Paranoid Readings of Culture and Media

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When I began my fellowship, I was planning to research and write about TV shows, particularly HBO’s *Looking* and *Girls*. I felt drawn to these specifically because they are progressive, and therefore highly contentious: both portray underrepresented groups, carry the heavy burden of viewer expectations, and are often pummeled by the media even when they do better work than more traditional programs. To characterize the unique reception of these shows, I drew upon the work of Eve Sedgwick in her final book, *Touching Feeling* (Duke, 2003), wherein she detects and describes the paranoia of contemporary philosophy and cultural criticism. This paranoia, fueled by willful naiveté, a fixation on exposing oppression, and fearful cynicism, has come to dominate the way we respond to cultural artifacts, particularly TV and its representation woes.

In June, the media’s gluttonous frenzy over several scandals led me to expand my view of this phenomenon. The coverage of Rachel Dolezal got me thinking about how reading with paranoia prevents us from listening to others, and how the anonymity and spurious “community-building” of some online platforms (like Twitter) encourage paranoid reading. I expanded my scope to the connection between Internet culture and paranoid reading, focusing mainly on two aspects: public shaming, and the many forms of commentary that overanalyze cultural happenings. Key readings included Jon Ronson’s *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (Riverhead Books, 2015) and online think pieces ranging from the super-paranoid to the self-aware and cautiously compassionate.

My excursions into theory, journalism, and the Internet taught me so much about the underlying motives of paranoid thought. I detected the impulse to decry micro-instances of oppression instead of the larger powers that perpetuate this oppression, and the narcissistic suspension of empathy and critical analysis that can occur when people feel wronged or ignored. But I also learned that exposure and public denouncement have their own time and place – I began to see the distinctions between paranoia and productive shrewdness and self-defense, and I believe I am learning how to integrate these values into my own life.

In an effort to bring my summer research down to earth, I dedicated time to the converse of Sedgwick’s paranoid reading: the reparative reading. Sedgwick does not fully elucidate her definition of the reparative reading, and so I got to do a lot of thinking about what I wanted it to mean. I eventually decided to advocate for a style of reading that is culturally savvy, but also therapeutic. Although paranoia is a self-defensive mode of thought designed for our inequitable and dangerous world, I think it is worthwhile to read reparatively in an effort to face the challenges presented by the self, and, ultimately, collective histories and realities. I concluded my paper by performing a reparative reading of the television show *Looking*, which met harsh criticism for its perceived normalization of gay culture.

I extend my gratitude to the Patterson Research Fellowship donors, who made possible this unexpected foray into media studies at Bowdoin. I now see how much the discipline interests me, and I hope to integrate my work from this summer into a future independent study or honors project. I am also grateful for the support of Professor Collings, who is consistently inspirational, kind, and able to make sense of my thoughts, even when I’m still working them out. Anyone interested in reading my final paper for this project should feel free to email me at aglynn@bowdoin.edu.

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