

## INTRODUCTION

Skiles Howard

[Dialogues@RU](#): *A Journal of Undergraduate Research*, now in its fourth year, is an annual peer-reviewed journal of student essays sponsored by the Rutgers Writing Program. It is unique among university journals in providing a forum for students at the beginning of their academic careers, and rare in the degree of student participation in all phases of production. To encourage and emphasize the importance of research writing at Rutgers, *Dialogues* presents a \$500 prize for "Best Essay" and \$250 prizes for "Distinguished Essay." This year, the "Best Essay" award went to Frankie Dintino for "*Fight Club and the Deleuzian Century*," and awards for Distinguished Essay to Alan Bond for "*Skeletons, Rag Dolls, and Ambiguous Swamp Creatures: Gender in Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*," to Jennifer Flynn for "*Reshaping the Autobiographical Self: Elie Wiesel's Night*," and to Jeffrey C. Moon for "*Ethical Christianity: A Reformation of the Protestant Church*." That *Dialogues* received over a hundred submissions this year, thirty more than for the previous volume, suggests that research writing is increasingly valued by Rutgers undergraduates.

The essays in the first three volumes of the journal emerged from the Writing Program's research writing courses, "Research in the Disciplines" (355:201) and "College Writing and Research" (355:301). This year, however, with the assistance of the Aresty Research Center, we were able to increase the number of submissions we received from upper-level courses outside the Writing Program, and to publish one by a "graduate" of "Research in the Disciplines," Eric Kaufmann. The pedagogy of Expository Writing and *The New Humanities Reader* has had a profound effect on this volume, inspiring students to generate diverse and innovative projects that testify to the effectiveness of the Writing Program in encouraging values that far transcend the traditional domain of composition programs to privilege the intellectual and analytic skills that are the goal of a university education.

For Volume Four, we followed the blind selection process established for the first three volumes. We removed all identification from the essays, and divided them among three groups of student editors chaired by a senior editor, assuring each essay submitted of an intensive appraisal by at least four readers. We discussed the merits of each essay, decided which ones should go forward, and recommended editorial changes. When we met

again to make the final decision on the essays for the volume, each student editor chose one or two essays with which to work, and assisted the authors in the revision process. On the completion of the final revisions, many of the editors wrote a commentary to which the author responded. The discussions between author and editor generate an immense vitality, and often some heat, as the editor tests and qualifies the assertions of the writer. These conversations are much more than a postscript to the essays, and demonstrate the kind of intense intellectual exchange and provocative dialogue that the Writing Program encourages.

Not at all by editorial design, the essays in this volume also engage one another in interesting ways, resulting in a multi-layered meta-dialogue *between essays* as well as lively discussions between authors and editors. The first two essays consider the ways in which gender stereotypes are reproduced and challenged in popular culture. In "Skeletons, Rag Dolls, and Ambiguous Swamp Creatures: Gender in Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*," Alan Bond (Livingston College 2005) analyzes the effect of fairy tales on gender concepts, and specifically the way in which Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* both displays and undermines traditional gender roles, "paving the way for a new, more egalitarian fairy tale and therefore a redefinition of gender roles." In her essay "Hip-Hop: Reconstructing the Image of the African American Woman," Melissa Connerly (Livingston College 2007) addresses the controversial and timely issue of misogyny in hip-hop music by examining the ways in which Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah challenge the degrading stereotypes circulated by male rappers. Yet she also contests the current appeals of the Rev. Al Sharpton and others to boycott the music, arguing that the "only way to destroy these stereotypes is for African American women such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah to embrace them. The place where these stereotypes were re-born will be the same place they are changed and reconstructed for the better."

Frankie Dintino's essay "*Fight Club* and the Deleuzian Century" offers a highly complex analysis of David Fincher's film that enlists the theory of the late French social philosopher Gilles Deleuze as an interpretive framework. As Dintino recognizes, *Fight Club* holds an intense fascination for college-age men; it also seems to elicit enthusiastic research essays, for *Dialogues* published an essay in Volume Two that dealt with the film's reproduction of social violence. Here, Dintino (Livingston College 2007) extends and complicates this reading by arguing that "the forces and societal problems dramatized in [*Fight Club*] are quite real: the end of history, control society, the institution of debt, and the

reactionary appeal of a return to pre-capitalist concepts such as masculinity." Editor Rahul Sharma qualifies this claim, however, observing that the film and Mr. Dintino's essay deal only with a fraction of the population of the so-called "Deleuzian century"—the single, white, middle-class male, and that "*Fight Club's* view of both the *zeitgeist* and the actual members of society is so narrow that it cannot be as socially relevant as Mr. Dintino claims." Furthermore, Sharma points out, "[i]n his conclusion, Mr. Dintino offers optimistic reasons for why college-age males like *Fight Club*. Personally, I have never heard a fan of the film discuss "the end of history," "control society," or "the institution of debt," but maybe those topics resonate in an ineffable way for most people." Undaunted, Dintino counters that although "there are many whose appreciation of the film does not extend beyond the gory fight scenes . . . I believe there is a significant minority who feel a certain *rapport* with the film in an ineffable way. I took it upon myself to provide a theoretical framework for this *rapport*, and in so doing to draw parallels between the film and society at large."

Two essays in this volume deal in distinct ways with the issue of cultural expectations and their influence. In "Reshaping the Autobiographical Self: Elie Wiesel's *Night*," Jennifer Flynn (University College 2005) revisits the Yiddish and French versions of Wiesel's Holocaust memoir to dispute Naomi Seidman's argument that the differences between them reflect Wiesel's attempt to moderate the hostility of the Yiddish version for a French-speaking Christian audience, arguing that the changes in the Yiddish version served primarily to document his Holocaust-damaged identity, and to rebuild it. Where Flynn engages the personal and historical, Annat T. Katz (Livingston College, 2008) examines the impact of cultural differences on contemporary business transactions, proposing that the advanced and specialized knowledge required by today's "knowledge workers" be extended to include instruction in Japanese culture and business etiquette to expedite US-Japanese commercial transactions.

Eric Kaufmann's essay "Polemical Hacks, Bastardized Gonzo, and the Death of Democracy," written for the political science course "Globalization and the Non-Western World," is a fascinating account of the factors more and less responsible for America's slide from "deliberative democracy" to "anomic democracy." Kaufmann (Rutgers College 2005) argues that "[c]ontrary to popular belief, the usual scapegoats—interest groups and negative campaign tactics—are not to blame," but that it is the media outlets that are "responsible for this state of affairs due to their prioritizing of profit over accurate and informative

reporting.” Editor Ryan Gogol challenges this assertion, cautioning “while the media reforms Kaufmann proposes might indeed be a step in the right direction, they are anything but a panacea. In order to rectify the anomie of American democracy, these would have to be aided by other important, and perhaps more basic, developments,” including “changes in government and corporate accountability, and also more frequent public use of more decentralized news sources.”

Religion has become a site of contestation, and two of the essays speculate upon its nature and role in the twenty-first century. Stephen Linguito (Livingston College 2007) explores the rapid global growth and future potential of the popular prosperity religion in “Scientology and its Potential to Attain Dominance as a World Religion.” To frame his assessment, Linguito uses the debate between proponents who praise the practicality and flexibility of a belief system that “incorporates science, knowledge, and spirituality into one entity,” and opponents who challenge the merits and ethics of Scientology. In contrast with Linguito’s admittedly dispassionate analysis, Jeffrey C. Moon (Rutgers College Honors Program, 2007) proposes a personal and radical renovation of mainline Protestant worship in “Ethical Christianity: A Reformation of the Protestant Church.” Inspired by his dissatisfaction with devotional practices that emphasize the music and ritual celebrating the death and sacrifice of Jesus at the expense of “teaching Christian moral reasoning and motivating ethical living,” Moon presents an ambitious program that values “Jesus the Teacher and *not* Jesus the Christ,” which he calls “Ethical Christianity.” Editor Douglas Piccinnini agrees that “Paul’s *Kerygma*, the doctrine that emphasizes “salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice,” greatly marginalizes the more humanitarian approach to religious practice, which was the root of Jesus’ teachings, and as Moon suggests should be the core of Ethical Christianity. In this sense, Moon’s argument for a possible reformation in Christianity is sound, as he calls for Ethical Christians to act as Jesus did in interpreting the Bible.” Yet Piccinnini also suggests that in our globalized world, “a system of ethics needs to be established which applies to all humans, regardless of race, creed, gender. To deal with ethics and their connection to a higher moral order in this matter, is in a sense thinking globally and acting locally, for Moon recognizes a need for an ubiquitous system of ethics, but localizes its effect within Christianity.”

Four essays in the journal deal with issues at the intersection of medicine, science, and culture. Virginia Mensah’s “Genetic Enhancement: Distinctions and Regulation,” and

Pascal Scemama de Gialluly's "The Physician as Coach in the Management of Chronic Diseases" contribute thoughtful analyses of problematic matters in our vexed health-care system, and present inventive proposals to solve them. Mensah (Rutgers College 2005) examines regulatory options for genetic technology that will minimize what she sees as the "dangerous social uses of current and prospective genetic technologies." Scemama de Gialluly, a post-baccalaureate pre-medical student at University College, proposes that physician-coaches can transform the current troubled doctor-patient relationship as well as the economically-stressed health-care system "and be the catalyst for a redefinition of the purpose and goals of the clinical encounter." XiaoLei Shi's "The Clockwork of Attention Deficit Disorder: Mechanisms in Illusion," and Monica Yung's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: Advertising and the Tobacco Industry" deal with the role of cultural production in defining, treating—and expediting—illness. XiaoLei Shi (Rutgers College 2007) uses Anthony Burgess' examination in *The Clockwork Orange* of the enforcement of social norms and the etiolation of the individual to frame the ways in which an "ableist society" constructs and disciplines difference in diagnosing and medicating the non-conformity of ADD. Yung (Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy 2009), deals provocatively with the social construction of smoking as a sign of independence, health and vigor, examining the ways in which the tobacco industry uses advertising strategies that control both media access and images that associate smoking with pleasure and health to manipulate consumer cravings and ensure corporate profits.

We are proud of these essays and commentaries, and hope that our readers will enjoy them as much as we, in fact, enjoyed reading all of the essays that were submitted. The range and depth of the essays in this volume demonstrate how effectively the Writing Program functions to encourage the intellectual ambition, intensive research, and independent analysis that promise to have an impact far beyond the university.