatic portrayals of Asian women in such popular works as *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* portrays a Japanese woman who nearly kills herself after marrying an unfaithful American naval officer. The musical *Miss Saigon* was also written by a white man, and updates the *Madame Butterfly* story to the Vietnam War in the 1970s, where a Vietnamese prostitute falls in love with a U.S. marine and kills herself when he rejects her.

These and other popular portrayals of Asian women as dragon ladies, “China dolls,” geishas, bar hostesses, and hula dancers promote the idea that Asian women are objects that exist only to submit to and please white men. Indeed, the pervasive and toxic stereotypes of Asian women in modern culture have a lot to do with a remarkable absence of Asian women in positions of power, and the equally rare sightings of positive portrayals of Asian women in mainstream media. There is only one Asian businesswoman on the Forbes list of “The World’s 100 Most Powerful Women,” Asian-American women fill only 0.2% of the CEO positions in the United States, and there has never been an Asian-American woman on the U.S. Supreme Court.

While it might be argued that an Asian model’s induction into the Victoria’s Secret pantheon of Angels would be a positive development because any mainstream popular exposure is better than none, this is not the case when these portrayals perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Even if the Angels in the Victoria’s Secret show represent the pinnacle of the international modeling profession, the chosen few do not represent power in any constructive, positively affirming sense of that
word. The Victoria’s Secret Angels are exhibited on stage for (predominately male) viewing pleasure. The Victoria’s Secret Angels cater to, and are objects of, the male fantasy, and the presence of an Asian model on the runway would only reinforce the harmful stereotypes that already surround popular perceptions of Asian women’s marginalized status, fetishization, and submissiveness. Let’s have the battle for the representation of Asian women in the boardrooms of powerful companies and other traditional corridors of power, not on the Victoria’s Secret runway.

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Bruce Springsteen, the iconic musician, singer, and songwriter known for his sweat-fueled, exhaustive, several-hour-long concerts, is now in his fifth decade of music making. Since his first album in 1973, Springsteen’s fan base has only grown. His legacy, the stories that his songs tell, and his presence on stage may have changed in style throughout the years, but they have not lost their genuine emotional intensity. His dedication to performing and writing about what many consider the “American story” in song has created a community of fans whose devotion rivals that of a religion. Can a case be made that Bruce Springsteen’s music, at its core, provides a religious experience for his fans?

In the documentary *Springsteen & I*, fans were asked what three words they think describe Bruce Springsteen. A great many of the words that fans offered have intensely religious connotations: joy, hope, loyal, power, belief, togetherness, redemption, and even supernatural and divine. One man even offered, “in him we trust,” a direct play on the inscription on U.S. currency, “in God we trust.”

Jonathan Gottschall points out that religion has been present in some form in every society that anthropologists have ever studied. A religious text, like any powerful story, “binds a community together” (Gottschall 124). Gottschall defines religious texts as “intense narratives about the biggest stuff in human life” (117) and uses the phrase “sacred fiction” (119) as an umbrella title for all religions and the stories they tell.

If people are using words typically heard in religious contexts to describe Springsteen, could that support the claim that Springsteen and
his music offer fans a religious experience of sorts? Yes and no.

The above ascriptions give credence to the claim that Springsteen does in fact provide a religious experience for his followers. Moreover, Daniel Cavicchi mentions more than once in his book *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* that Springsteen often takes on the role of an “evangelical preacher” while performing, a preacher who shouts things to the audience such as: “‘Does anybody have any faith out there tonight?’ (‘Yeah!’) “Does anybody have any hope out here tonight?’” (‘Yeah!’)” (30). Patricia Smith calls Springsteen “a preacher with a subtle approach” (67). Springsteen himself has said “some people pray, some people play music” (Marsh 16), which seems to imply that both are ways by which people can identify what is most precious and most needed in their lives. Mike Appel, known for his involvement in Springsteen’s early career and
for getting Bruce an audition with John Hammond at CBS, said, “Bruce isn’t a rock act. He’s a religion” (Marsh 16). In his book *Born in the U.S.A.* Jim Cullen draws particular attention to Bruce’s Catholic upbringing, arguing that Bruce sees the world in a distinctively Catholic way that is “communal, emphasizing God’s presence in the world” (168) and calling Bruce a “missionary” (172). Christopher Sandford even called “Born to Run” a “teen-angst hymn” (82). And like all great hymns, it has a way of staying in your head for days after the worship event is over.

Let’s examine “Born to Run,” the title track of Springsteen’s third album, one of a handful of albums that arguably changed popular music in the U.S. forever (C. Smith 114–116). *Born to Run* catapulted him to major mainstream success. Springsteen said that it was “the album where I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom” (Springsteen 47). The *Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology* depicts Springsteen’s performance of “Born to Run” as a sweat-fueled, blue-jean anthem that chronicles the story of an unnamed boy and a girl, Wendy, who are trying to escape the “death trap” they’re stuck in. The boy tells Wendy that “we were born to run” and that “someday… we’re gonna get to that place / where we really want to go / and we’ll walk in the sun” (Springsteen 54).

These penultimate lines tell us that at its core, “Born to Run” is an “American love song” (Cullen 38) about salvation. The narrator hopes to someday “walk in the sun,” which can loosely be compared to the religious idea of heaven or some sort of enlightenment: he aspires to a better life, to move from darkness to light and from despair to contentment. But the boy in “Born to Run” seeks this deliverance by way of things conventional religion might call worldly (cars, Wendy, the promise of the highway). But if there is anything to Paul Tillich’s claim that “the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of ultimate concern,” Springsteen is directing adolescent male faith straight toward the things that ultimately concern most adolescent males.

It certainly seems as though Springsteen fans have a religious relationship with Springsteen’s music. But personal anecdotes and mere ob-
servances are not sufficient to establish a firm answer to the question posed earlier: is Springsteen’s music religious at its core?

Perhaps a more relevant question to tackle first is: what is the purpose of religion? If we can broadly define the purpose and effects of religion, we can compare it to the purpose and effects of Springsteen’s music and fan-following.

Gottschall discusses David Sloan Wilson’s descriptions of religion, boiling down Wilson’s position to there being three main benefits of religion for societies: it creates community, coordinates behavior within a group (providing rewards and punishments) and creates a powerful incentive system that promotes group cooperation and suppresses selfishness (Gottschall 127). By this approach, a religion’s worth isn’t measured by how factually accurate its principles are. Instead, a religion is valued by its effect on the community that follows it. Gottschall draws a parallel between religious community binding and what a movie at the cinema does to its viewers: the movie takes “a motley association of strangers and syncs them up” (136). Therefore we see that this syncing or binding response that occurs in the presence of a talented storyteller is not restricted to religious experiences only. Stories told in church and at the movies bind people together, and so do stories told onstage by one of the greatest music icons of the twentieth century: Bruce Springsteen.

Do the effects of Springsteen’s music on his fans fit Gottschall’s outline of a religion’s effects on community? Let us consider Gottschall’s first criterion: the creation of a community. There certainly seems to be solidarity among Springsteen fans, but they aren’t centered in any one geographic location: Springsteen has fans worldwide. Is it possible for people to have community when they don’t live close to each other? According to Yuval Harari, it is.

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution, fiction has allowed humans to communicate outside of their intimate social groups (Harari). The Cognitive Revolution, Harari says, allows us to “cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers” (25) because it
enables us to believe in “common myths” (27). This has huge implications for human life: we form communities as we can believe in, ponder, and share with others about things that may not be factual or historical, but are nonetheless real. By this line of thinking, Springsteen fans constitute a community, or a “large-scale human cooperation” (27) as Harari calls it, because all Springsteen fans believe in the wonderful, powerful experience of Springsteen’s music. Consider Cavicchi’s description from *Tramps Like Us* of what it means to be a Springsteen fan:

Springsteen fans, while obviously not claiming to experience a revelation from God, are nevertheless claiming to experience a new and special relationship to another with whom they have not had any conventional contact or interaction. Most fans have not physically met Bruce Springsteen...Yet, despite that distance, they report feeling an odd closeness to him, referring to him by the familiar ‘Bruce,’ as if he were some sort of close friend whom they have known for many years (52).

Cavicchi’s book continuously highlights the intensely personal nature of many fans’ feelings for Springsteen and his music, which, as he points out, is rather remarkable considering most fans haven’t had any one-on-one contact with Springsteen. But because of the Cognitive Revolution and the human ability to believe in the power of stories, knowing Springsteen personally hardly matters at all. Cavicchi even says that most fans aren’t “so much touched by Springsteen himself as by his performance” (55), which enables them to feel a sort of “invisible magnet” (158) pull towards other fans, who by all other accounts would be considered strangers. The human ability to believe in and share with others the power of a Springsteen concert is what makes communities like Springsteen fans possible. Springsteen said himself in the documentary *Glory Days* that “isolation to me feels like about the most dangerous thing on earth.” Before an acoustic rendition of “Born to Run,” Springsteen said that community was at the heart of his work:

I realized that in the end, individual freedom, when it’s not connected
to some sort of community...ends up feelings pretty meaningless. So I guess that guy and that girl, they were out there looking for connection. And that’s what I’m doing here tonight. (Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology)

Let’s move to the second element of Gottschall’s three-pronged description of a religion’s purpose in society: coordinating group behavior, which involves setting rules, norms, rewards, and punishments. Here we seem to run into a problem. Being a Springsteen fan doesn’t involve applying yourself to a system of rewards and punishments. But it is plausible to scrape together the argument that Springsteen’s music trades ideas of traditional religious paths to enlightenment/heaven, such as prayer or meditation, for more worldly means, namely women, cars, and music (“Blessing or curse?”). In this sense, Gottschall’s second contention holds true as it pertains to Springsteen’s music. Instead of praying, the characters in Springsteen songs such as “Thunder Road” take to the road, often with a girl, in search of their own kind of salvation.

Springsteen doesn’t stand on stage and explicitly tell the audience what they should or should not do. Rather, the stories in his music implicitly provide people with examples of how one might cope with a problem. Consider “Thunder Road.” The narrator tells Mary, the girl in the song, that she can hide, waiting “for a savior to rise from these streets,” or that she can climb in his car because “the night’s bustling open” and “these two lanes will take us anywhere” (Springsteen 49). The boy in the song tells Mary that “heaven’s waiting on down the tracks... we’re riding out tonight to case the promised land.” Instead of praying or reading scripture, for example, the boy in “Thunder Road” hits the road with a girl in search of his own version of salvation. In this respect, Springsteen’s music fulfills the requirements of Gottschall’s second element of a religion’s purpose in society.

The third contention in Gottschall’s description is that religion creates an incentive system that promotes group cooperation. One need not look farther than a Springsteen concert to find evidence of how his
music and performances are able to sync up an audience and make thousands of people cooperate.

In one of Cavicchi’s descriptions of a Springsteen concert, he writes, “people were smiling, wiping the sweat from their foreheads… Whereas most rock concerts last two hours at the most, this one lasted four” (35). Why would thousands of people actively choose to pay for the chance to stand up for four hours, jammed together like sardines? Because they are Springsteen fans. In this sense, Springsteen’s performances and music have an incredible power over people’s behavior (Fig. 2).

An enormous amount of cooperation is needed to create a concert atmosphere of thousands of fans. If we remember Gottschall’s first contention as it relates to Harari’s argument, these are fans who feel
connected to Springsteen even though most have never met him: “like most fans to whom he has spoken in his music, I have never met Bruce Springsteen. But like most, I feel as if I know him” (Cullen xiv).

In a way, it’s surprising that Springsteen has any fans at all, because he’s not a “good” singer by most musical standards. Patricia Smith even described his voice as “a gravelly growl.” And Springsteen isn’t the classiest dresser either. As Ann Powers explained, her first impression of Springsteen’s physical appearance was less than wonderful: “here was a bony dude with the worst haircut ever, who wore T-shirts covered in holes…he looked like the fry cook at the amusement park where I worked as a counter girl in the summer.”

If his appearance and technical vocal abilities aren’t attracting fans, what is? It’s the way he tells stories.

Springsteen is a fantastic storyteller, and according to Gottschall, humans love storytellers: our minds “yield helplessly to the suction of story” (3). Just like the !Kung San storyteller (Gottschall 19) Springsteen’s music works as a “social glue” of sorts that brings “people together, skin against skin, mind against mind” (28).

What’s truly fascinating about our desire for story is that we don’t tire from hearing the same story again and again, Gottschall tells us. As Marcus Greil said in a review of Born to Run for Rolling Stone, “the stories Springsteen is telling are nothing new, though no one has ever told them better or made them matter more.” Springsteen isn’t dazzling his fans with completely original tales: he’s doing quite the opposite. His stories aren’t amazing, but his ability to tell them is. As President Barack Obama said, there are only “a handful of people who enter your lives through their music and tell the American people’s story. Bruce Springsteen is one of those people” (“Bruce Springsteen Rocks”).

What is so amazing about the way Springsteen tells stories? In Springsteen & I, director Baillie Walsh asked Springsteen fans to send in answers to this question. One fan said that Springsteen’s “storytelling
is perfect.” Another fan said, “Bruce’s lyrics always made me feel like I was going through someone’s family photo album and looking at their life.” This fan, who’d taped his submission for the documentary in his car, proceeded to cry for a full 32 seconds, showing the viewer the stunning power that Springsteen’s storytelling has over his fans. Another fan, describing the passion and intensity with which Springsteen performs, said “you can just see his veins popping out because he’s working so hard” (fig. 1).

These same veins have been popping out for over 40 years now, and it doesn’t look as though Springsteen intends to quit anytime soon: in 2016, he embarked on an 89-concert “The River” tour. We can’t say definitively whether Springsteen’s music is identical to a religious experience, but perhaps a firm answer to this question is irrelevant. Even if the comparison between Springsteen’s music/fans and religion does break down, it remains true that both religion and Springsteen’s music touch the same need for community in people. They accomplish the same goal: creating meaning where there essentially is none. Maybe it isn’t so much that Springsteen’s music is a religion as it is that his music gives us another vehicle through which we can feel many of the same emotions a religion lets us feel. As Springsteen sings in his song “Badlands,” “I believe in the love that you gave me / I believe in the faith that could save me” (Springsteen 71). Springsteen certainly is a master storyteller, and people look for phenomenal storytellers in all facets of life. Some go to church, some to the movies, and some to Springsteen concerts.
Works Cited.


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