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Abstract

This research is an exploration of my evolving relationship with popular culture: as an activist, an educator, and a self-described pop-culture geek. As a biracial and queer woman working in the field of education, I am motivated to examine my own experiences with formal and informal methods of learning, addressing the social and political gaps in each. In exploring my own experiences growing up racialized, queer, and lower-class, I am making a clear case for the value of popular culture as a site of learning about aspects of identity that were often not discussed or were ignored entirely in the classroom settings to which I was exposed. Combining aspects of critical analytic autoethnography (Taber, 2012) with feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007), I examine three key films: Scream *(Craven, 1996),* Practical Magic *(Dunne, 1998), and* Disturbing Behavior *(Nutter, 1998), as well as three characters in these films whom I identify as having had a large influence on me as a teenager, particularly in fostering my ongoing (un)learning surrounding the willful subject (Ahmed, 2014). These three characters are Sidney Prescott from* Scream, *Sally Owens from* Practical Magic, *and Rachel Wagner from* Disturbing Behavior.

Résumé

Cette recherche est une exploration de ma relation avec la culture populaire en constante évolution à titre d'activiste, d'éducatrice et de personne qui se décrit comme geek de la culture pop. En combinant des éléments de l'auto-ethnographie analytique critique (Taber, 2012) et de l'analyse du discours féministe (Lazar, 2007), j'examine trois films clés : Scream *(Craven, 1996),* Practical Magic *(Dunne, 1998) et* Disturbing Behaviour *(Nutter, 1998), ainsi que trois personnages dans ces films que j'identifie comme ayant eu une grande influence sur moi à l'adolescence, surtout en ce qui concerne la facilitation de mon (dés)apprentissage du sujet volontaire (Ahmed, 2014). Ces trois personnages sont Sidney Prescott de* Scream, *Sally Owens de* Practical Magic *et Rachel Wagner de* Disturbing Behavior.

This research is an exploration of my evolving relationship with popular culture: as an activist, an educator, and a self-described pop-culture geek. As a biracial and queer woman working in the field of education, I am motivated to examine my own experiences with formal and informal methods of learning, addressing the social and political gaps in each. In exploring my own experiences growing up racialized, queer, and lower class, I am making a clear case for the value of popular culture as a site of learning about aspects of identity that were often not discussed or were ignored entirely in the classroom settings to which I was exposed. Combining aspects of critical analytic autoethnography (Taber, 2012) with feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007), I examine three key films: *Scream* (Craven, 1996), *Practical Magic* (Dunne, 1998), and Disturbing Behavior (Nutter, 1998), as well as three characters in these films whom I identify as having had a large influence on me as a teenager, particularly in fostering my ongoing (un)learning surrounding the *willful subject* (Ahmed, 2014). These three characters are Sidney Prescott from *Scream*, Sally Owens from *Practical Magic*, and Rachel Wagner from *Disturbing Behavior*.

Through an autoethnographic discourse analysis, I explore the pedagogical influence that the plot and main characters from these films have had on my evolving worldview as an intersectional feminist, investigating their characteristics and moral underpinnings in relation to an education in social justice issues. I reflect on my past and present personal experiences viewing and learning from these three films, their main themes, and the prominent female characters, while connecting those experiences back to literatures in feminist discourse analysis, public pedagogy, and willful subjects. My research question was as follows: How have the three film characters of Sidney from *Scream*, Sally from *Practical Magic*, and Rachel from *Disturbing Behavior* shaped my learning in regard to discourses of femininity, agency, and power? Ultimately it is my goal to use my personal experiences with the popular culture themes and characters mentioned above to highlight the power that such characters and storylines hold in the educational processes in relation to categories such as class, sex, and race. Furthermore, I elucidate the failings of these films and their problematic depictions of femininity in facilitating a nuanced and informed understanding of the role of intersecting power and privilege in regard to feminist texts.

In rewatching and analyzing the discourses present in these films, I found that they had represented an escape for me, as a child living in an often dysfunctional and chaotic home. These films, and in particular the three characters to which I was most drawn, began to symbolize the image of the willful subject in my mind. Throughout this research I have noted that I saw pieces of myself and my older sister, both cast as willful subjects by those around us, in the characters on-screen. These images of women who were extremely capable, strong, and willful provided me with an alternative to the story I had seen play out with my sister—where her willfulness was often punished and she suffered greatly at the hands of a social system that did not protect her. Through these films, I was afforded a new range of possibilities for what my future could look like, without having to shrink myself and submit to societal pressures to diminish my willfulness. Now, as a feminist researcher in the field of social justice education, I analyze my experiences growing up and becoming feminist, as well as the pedagogical implications of popular culture. In this article, I explore my own story with respect to willfulness, race, class, and gender. I detail my theoretical framework of the willful subject, intersectional feminism, and public pedagogies. I then explain my methodological use of autoethnography and feminist critical discourse analysis.

Finally, I present my findings, where I revisit and ultimately problematize my feminist icons. I conclude with an explanation of the social and pedagogical implications of my research.

Observing Willfulness: My Story

As a child, I admired my older sister deeply. Everywhere she went, she drew attention and would never withdraw from it; she lived loudly and confidently. I realize now that my sister represented the figure of a willful subject (Ahmed, 2014) in my life, one who was independent, confident, and capable, without seeking validation from others. Sara Ahmed's (2014) conceptualization of the willful subject is one that has taken many forms throughout history, as she described individuals who refuse to bend to a "general will" or social consciousness as subsequently being labelled by society as willful. According to Ahmed, those who become such containers of willfulness are often, but not always, young girls. I watched my sister's willfulness become a poison that turned her life down a path of self-destruction. As an adult who has studied feminist theory, I can see now that it was not my sister's refusal to bend to social reasoning that led to this self-destruction; it was the consequence of her refusal, as society punishes willful subjects in varying ways. However, as a child I did not see this, and so I sought new images of resistance to power that were distinct in their approach, and I found them in film characters such as Sally Owens from *Practical Magic* (Dunne, 1998), who ultimately overcomes self-destructive tendencies that are portrayed as symptomatic of willful women in traditional patriarchal discourse.

Growing up, I often felt a dissonance between people's perception of me and who I knew myself to be, and in this same way I began on my path toward finding willfulness. When the teachers at my school looked at me like I deserved their pity, or when my mother lashed out at me for not doing a good enough job at maintaining our home, I couldn't understand why. I didn't understand why people yelled racial slurs at me and made fun of my skin or my body hair, and I couldn't tell anyone because I was deeply ashamed. As I grew older, I began to see similar experiences in the films and television I watched, and I learned words to describe what was happening to me. I realized that my teachers pitied me because I was poor and from a "broken" home. The teachers, and some of my peers, knew my sister was an addict who had lost custody of her daughter. Furthermore, some of these people believed that I was somehow less than them because I was racialized. My mother yelled because she expected too much from me, she wanted me to be something that I wasn't (a support system), and she needed help that she couldn't afford. I didn't understand that I was feeling culturally and historically displaced from losing my family relationships and abandoning my childhood. I was left riddled with anxiety and depression, which I could only name as anger. It took me years to understand that this anxiety was a consequence of losing my relationship with my sister, in addition to that piece of one's childhood that shelters you from the world outside, but to a much larger extent it was due to my own social positioning (being named by society) as a willful subject. Through engaging with various films, I began to see similar experiences to my own reflected back at me. For example, when I encountered Rachel's character in *Disturbing Behavior* (Nutter, 1998), I can recall the sense of recognition I felt upon realizing that she was struggling to assert herself at school, not only because she was *not* male, but also because she was *not* wealthy and was *without* support from a parent or guardian. I began to piece together the social reality I was living in.

An experience that has stuck with me over the years took place when I was in Grade 4, around 9 years old. Apparently frustrated with the way I chose to wear my hair at the time, as I had long bangs that often hung down in front of my face, my teacher joked in front of my peers that "eventually when I ended up in prison I would at least be accustomed to looking through bars." At 9 years old I was identified as being a future convict. I wonder now if she had known somehow that my own sister would eventually spend lengths of time behind bars and that this statement would forever linger in my mind, marking me with the potential to follow in my sister's footsteps. Of course, at the time I could feel only the similar confusion and sickness in my stomach that had become a physical reaction to moments when people's perception of me did not match my self-identity. In these moments, I would seek comfort in images of the willful subject: renting *Scream* (Craven, 1996), *Practical Magic* (Dunne, 1998), and *Disturbing Behavior* (Nutter, 1998) again and again, turning over every detail and memorizing the language of the willful women on-screen. It was as if the films helped me to make sense of the real-life experiences I was having, and gave me a language to explain why people treated me as they did. But most importantly, these three films allowed me to create new visions for my future, where I was cut off from feelings of community and love, where I could feel powerful, capable, and worthwhile, without changing who I was. When I began to reflect on my feminist learning and my personal connection to film as a site of learning, I decided to engage in autoethnographic research exploring these films, and my learning from them, to better understand the connection between feminist scholarship and public pedagogies of popular culture. It was not until I reflected on my learning from such films that I began to see the complexity of what they taught me with respect to race, class, and gender, and I began to problematize the pedagogical quality of narratives of willfulness that continue to centre Whiteness and universalize the experiences of women.

Theoretical Framing: The Willful Subject, Intersectional Feminism, and Public Pedagogies

This research combines elements of both feminist theory (Ahmed, 2014, 2017; hooks, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Mohanty, 2003) and public pedagogies of popular culture (Burr & Jarvis, 2007; Jarvis, 2016; Jubas et al., 2015; Tisdell, 2007, 2008; Wright, 2009) in an attempt to highlight the role that film can play in challenging hegemonic discourses surrounding the subjectivity of individuals. I argue that engagement with subversive texts can provide opportunities for individuals to learn about both themselves and others in a manner that highlights intersecting social dynamics. It can be difficult to fully comprehend how individual differences create diverse challenges for those most affected by the layering of systems of power, and when we are granted insight into the day-to-day life or innermost thoughts of another individual, this understanding becomes more possible. Collins and Bilge (2016) defined intersectionality as a framework built on the presupposition that power relations are intricately interwoven and mutually constructive. Rather than examining modes of oppression on a single axis of social division, intersectionality sheds lights on the multiplicity of different axes of oppression that influence one another. According to Collins and Bilge, "Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (p. 2). Importantly, Cho et al. (2013) emphasized a framework that does not focus on categories, identities, or subjectivities; instead, their conception of intersectionality centred on the analysis and disruption of structural inequalities. Rather

than working to further segregate and categorize the individual, intersectionality can be used to reveal the ways power operates "in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 797). In this way, Cho et al. made a strong case for theory in which an individual's identity is the result of the dynamic intersections of power relations within societal structures, and not a direct result of the power relations themselves.

Ahmed (2017) described the phenomenon of becoming feminist as a way of reframing or redescribing one's surroundings, and she elucidated how feminism challenges what we have perceived to be universal. She propelled this argument by discussing the uneasy, wrong-seeming moments in which many women find themselves, unaware or unwilling to face at the time that they are coming up against injustice. Ahmed (2017) explained that once she found feminism, she experienced something like a series of clicks wherein several of these moments from her past suddenly came into focus and she found herself less isolated by this feeling. She described finding feminist writing as "finding out about the many ways that feminists have tried to make sense, already, of the experiences you had, before you had them" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 31), highlighting how these experiences that have left you feeling isolated can in fact be where you find a community of women who have similarly faced and tried to name such moments. In moments of dissonance from my childhood (and beyond), such as when my teacher told me I'd someday be looking through bars, I was being positioned as the *other*. I stood out as unusual, as *not normal*, due to my brown skin, my hairstyle, my secondhand clothing, and my family history. It took decades of learning for me to finally understand what was happening in these moments, and much of this learning was through being exposed to visual narratives that emphasized similar social issues to those I grew up experiencing firsthand (i.e., racism, classism, sexism). In rewatching and continuously learning from these films, which often represented intersecting power dynamics and their impact on the lives of willful women, I was becoming feminist.

In her conception of the willful subject, Ahmed (2014) described how being made unhappy by a situation, or causing a discomfort, is to will in the wrong way; she stated that "willfulness as a judgement tends to fall on those who are *not* compelled by the reasoning of others" (p. 15), and thus, it is a kind of willing that wills against a general or more dominant will. This willing, Ahmed (2014) argued, concedes in not meeting the criteria of "human" that is prescribed by modern discourse: White, male, straight, able-bodied. She traced the willful subject throughout history, beginning with the Grimm tale of the willful child who is so disobedient she meets her untimely death, and upon being buried, her arm embodies her willfulness in its refusal to rest below ground. Ahmed (2017) illuminated how the figure of the willful child mirrors the figure of the subaltern, as she is "addressed as a member of the subordinate class" and the demand of the general will is aligned here with the colonialist interest (p. 80). This willfulness in regard to colonial discourses is a call to recognize the distinctive forms of will; namely, that when it is a will attached to racialized forms of feminism, it is no longer only gender-based violence but "violence of enslavement, of colonization, of empire" where the requirement of happiness is to sacrifice one's cultural memory, historical significance, and language (Ahmed, 2017, p. 80). Similar arguments can be made for a willfulness marked by differing sexuality, gender identity, ability, and so on. As Ahmed (2017) described it, "Some have to become willful to survive a history" (p. 81). When I began to reflect on my experiences growing up, and the role that certain films and their willful women characters played in my emotional landscape, I realized that I felt a

connection to them, and I was slowly learning to take up the charge of willfulness in order to survive my own history, in a way that felt safe for me.

Critical to my exploration of film as a pedagogical device is Luke's (1996) assertion that learning takes place through the intersubjective encounters of one's everyday life, and that both learning and teaching "are always gendered and intercultural" (p. 7). It was Luke's work that informed the development of research into public pedagogies, defined as the

> various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning that occur beyond the realm of formal education institutions—including popular culture (i.e., movies, television, the Internet, magazines, shopping malls), informal educational institutions and public spaces (i.e., museums, zoos, monuments), dominant discourses (i.e., public policy, neoliberalism, global capitalism), and public intellectualism and social activism (i.e., academics who engage with the public outside of the academy, grassroots organizations, and social movements). (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 4)

The importance of public pedagogies rests in the undeniable truth that individuals learn through constant interaction with their everyday lives. As Sandlin et al. (2011) noted, "An emerging number of adult educators believe it is important to focus on public pedagogies because it is at least partially in and through these spaces of learning that our identities are formed" (p. 5). In this article, my focus is on public pedagogies of popular culture, which are influential and powerful *because* they are popular and can often be manipulated to serve a purpose by the socially dominant communities who are producing, writing, directing, and performing/creating. However, as a site of such widely accepted contestation, it is no surprise that there would be ample opportunities within popular culture for the disruption of dominant ideologies or messages—and as a direct consequence of such engagement, learning (Johnson, 2017; Jubas et al., 2015; Morell, 2002). Particularly in film and television, there is a growing field of literature that highlights the role of visual narratives in expanding the viewer's thinking in regard to many social categories, such as race, class, sexuality, and gender (Brooks, 2015; Burr & Jarvis, 2007; hooks, 1994b, 1996; Jarvis, 2016; Tisdell, 2007; Wright, 2009).

Wright (2009) noted, "The public pedagogy of popular culture is pervasive and powerful. To ignore it is to miss the educational moments when we might use the undeniable pleasure of popular culture to purpose disruptive alternatives and promote liberatory learning" (p. 149). When educators are aware of the pedagogical impact of popular culture and bring cultural texts into their classrooms, they are creating a more relevant and equitable approach to pedagogy where marginalized students are given opportunities of success and empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As Tisdell (2007) has theorized, popular culture often creates opportunities for viewer comprehension through connections between cultural depictions and personal experience. Growing up in a single-mother household, I was often left to my own devices while my mother and brother were at work, and even as I grew older and was often responsible for my young niece, we were almost always left to entertain ourselves, and so we did: by watching movies. Again and again, I would rent my favourite selection of VHS tapes from the local video store, until I was lucky enough to buy them and take them home when VHS became obsolete. Among the array of '90s films I grew up watching were the three I chose to analyze here: *Scream* (1996), *Practical Magic* (1998), and *Disturbing Behavior* (1998), which I determined as significantly shaping my identity.

In watching these women on-screen and witnessing the ways that social hierarchies played out in their lives and affected their self-image, I began to see that similar processes were (or were not) taking place in my own life and the lives of those around me. My rewatching of these films led to me forming "alternative narratives" (Tisdell, 2007) for myself, as well as enhancing my ability to analyze the larger social structures at work behind the scenes in my family's struggles with poverty, addiction, and abuse.

Methodology: Combining Autoethnography and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Looking through a lens that acknowledges the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of such structures as racism, classism, and sexism, I have chosen to use feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the method of examining my complicated relationship with the films in question. Feminist CDA aims to explore how "gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged" (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). Lazar (2007) described feminist CDA as aiming to demystify the relationship between discourses of power, gender, and ideology, ultimately seeking to affect social transformation. Likewise, this research is concerned with the ways in which sexism, and other forms of social subjugation, are discursively produced and/or challenged in visual narratives that centre the experiences of the willful subject. Thus, I use methods of feminist CDA in my analysis of both the plot and character development of *Scream*, *Practical Magic*, and *Disturbing Behavior*, illuminating moments when the narrative and depictions of sex, race, and class perpetuate or challenge certain discourses. As mentioned above, I reflect on my past and present personal experiences viewing and learning from these films, their main themes, and the prominent women characters, while connecting those experiences back to social and theoretical discourses in feminist media scholarship and public pedagogy. Lazar (2007) wrote, "The task then of feminist CDA is to examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-)resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk" (p. 149).

Thus, I have chosen to use feminist discourse analysis within my autoethnographic research because, by its very definition, feminist CDA encompasses intersectionality in its methods of examining power comparatively rather than universally, emphasizing the diffuse and overlapping social structures of dominance (Lazar, 2007). Furthermore, this method is aimed at highlighting the role of discursively produced systems of power in order to create lasting social change, which as Lazar (2007) noted, falls under the category of "praxis-oriented research" (p. 145). Praxis is critical in any research with social justice aims, as it involves an awareness and mobilization of the relationship between theory and practice. To put it plainly: I want this research to inform future artistic practices and discussions regarding representation in mainstream film.

My personal experiences suggest that popular culture, and specifically its contextual use in adult education, provides space for shifting epistemologies and increased emphasis on personal narrative and thus facilitating (un)learning on part of the viewer. The deep connection to my own experiences learning from certain popular culture texts is what ultimately led to my using autoethnography as a method. In her writing on autoethnography, Reed-Danahay (1997) emphasized a post-modernist identity as one of "cultural displacement, and of shifting axes of power" where such axes are necessarily examined and reflected in

modern theory surrounding the self and society (p. 2). This conception of self-identity, as it relates to research methods and epistemological processes, is an ideal counterpart to an intersectional approach to analyzing the social structure in which the researcher is intertwined. Taber (2012) adapted the work of authors such as Reed-Danahay (1997) and hooks (1994a) in acknowledging that she is deeply connected to both her research and teaching, as she argued that it is through recognizing this connection that researchers might better position themselves as a "whole being," where the varying facets of their life are interconnected (p. 75). According to Taber (2012), a researcher's use of autoethnography acts as an entrance point into an analysis of the larger social structures that take effect in the everyday life of the individual. Ultimately, Taber argued that autoethnographic research must include empirical analysis and work toward a socially relevant viewpoint, which connects to Lazar's (2007) point about praxis noted above. I therefore draw on my personal experiences, while emphasizing the role of institutional power in perpetuating discourses of the willful subject in mainstream media. Through researching my own relationship with certain themes present in popular culture texts I grew up watching, I draw deeply significant connections between my own learning and wider social structures that were both influencing and influenced by such texts.

I began my research project by examining the three films and characters who have had a major influence on my personal development, as even to this day I find myself striving to embody different aspects of each of their personalities. I reflected on my initial experiences watching the films, and the familial and home environment I was living in at the time of exposure, and I wrote down anything I could remember about how I felt watching the movies and engaging with the characters. After this, I developed a series of questions regarding my learning of discourses of femininity from these three films and the implications for adult education practices. As I rewatched the films, I took detailed notes, annotating different moments in each where I could clearly see how I had been influenced by a character or plot point and where my thinking had subsequently shifted. After rewatching all three films, I reread each set of notes and cumulatively reflected on the discourses I had identified and the key moments of learning that took place both in the past and presently. This was when I found significant gesturing toward concepts of willfulness and femininity, and social ostracization and trauma, in line with Ahmed's (2014) theory surrounding the willful subject. I chose to organize my analysis around the willful subject in an effort to focus on my personal memories and present engagement of each film, invoking a conversation between my past and present selves. I needed to reflect on the learning that had taken place from these films before I watched them for the first time as a researcher, with an explicit purpose, as this was how I had viewed them initially. Viewing a film for entertainment purposes yields different results from engaging with such a film for research, and the pedagogical implications of each process is different. However, through placing my past and present self in conversation surrounding the discourse of willful subjects in the films, I hope to illuminate the (un)learning that can take place when cultural criticism is recognized as a crucial component of public pedagogy and adult education. I've framed my analysis through this lens of past and present meaning making in an attempt to highlight the shaping of my feminist identity while remaining critical of the reproduction of harmful discourses present in each film.

(Un)Learning Willfulness

In Wes Craven's iconic film *Scream* (1996), the audience is brought into the life of the sardonic Sidney, whose mother is thought to have been brutally raped and murdered almost a year prior to the film's opening, and who is now the object of a serial slasher's murderous eye. Having lived through her own real-life horror, Sidney is not a fan of the genre and consistently displays a lack of interest in being your run-of-the-mill slasher victim, mocking the killer's repugnant phone calls and outsmarting him on a number of occasions. Unfortunately, her friends do not share in this apparent conviction, or they are just less resourceful; either way, most of them die throughout the course of the film as the murderer clearly attempts to isolate Sidney from her community. In stark contrast, *Practical Magic* (Dunne, 1998) is centred on the lives of a matriarchal family of witches who suffer from an intergenerational curse passed down by an ancestor whose love abandoned her during the Salem witch trials. Sally and Gillian, two sisters whose mother has recently taken her life after losing her husband to the curse, are seen moving in with their aunts at a young age. Importantly, this is the only popular culture text I analyze here that was written by women (original source and screenplay), and the women in the film are actually central to the entire plot. Watching this film as a child, I could see that young Sally is critical in maintaining the family structure and simultaneously carries a deep shame regarding her magical gifts: being the voice of reason in the aunts' home and for her sister, while longing for a simple, normal life in which she is accepted socially and able to start a family that is also accepted. Lastly, I analyze discourses and characters from the teenage thriller *Disturbing Behavior* (Nutter, 1998). This film follows the life of Steven, whose brother has recently committed suicide and whose parents subsequently decide to move their remaining son and daughter to the fictional town of Cradle Bay. This town has a dark secret, though it is not a secret to the local police sheriff, whom we witness covering up the violent murder of a teenage girl by the local high school quarterback, who is also a member of the extracurricular group the Blue Ribbons. Witness to this cover-up is Gavin, a highly intellectual burnout who has been paranoid about the nature of the Blue Ribbons for a while now. Gavin takes Steven under his wing, showing him the ropes at Cradle Bay High, warning him to steer clear of the Blue Ribbons, and introducing him to his good friend, and my teenage feminist icon, Rachel.

Analysis: Revisiting My Feminist Icons

A commonality that struck me between the characters in all three films is their being marked as *different*: they are positioned as social outcasts due to their being unconventional in one way or another. Although the films do (realistically) suggest that these differences have led to the characters not fitting in, the writing also focuses on the subjectivity of those who are socially subjugated, and importantly the films highlight such subjectivities as having a more critical consciousness than most. This resonates a basic and foundational truth that many individuals need reminding of from time to time: that to be different is not to be without subjectivity (Mohanty, 2003), and that the experience of being different lends itself to a more socially aware and critical subject. As Lazar (2007) noted, feminist discourse analysis is occupied "with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order" wherein men are privileged and women are disadvantaged and disempowered (p. 145). She stated that "a feminist perspective reminds us that many social practices, far from being neutral, are in fact gendered in this way" (p. 145). In addressing my research question, it seems

as though the lasting impression of these films in regard to society is their reframing of young women as willful subjects: heroines who live in a manner that disrupts patriarchal notions that men are more intellectual, stronger, and more emotionally sophisticated than women. I believe these characters have significantly influenced my feminist becoming (Ahmed, 2017) in their positioning as *not* being conventional: *not* wealthy, *not* socially accepted, not dependent on others, in addition to their subsequent critical consciousness, which is framed as a direct consequence of this willfulness.

Interestingly, the beginning of each film seems to set the tone in regard to the theme of willful subjects (Ahmed, 2014), as in each film we open on a scene that involves the murder and symbolic silencing of a woman. In *Practical Magic*, an accused witch is being hanged by a group of lovesick men and revenge-filled women, with a voice-over of one of the present-day characters saying, "We Owens women have always caused a stir" (Dunne, 1998). Similarly, *Disturbing Behavior* begins with the power dynamic of a sexually liberated young woman (girl) being silenced (literally) by discourses of modesty and misogyny, embodied by the stereotypical jock turned brainwashed murderer (Nutter, 1998). Lastly, and perhaps most iconic, in the opening scene of *Scream*, the viewer witnesses the murder of a teenage girl who has seemingly done nothing to irk her killer other than to exist and answer the phone (Craven, 1996). The motivation for this murder is later revealed as being romantically vengeful and again in response to her willfulness. Therefore, we can see how the concept of willfulness, which is independent and often contrary to the general or traditional will as discussed by Ahmed (2014), is something that is brought into focus almost immediately in these films.

As a side effect of my intense identification with these characters, and the larger social phenomena of the role of media discourse in shaping subjectivity, the representations of femininity and willfulness in these films encouraged me to simultaneously embrace my social positioning as well as my "darker features," while longing for a more well-defined sense of style, Whiteness, and a slimmer physique. For example, in *Disturbing Behavior*, we are introduced to Rachel's character as she is dancing in the back of her pickup truck to loud rock music; she wears dark makeup, ripped jeans, a nose ring, and no bra, and most importantly, has a complete disinterest in what everyone else is doing. Gavin catches Steven staring at her and describes her as a great girl but also "Cook's Ridge trash" (Nutter, 1998). I remembered this scene vividly because it was incredibly influential and led to me embracing my lower-class identity, while unfortunately internalizing standards of beauty. This film depicts a young woman who grows up in poverty as having an intellectual and critical outlook on life and processes of socialization, in contrast to the uncritical students at the school who are wealthy and represented as preppy. This was one of the first times I saw a representation of someone from a similar social class as mine who was not being stereotyped as ignorant and unintelligent, and the depiction felt more in line with my self-image. However, I also remember feeling so physically inadequate because I could never look like a young Katie Holmes in ripped jeans and a crop top, appearing to have put such little effort into her appearance and somehow looking stunning enough to make this guy stop dead in his tracks. It didn't add up. I think this speaks to the true nature of discourse, in that the depiction of Rachel was capable of illuminating something for me in its challenge of class division while simultaneously reinforcing the image of a beautiful teenage girl as tall, thin, and White. All three of my feminist icons were thin, White women, and this served to support an internalized self-hatred due to being different from what was

being represented as the "norm." Ahmed (2014) has noted that being racialized in Western society is to be marked as willful due to your being outside of the dominant group, and I now see that my being drawn to willful women in popular culture was simultaneously a method of survival and destruction.

In addition to the physicality of the women in the three films, I also became hyperaware of the consistent juxtaposition between the discourse of a "normal" and happy life, filled with complacency and more traditional Western values, and what I refer to as a willful life (Ahmed, 2014), wherein the subject is not concerned with their ability to be accepted into larger society and is able to embrace their existence as outside of this central ideology. For example, within the plot of *Practical Magic*, the sisters Gillian and Sally seem to represent these two diverging paths toward perceived happiness: where Gillian embraces her difference, celebrates her willful nature in its manifestation as sexual liberation, and is content to travel and not settle down, and conversely Sally is shown to long for a "perfect" life where she is welcomed by the other mothers from her children's school, where she blends in and successfully hides her differences (Dunne, 1998). Lazar (2007) wrote that a feminist critique of gendered relations disrupts the status quo by suggesting that gender "does not predetermine or mediate our relationships with others, or our sense of who we are" (p. 145), and in presenting this clear dichotomy between the two characters, it would appear that the goal is not to situate either one as being inherently more prescribed by their gender. Rather, this film strikes me as taking the position that a successful orientation toward will would be one that is more honestly informed by a healthy level of self-awareness from the individual in question, as well as an appreciation and commitment to the community that supports them in their willfulness. It serves as no surprise to me that the one screenplay that was adapted by a group of women, and was based on a novel written by a woman, is the one that effectively showcases that there is *not one singular* way of achieving happiness as a woman, and that it can be more of a collaborative pursuit than one taken up in isolation. Jubas et al. (2015) emphasized that in relating to characters depicted on-screen, we "learn about ourselves and how we might respond in new situations" (p. 1), and I can identify that viewing this film as I was growing up taught me multitudes about the relationship between myself and my family, as well as the various ways that I could approach my relationships with them.

While rewatching *Practical Magic*, it occurred to me immediately that Sally would not have been as important to me growing up if it had not been for her sister, Gillian. Gillian is clearly depicted as a willful subject, as she does not care to settle down or focus on material wealth: she does not care for conventional discourses of happiness. Sally, preoccupied with living a normal life, does not understand this side of her sister and ultimately stays behind in their hometown feeling lonely and missing Gillian, who has decided to move on (Dunne, 1998). I remember being young and watching my own sister, the way she seemed to move through the world with such an air of confidence, her striking beauty and her absolute distaste for the mundane. She was my first exposure to willfulness. Unfortunately, due to the ways that our institutions and communities tend to punish such qualities, in young women especially, my sister's story is filled with trauma and sadness instead of being an inspiring tale of defiance. By the time I first watched *Practical Magic*, I did not wish to live like Gillian anymore, knowing that it could bring me similar hardships and quite honestly feeling an intense anger toward my sister; I recognized myself immediately as Sally. Drawing on the work of Jubas et al. (2015), I can reflect on my experiences watching this

film and witness my own social positioning being reflected, complicated, and challenged (p. 8), and I can identify that the discourses present in the film taught me to challenge harmful social hierarchies.

Furthermore, the patriarchal violence in this film presents another area of connection between myself and Sally, as I have often positioned myself as the protector of the women in my family, wishing that I could put an end to the abuse my mom, sister, and niece have all suffered at the hands of men. While rewatching the film, it was much clearer to me that Gillian's willfulness was being positioned as irresponsible and irrational (judged by societal standards), and her character was depicted as being responsible for her abuse due to her having "the worst taste in men" (Dunne, 1998). I consider the intervention of Black feminist thought in refusing to position this sort of violence as *domestic abuse*, as this term suggests that such violence is an individual issue rather than a social issue. While this film fails to subvert the harmful message that Gillian was somehow asking for the violence that fell upon her, it does succeed in framing this violence as a community issue: as her family and the women of the small town finally come together to break the violent hold that her boyfriend has on her, even in death. Tisdell (2008) wrote, "Not only do media reflect what's happening in our culture, it also has a role in shaping it as it raises viewers' consciousness about issues" (p. 52). Through the film's depiction of the violence Gillian experiences as the mutual responsibility of her entire community, the viewer is provided an opportunity to envision alternatives to individualistic thinking that is the common discourse in conversations regarding domestic abuse.

Character embodiment of the willful subject seems less subtle in the character Sidney from Wes Craven's iconic horror film *Scream* (1996). Unfortunately, I realized in my rewatching of the film that the methods through which Sidney is positioned as a feminist icon often involve posing her in contradiction to other women in the film, such as her best friend Tatum, who embodies the sexist stereotypes of the vapid, sexually liberated, and self-interested blonde woman. In the opening scene, we witness a young woman answer a phone call from a stranger, and rather than end the call and move on with her night, she decides to entertain him with a brief chat regarding horror films. In juxtaposition to the opening scene, when Sidney is called by the killer and asked the signature question, "What's your favourite scary movie?" she dismisses horror films as unoriginal and unrealistic in their depiction of "some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl who can't act, who's always running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door" (Craven, 1996). Sidney actually goes so far as to suggest that the genre is "insulting" in its representation, thus inviting the conclusion that she herself does not feel represented by these images and that she is far too intelligent to make those same choices. In stark contrast to the phone call in the beginning scene, once the killer reveals that they are watching Sidney, and therefore nearby, her response is to call their bluff by pretending to pick her nose, thus catapulting the discursive twists of this film into the classic trap of not-that-kind-of-girl feminism that simply works to pit women against one another and perpetuate narratives surrounding right and wrong ways of being a girl. It bears mentioning that the blonde stereotypical women in this film have become feminist icons in their own right, and this supports Tisdell's (2008) assertion that mere interaction with issues such as femininity and sexism can actually facilitate a process of learning and deeper analysis on the part of the viewer. Many individuals who have watched this film (myself included) have found something

empowering in the character Tatum, with her refusal to fear the serial killer and ability to continue on with her easygoing attitude.

Importantly, the refusal to accept the position of victim is consistent throughout Sidney's character development, and she is often framed as being "tougher than she looks" (Craven, 1996). Leaving aside this notion that one's appearance is an accurate depiction of their toughness, I remember being impressed with Sidney's resourcefulness throughout the film, as her initial solutions or responses to her attacker often do not work, and she barely has time to lament the failure of her original reaction before she is onto her next plan. An example of this occurs when she is faced with her attacker for the first time, and she tries to call 9-1-1 only to realize the phone downstairs is still on the line and she immediately turns to her computer and uses it to call for help, which in the '90s especially is a pretty spectacular display of problem solving. Even more educational to me as a young girl was Sidney's apprehension surrounding the innocence of her boyfriend Billy, who ultimately ends up being the killer. Too often the people we instill a sense of security in, the ones we let closest, are the ones who abuse this vulnerability, as with Gillian's boyfriend in *Practical Magic*. As discussed in the introduction to this paper, Ahmed (2014) framed the willful subject as an individual whose decision making is not influenced by the wants or needs of others; and being exposed to this film before I was a teenager was an exposure to the concept that women were powerful when not compelled to follow the reasoning of others. As Jarvis (2016) noted, when a viewer experiences an alternative way of viewing the world through their engagement with popular culture, they are immersed in a point of view rather than simply considering it. Thus, to be immersed in Sidney's life, and to experience her resiliency and resourcefulness, was a key pedagogical moment in my own learning of willfulness.

Reflecting on Social and Pedagogical Implications

Watching these films as a young adult, my reading was predominantly positive, as I interpreted Rachel, Sally, and Sidney as being rebellious outcasts who were unconcerned with the societal pressures to exist in a certain way. Rachel: the punk rocker whose best friend harmfully refers to her as "trash," represented a mutual relationship between critical social thought and lower socio-economic status, where I had previously been exposed to media portrayals of these two things being mutually exclusive. Sally: the intuitive nurturer who has a challenging relationship with her family and their history, was the embodiment of internalized shame and an uncontrollable desire to fit in. I saw my very deeply embedded insecurities reflected in her refusal to embrace her family and their differences, specifically drawn to the disconnect between sisters. Sidney: the guarded fighter who is caught in the middle of a trauma storm, disappointed by the genre of her life but motivated enough to display incredible levels of resiliency and resourcefulness. Here I found validation for the coldness I had developed toward others and the walls I had built to keep people out. I realized that the driving force behind my choices could be my own desire to keep going and move past the difficulties in my life that were brought on by issues with my family.

Rewatching these films as an adult, and as an educator, I came out of the process with some deep criticisms of the films, where I had previously tended toward romanticizing their edginess. The glaring absence of any racialized characters in the films was eye-opening for me, and ignites a deep sense of regret for my unquestionable identification with the

characters. While I am able to identify these films as being critical in my feminist becoming (Ahmed, 2017, p. 27), years of perspective and theoretical framing have led me to the realization that this becoming was significantly marked by Whiteness. It is clear to me now that I had very few popular culture icons encouraging me to embrace my mixed-race identity. hooks (1994b) discussed the reproduction of internalized racism through mass media's perpetuation of White supremacy, stating that "whites now privilege lighter skin in movies and fashion magazines, particularly with female characters," while "folks with darker skin face a media that subordinates their image" (p. 211). Modern investigations by authors like Brooks (2015) and Jafri (2017) illustrate that not much has changed as the drive toward racial inclusion has ultimately led to increased stereotyping and tokenization, rather than offering complex and well-informed representations of racial diversity. Non-racialized women are given more allowances in regard to their toughness; it is seen as being more appropriately placed and coming from a less selfish place than is the case for stereotypical depictions of women of colour (Brooks, 2015). This kind of criticism highlights that representation is not a numbers game, and meaningful inclusion will not be achieved by simply having more women in a film (with speaking roles) or including an entirely racially diverse cast. In order to interrupt unequal power structures, modern representations of women in film must work to decentralize Whiteness and disrupt White supremacist discourses. As Brooks wrote, "Acknowledging the layer of race permits a more holistic view of the societal structures that oppress all women, not just white women" (p. 465).

However, I am not quick to dismiss the lessons in feminism within these films that worked to support my eventual rewriting of the world around me as deeply flawed (Ahmed, 2017), and I now pinpoint these specific characters as some of my earliest and cognizant education in being willful. Each of these characters displayed willfulness in their eventual dismissal of cultural ideas of femininity, the thematic challenging of traditional paths to happiness, and an emphasis on community in supporting social awareness. I hope that my research has succeeded in illuminating the role these texts have played in my becoming feminist (Ahmed, 2014), while problematizing their role in my internalization of Whiteness, heteronormativity, and hegemonic gender roles. I seek to further the existing body of literature that highlights the necessity of investigating the role of popular culture in adult learners' lives. For many individuals, both inside and outside of academia, cultural texts such as film and television are their only exposure to "alternative" narratives (ways of being in the world), as well as varying discourses surrounding power and dominance. It was not until I watched these films that I became aware that my race, socio-economic status, and family history were each affecting people's perception of me. Furthermore, it was only upon witnessing the ways that Sidney, Sally, and Rachel found to rebel against societal expectations and challenge the harmful social structures affecting them that I began to see a different future for myself—and it was one that involved lifelong learning. Popular culture can be a means of raising one's critical consciousness and increasing awareness of one's social positioning, and this process is further enhanced when adult learners are taught critical tools to analyze the cultural texts they consume.

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