Edited by

Kathryn E. Lane

Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media

Age of the Geek

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Editor
Kathryn E. Lane
Department of English
Northwestern Oklahoma State
University
Alva, OK, USA

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Preface

This book developed out of a "special topics" area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference, entitled *The Geek in Popular Culture*. Interest in the topic at the conference lead to a visit with an editor at Palgrave, which lead to this collection of essays examining depictions of the nerd and/or geek in popular culture. It was fascinating then—and still is—to hear people say "I'm geeking out" or to see a tweet that proclaims "We're all NERDY teachers. Well. Some of us are NERDY grad students." As these instances demonstrate, the denotation and connotation of these words is changing, as is the cultural perception of the nerd/geek stereotype. This collection of essays grapples with the evolution of these terms as seen in mediums that illustrate our lives—Twitter, television, film, fiction, sports, etc. It is not our intent that this book be the end of the discussion; we see it as the beginning of a valuable academic and social discourse. Each contribution deals with a particular type of media versus a variety of media; recognizing that no contribution is exhaustive. This collection is organized into sections which focus on a particular theme or media to simplify the reader's navigation. Within this collection there are a variety of research methodologies demonstrated, and contributions from around the globe.

The editor would like to thank the contributors for their work, patience, and timely responses over the last two years. Furthermore, this

project would not have been possible without Shaun Vigil of Palgrave Macmillan, who offered guidance and support to a first-time book collection editor. Many thanks.

Alva, USA Kathryn E. Lane

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Editor and Contributors

About the Editor

Kathryn E. Lane is an Associate Professor of English and Department Chairperson at Northwestern Oklahoma State University. After completing her BA from Southeastern Louisiana University, Lane pursued a Master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She subsequently earned her doctorate from UL Lafayette, completing her dissertation, entitled "More Than Girl Talk: Situating *Sex and the City* in Feminist Discourse." Her areas of interest include popular culture, Victorian literature, and detective fiction. She has published both creative and scholarly works on a variety of topics. This is her first time serving as editor of a book collection.

Contributors

Jessica Bodner is enamored of the miracle of human consciousness. In her younger days that meant she was a teacher by trade and reluctant researcher; now she is an online learning experience designer and independent scholar. Dr. Bodner devotes her time to fandoms, hobbies, and the normals, jocks, and nerds she calls her husband and children.

Christopher Bollinger is a Professor of Communication Studies at Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, Texas, USA. His teaching and research foci reside at the intersections of pedagogy, critical cultural

studies, language and social interaction, identity politics, ethnographic methodologies, violence prevention, and interdisciplinary studies. He also directs the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Peter Cullen Bryan is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Penn State University in the United States. His areas of study include Transnational American Studies, International Communications, and twenty first-Century American culture, emphasizing comic art and digital communities. His Master's thesis considers the influence of early cartoonist Windsor McCay upon comics as a genre, and his dissertation focuses on the cultural impact of Donald Duck comics in Germany, emphasizing Erika Fuchs's translations and digital fan communities that arose in response. He often wonders if Stan Lee slips out to see a Marvel film, just to feel like a fan.

Bernardo Bueno teaches Literature and Creative Writing at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS) where he also acts as undergraduate Creative Writing coordinator. He holds a Ph.D. in Creative and Critical Writing (University of East Anglia, United Kingdom) and an MA in Literary Theory (PUCRS, Brazil). His research interests are the aspects of geek culture in fiction, genre fiction, creative writing pedagogy, and the dialogue between technology and literature.

Alissa Burger is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Culver-Stockton College. She teaches courses in research, writing, and literature, including a single-author seminar on Stephen King. She is the author of *Teaching Stephen King: Horror, the Supernatural, and New Approaches to Literature* (Palgrave, 2016) and *The Wizard of Oz as American Myth: A Critical Study of Six Versions of the Story, 1900–2007* (McFarland, 2012), and editor of the collection *The Television World of Pushing Daisies: Critical Essays on the Bryan Fuller Series* (McFarland, 2011).

Michael Czuchry is currently an Associate Professor of Psychology at Texas Lutheran University, in Seguin, Texas, USA. He received his BA in Psychology from Colorado College, his MA in Experimental Psychology from East Tennessee State University, and his Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology at Texas Christian University. Dr. Czuchry teaches Introduction to Psychology, Quantitative Methods for Psychology, History and Systems of Psychology, Cognitive Neuroscience, and numerous other courses. He loves to engage students in the research

process. He also loves hiking in the Greenbelt in Austin, Texas with his wife, Rebecca, and dog, Sophie.

Jennifer Rachel Dutch Since 2013, she has been an Assistant Professor of English at York College of Nebraska where she teaches a variety of writing and literature courses. She completed her Ph.D. in American Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg in 2013. While her primary research interests are in the intersection of food and culture in the United States, Dutch is also interested in how the American Dream is shaped by and helps to shape identity in the United States.

Kathleen M. Earnest is an Assistant Professor of English at Northwestern Oklahoma State University, USA. She also serves as the program coordinator for English education, advising English majors who plan to teach secondary students in public school. Her instructional responsibilities include introductory composition and humanities courses and upper division courses in young adult literature, methods for secondary teachers, and English usage. She earned a Bachelor's from NWOSU, a Master's from the University of Oklahoma, and a doctorate from Oklahoma State University. Research interests include first generation college students, place-making, pop culture, and creativity and arts in community development.

Johnathan Charles Flowers is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. Since beginning his graduate career, Flowers has taught for the Departments of Philosophy; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and Education Administration and Higher Education. Flowers has also presented regularly at academic conferences across the country on issues in East Asian Philosophy, Philosophy of Race, Feminism, Comics Studies, and Critical Approaches to Popular Culture. His forthcoming dissertation, *Mono no Aware as an Aesthetics of Gender*, aims to use the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* to discuss gender performativity.

Łukasz Muniowski is a doctoral student at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland. He has produced academic articles on sports, literature, television series, and video games. His doctoral dissertation focuses on the biographical representations of the achievements of leading NBA players after Michael Jordan. He is an irregular contributor to WhatCulture and a full-time dog lover.

Jessica Stanley Neterer is an adjunct instructor at John Tyler Community College in Virginia (USA) where she teaches composition and literature courses. She graduated with an MA in English from Longwood University in 2015. Her research interests include children's and young adult literature, pop culture studies, and all things geek. In her spare time, she enjoys baking, board games, and taking pictures of her cat. "*Ich Bin Ein Nerd!*: Geek Identity in Insider and Outsider Media" is her first publication.

Sotiris Petridis is a Ph.D. candidate at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Film Studies (Aristotle University) and a Master's degree in Art, Law, and Economy (International Hellenic University). He has been awarded a scholarship from the Onassis Foundation for his doctoral studies. His research area is about the evolution of the slasher film subgenre. He is currently teaching Film Theory and Television History at Aristotle University as part of his doctoral studies.

Lauren Rocha is an adjunct instructor at Merrimack College. Her research focuses on gender in nineteenth-century Transatlantic Gothic texts and popular culture. She has presented her work at the conferences of the Popular Culture Association, American Literature Association, and the Association of Adaptation Studies. Her articles have appeared in *Popular Culture Review*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, and *Critical Survey*. She is currently working on examining female bodies and identity in relationship to the domestic in horror.

Tiffiny Sia is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Texas Lutheran University. This position gives her an excuse to include research in all her classes, which resulted in her being awarded the Piper Professor of 2016. She is basically an experimental research junkie and is constantly involving students and colleagues in this habit-forming scientific endeavor. Favorite research paradigms involve documenting the more questionable social media sites, like YikYak and ChatRoulette. She earned her Ph.D. and Master's in Experimental Psychology from Texas Christian University in 1996 and 1993, respectively. Her research interests include any amusing topic she can operationally define.

Steven S. Vrooman, Ph.D. is Professor at Texas Lutheran University. He received his MA and Ph.D. in Communication from Arizona State University. He teaches, among other things, on rhetoric, social media,

and popular culture. He has been researching Internet communication since it emerged from BITNET in the 1990s. He has researched and written on Internet social movements, online fandoms, word use on Twitter, flaming, trolling and invective, the maintenance of online communities, and the incorporation of social media into elearning. He professionally consults on social media theory and strategy and spoke on Twitter at TEDxSanAntonio. He tweets at @MoreBrainz.

K. Brenna Wardell is an Assistant Professor of Film and Literature at the University of North Alabama in the United States. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality, aesthetics, and issues of place and space in media and literary texts. Publications include work on Joss Whedon's acting ensemble for *Slayage* and a piece on Alfred Hitchcock's film *Frenzy*, published in *Critical Insights Film: Alfred Hitchcock* from Salem Press.

CHAPTER 1

How Was the Nerd or Geek Born?

Kathryn E. Lane

"It's the age of the geek, baby," proclaims Alec Hardison in numerous episodes of the TV series *Leverage*. Perhaps Hardison is right. The highest-ranked show on primetime is *The Big Bang Theory*,[1] which depicts a group of "nerdy" scientists trying to connect with the non-nerdy world surrounding them. In addition, *Scorpion*, a show that chronicles a team of geniuses who exhibit "nerd" characteristics from the very first episode, was the highest-ranked new primetime show in 2014. As Brian L. Ott contends in his book *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*, if television functions as public discourse, then it stands to reason that what is on our television sets, Netflix accounts, or Hulu does, in fact, go far beyond mere entertainment. This leads to the inevitable question: why can American culture accept a nerd or geek character in the media—television, film, YouTube—and yet not accept a person who would be characterized as a "nerd" or "geek" in real life?

And, just to be clear, when asked, "by a 2-to-1 margin (60 to 28%), American parents say, if forced to choose, they would prefer their sons or daughters make C grades and be active in extracurricular activities

K.E. Lane (✉)
Northwestern Oklahoma State University,
Alva, OK, USA

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than make A grades and not be active."[2] Furthermore, the authors were quick to suggest that "parents responding to the Gallup survey interpreted 'make A grades and not be active' as a code for nerd or dork, while athletics is the ticket to social status."[3] That statement is telling as well. Parents would rather their children risk injury in athletics than be labeled a "nerd"? Really? That doesn't make sense if we consider what Americans are actively selecting on their televisions, Netflix, or mobile devices for entertainment. *The Big Bang Theory* is the most popular sitcom on American television and has held the coveted position for years.[4] In fact, the show rakes in consistently high ratings even in syndication, which would explain why it is on at least one channel every night in most markets, whether new episodes are airing or syndication reruns are gracing our TV screens. So, if Americans are willing to watch "geeks" on television, Hulu, Netflix, and YouTube, self-identify as "nerds" on Twitter and Instagram, and read fiction that either features nerds or geeks or marks the reader as such, then why are the terms still considered negative if someone else uses them to describe you? It doesn't make sense that you can call yourself a geek but be offended when someone else does. Perhaps we need to consider the meaning of the words themselves.

What is a "nerd"? What is a "geek"? How are they different? When Hardison says it's the "age of the geek," what does that mean? Let's start with some basic definitions to ensure we're all speaking the same language.[5]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines "nerd" as "an insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious. Now also: *specifically* a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication."[6] The definition of a nerd, specifically their pursuance of highly technical interests—"with obsessive or exclusive dedication"—is what some individuals would associate with geekdom. However, the definitions of the two terms are very similar, so a comparison to establish basic similarities will be helpful. The *OED* offers two distinct definitions of "geek."[7] For the sake of this introduction, let us focus on the first definition and its subcategories. The *OED* states that "geek" is chiefly a US slang word with three subdefinitions that are relevant to our understanding of the nerd/geek stereotype. The first definition of "geek" is originally English in origin, specific to the north of the country, and is defined as "a person, a fellow, *especially* one who is regarded as foolish, offensive, worthless, etc."[8] This first subdefinition focuses on

the gender of the person being described, with its denoting "a fellow." This definition also points out that the person being described is either "foolish, offensive, or worthless." Our understanding of the nerd/geek stereotype, then, takes male gender and "studiousness" as its foundation, followed by a string of negative characteristics. But what if this early definition of a geek is an attempt to articulate social awkwardness, all of which could be described using the adjectives listed above, depending upon the situation?

The second definition of "geek" is noted as "frequently depreciative" and is defined as "any unsociable person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit (usually specified in a preceding *attributed* noun)." For example, someone might be identified as a "computer geek," "book geek," or "football geek." The portion of this definition that is relevant to our understanding of the nerd/geek stereotype is the obsessiveness that many claim marks the stereotype as it is perceived today. Of course, obsessiveness was noted in the "nerd" definition also, so this is definitely a uniform concept as far as these labels are concerned. Not surprisingly, this particular definition notes that "geek" is often used as a simile for "nerd."

The third subdefinition is the most specific: "A person who is extremely devoted to and knowledgeable about computers or related technology. In this sense, especially when as a self-designation, not necessarily *depreciative*." This definition focuses on knowledge, specifically knowledge of things having to do with technology. From these definitions and subdefinitions we can take away a few common established characteristics: intelligence, obsessiveness, and male gender. The other thing that all of these definitions have in common is that calling yourself a geek is not a bad thing, but someone else calling you a "geek" can be an insult.[9, 10]

Yet, how did these words come to have the meanings they do? Both terms are obviously loaded with connotations, but the denotation of the terms is very similar. How then do we differentiate between the terms? Perhaps more importantly, should we differentiate? How did our concept or understanding of the words "nerd" and "geek" come into being? How did this all start?

The nerd/geek stereotype that is the focus of this collection is a twentieth-century construct that is changing with each step we make further into the twenty-first century. The term "nerd," coined at polytechnic institutes in the 1930s and 1940s, is not the same characterization we

see in the media today.[11] The nerd has evolved from his or her humble beginnings as a social outcast into a mainstream character ripe for analysis and study, as this character, more than any other, tells us how we feel about ourselves as we face a world dominated by technology and isolation. Considering how much of Americans' daily lives are dominated by media, for this study we need to look at the nerd/geek stereotype in its first incarnation in our current medium to fully understand the implications. It's not until the nerd is seen and identified on television that the stereotype will begin to solidify.[12] Furthermore, it's no coincidence that it's in the powerful medium of television, with its capacity for discourse with the viewer and society as a whole, that the nerd stereotype fully comes into being. It would take *Saturday Night Live* to make "nerd" into a household word, even though the visual template is already established and easily recognized. We know this character when we see them: a male character of high intelligence, demonstrating obsessiveness and social awkwardness, wearing "coke bottle glasses," a pocket protector, or a comic book-related item to fully "clue" the viewer that this is the nerd character.

"The first *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) nerds sketch was written by Rosie Shuster and Anne Beatts shortly after the appearance of Elvis Costello as the musical guest on December 17, 1977."[13] In fact, Costello's fill-in performance sparked the idea for the first nerd skit performed on *SNL*, which would ultimately lead to the widespread use of the term and its current characteristics. Anne Beatts recounts how watching Costello in his signature garb prior to the performance that fateful night actually prompted her revelation that "this isn't punk rock. This is nerd rock."[14] Costello's glasses, his short pants, and threadbare jacket shifted Beatts's view. Costello's performance was a hit and ultimately opened the door for Beatts and Shuster to pitch their nerd skit idea to *SNL*. After a bit of pushback, the first skit, starring Bill Murray and Gilda Radner as "nerds," premiered on January 28, 1978, entitled "Nerd Rock."

As the nerd stereotype is finally labeled, it might be helpful to look analytically at the first visual representation of the character who would come to be seen and termed "nerd" in the American consciousness. It's not surprising that this first instance of image and label together comes from television; even in 1978, TV was having a major impact on the national consciousness.[15] The skit "Nerd Rock" aired approximately one hour into *SNL* on January 28, 1978. This was the tenth episode of the

show's third season. This particular episode was hosted by Robert Klein and featured Bonnie Raitt as the musical guest. Klein would appear as the leader of the "nerds" band, with the three nerd characters playing opposite the cool radio host, portrayed by Dan Ackroyd. As is common in media, viewers often recognize the nerd or geek character because of their difference from the dominant hegemony. Ackroyd's character wears sunglasses for the duration of the skit. His posture, even though seated, is relaxed and speaks of confidence in his position and what he's doing. In contrast, all three nerds depicted in the skit are clearly nervous in their space, alternating between slouching and avoiding eye contact. The three nerd characters are identified by nicknames only in the first skit. The first and implied leader due to positioning of the group at the "interview" table is "Spaz," portrayed by Robert Klein. The second nerd character is "Four Eyes" and is played by Gilda Radner. The final character is "Pizza Face," portrayed by Bill Murray. All three of the nerd characters are wearing "outdated" or mismatched clothes in comparison to Ackroyd's on-trend shirt and jacket.

The skit opens with music playing in the background. As the chorus winds down, Ackroyd's character leads into the interview with the following comment: "Acid Rock. Punk Rock. What's next? Nerd Rock." He then proceeds to introduce the song, "Gimme Back My Algebra Homework, Baby," and the group he's interviewing—the Nerds. The first question posed to the group is, "So, where did you all come up with the name 'nerds'? Is that what you call yourselves?" The character of Spaz immediately answers with, "No, other people did."

At this point, the studio audience laughs and the nerd stereotype has been named. This statement also establishes—in a living example broadcast through our television screens—the idea that you can self-identify as a nerd, but that when the term is used by someone else to describe you, you have to react in some way. These three characters who have been labeled "nerds" have created an album as a sort of rebellion against the name-calling, reappropriating the term for their own use. It's no coincidence that the album is identified as "rock," which has a history of being seen as the "rebellious" genre.

Next, the three characters are seated on one side of the table in a line, and the character of Dugan even comments that he wishes his audience could see what he's seeing. In hopes of giving the listening audience a sense of what he's faced with in his studio, he acknowledges each nerd character and describes a physical detail to his audience. For

the character of Pizza Face, Dugan states, "You're wearing some plastic thing in your pocket with a dozen pencils," which calls to mind the pocket protectors worn by the engineering students of earlier years. With Four Eyes, Dugan appears to struggle for a descriptor (perhaps due to her female gender and an ingrained need not to insult a woman) and settles for "You have a lot of yellow plaque on your teeth." Interestingly, this comment is met with an nod of agreement from the female nerd of the group. Finally, Dugan has worked his way "up" the table of nerds to Spaz, who he notes is "wearing a think button." During the "interview," the nerd characters don't stay on topic, don't always answer Dugan's questions as expected—or at all—and they show little understanding of social expectation. In many ways, the nerds depicted on-screen demonstrate our cultural understanding of the nerd character with one major difference—gender. In this group of nerds, there is a single female nerd, the character of Four Eyes. Furthermore, it's not simply that a female version of the nerd stereotype is depicted on-screen, but, even more than that, that this female nerd gives voice to the nerds' struggles and motivation.

The character of Dugan asks the group "Why now?" Four Eyes answers: "We're an idea whose time has come. We're young. We're brilliant. We're nerds. It's our turn to be popular."[16] This answer reveals a number of things about the nerd stereotype with which we're already familiar—an awareness and acknowledgment of their intelligence, a desire to be "popular" or part of what is perceived as normal, and abstract thinking about a common topic—music. Also, an apparent belief in rule-following, as the nerds seem to think popularity is a question of "turns," an idea often used to explain sharing to young children. The nerds think it's their "turn," without realizing they do not have the social skills to be popular. Even an interview with the characters about their album—something about which these characters should be excited—is a challenge for the radio host, Dugan, as they consistently stray from the topic at hand.

The "Nerd Rock" skit has two more crucial elements at play that deserve discussion: the formation of the group and the product of their collaboration, their album. This group of nerds does not have a traditional rock "origin" story; instead they've been set up by Four Eyes's aunt so that, even in this "anti-adult" enterprise of creating rock music, the nerds are still connected to adults. Furthermore, the final third of the skit shows Spaz's mother carrying in the teenagers' coats and coaching

them through saying thank you and goodbye to the radio host. At this point, the nerds further demonstrate that they are socially stunted because they all answer in unison, in a childlike singsong, and there's no attempt to complete their interview with Dugan. They are following the rules set out by the authority figure of the mother.[17]

The Nerds' album is entitled "Trying Desperately to Be Liked" and contains songs with titles like "Gimme Back My Algebra Homework, Baby" and "I'll Give You My Lunch Money," both of which speak to the nerd stereotype of individuals who are often bullied or used by others for their own benefit. Furthermore, the mention of money in the song title also speaks to the elevated economic status of the nerds. If they had a bag lunch from home, there would be no money to "take" and, hence, no need for the song. Additionally, the Nerds' song titles articulate the struggles they deal with daily. Their album title speaks to what these characters desire most "desperately"—to be liked. This is a common trope that we'll see in the depiction of nerd characters from this point forward: either an explicit or implicit desire to do whatever it takes to be liked by those they see as "popular." The other element of the skit, which revolves around the album, is that the station attempts to give away ten free copies of the Nerds' album, but no one calls into claim one. The message being sent here is that even bored listeners won't invest their time or energy in order to have something created by nerds. Furthermore, this implies there is a stigma attached to anything labeled "nerd," even if it's free.

As previously mentioned, there is one aspect of the *SNL* skit that marks this depiction as different from the history of the term and its portrayal previously. This is the character of Four Eyes. Four Eyes is a female nerd and, traditionally, the stereotype of a nerd or geek is of a male outsider. Yet, one could argue that the depiction of a female nerd was a good thing, as *SNL*'s first nerd skit was popular and led to more success. In total, there were 13 nerd skits produced and broadcast between January 1978 and March 1980. All 13 nerd skits depicted both a male and female nerd character.

Some elements that appear in all of *SNL*'s nerd skits should be catalogued to further our understanding of the stereotype. The first is that there is an implied potential romantic relationship between Todd and Lisa. This is in direct contrast to the cultural stereotype that male nerds can't get girlfriends or attract female companionship. Importantly for the stereotype, though, Todd doesn't "get" Lisa, despite his attempts, so

the message is again sent that male nerds aren't successful romantically/sexually. Additionally, the interaction between the two nerds for the majority of the skits comes across as a sort of "arrested development," with Todd giving Lisa "noogies" and trying to peek into her blouse. Lisa's reply to most of Todd's jokes is to say "That was so funny, I forgot to laugh." Both characters are in the same costumes for the majority of the skits. However, even when there's a reason for these nerds to dress up—the prom, for example[18]—their clothing demonstrates certain elements of nerd iconography. For instance, Lisa is consistently shown in glasses and with Kleenex tucked into her sleeves, while the waistband of Todd's pants is always higher than his waist. For most of the episodes, Todd is wearing a pocket protector. The nerd stereotype becomes cemented with each skit.

Finally, the nerd's socio-economic status is further defined through the *SNL* nerd skits. Todd and Lisa never have to handle an afterschool job. Their only focus is on their studies, their potential love interests, running for student body president, and Lisa's piano lessons. This "unvoiced" element of the nerd stereotype is that nerds have enough economic freedom (whether their own or through their parents) to not worry about economics.

The popularity of the nerd skits widened the cultural knowledge of the term "nerd," as evidenced by Beatts recounting that, a year later (approximately 1979), a friend told her the word "nerd" was being put into the dictionary.[19] The year 1980 was the next instance of the word "geek" being used in a publication in a way that correlated with the nerd stereotype. In her 1980 book *Runnin' Down Some Lines: The Language and Culture of Black Teenagers*, Edith A. Folb states that "geek," in the black vernacular, means a "studious person."[20] Folb's definition aligns with the *OED* definition for both terms—"nerd" and "geek"—as American culture knows the terms to be used today. As this chronology would imply, the terms "nerd" and "geek" were being adopted widely into the American vernacular, and these words are now loaded with meaning derived over time.

After Folb's book and the *SNL* skits, it wasn't long before we saw a character in the popular media who was identified as a "nerd." The first example, post *SNL*, was the iconic film *Revenge of the Nerds*, which premiered in theaters in 1984. The movie's success was quickly followed up with a sequel, aptly entitled *Revenge of the Nerds II*, in 1987. In 1988, the television show *The Wonder Years*[21] premiered with a huge viewing

audience, all following the life and trials of the main character/narrator of Kevin Arnold. Much like in the *Revenge of the Nerds* films, Kevin does not initially identify as a "nerd," but is instead labeled one by others (notably his brother, Wayne). The more obviously nerd/geek stereotype is seen in the character of Paul, Kevin's childhood best friend. In *The Wonder Years*, Paul is depicted as the nerd character, and his "nerdiness" is highlighted by the contrast between him and Kevin, as well as Paul's relationship with the other characters on the show. Eventually, Kevin's acceptance of himself, and later Paul's, comes to include an acceptance of this labeling, which paradoxically moves him out of the "nerd" category.[22] *The Wonder Years* ran on ABC from 1988 until 1993, and during this time two more *Revenge* films were produced and released, in 1992 and 1994 respectively. While this show was much lauded by television critics, the nerd/geek character wasn't as prominent in this series as it would shortly become.

In 1989, *Family Matters* premiered. The show focused on the Winslow family, an African-American working-class family in Chicago, Illinois.[23] *Family Matters* is of note in the development of the nerd/geek stereotype for two reasons. First, by changing from the elaborate narrative format for which *The Wonder Years* was so lauded to a more traditional half-hour sitcom format, *Family Matters* relied more on the nerd character to provide the series' laughs and popularity. Second, for many television viewers at the time, the nerd/geek stereotype was embodied in the character of Steven Urkel, the nerd character on the series. Again, in both television shows and the *Revenge* films, the nerd/geek stereotype was presented as unchanging and always in opposition to the "normal" characters. In *Family Matters*,[24] the character of "Urkel" was most clearly positioned as the opposite of the Winslows' athletic son, Eddy[25] and their popular daughter, Laura. For a large portion of the 1990s, the nerd character was typified by the character of Steven Urkel. Yet, the "geek" love that seems so common currently doesn't reflect the nerd/geek stereotype of the 1980s and 1990s, as typified by this character. The character of Steven Urkel was always identified as a "nerd," not a geek, despite his ability to create computers and other technology. It was not considered socially acceptable for the character to be as he was; instead, the Winslows were always trying to change him to fit their norm. This was very much an "old school" version of nerddom, in which the nerd character needed to be transformed to "normal."[26] Both *The Wonder Years* and *Family Matters* were mainstream hits, but the nerd/

geek stereotype was either phased out of the series, as in *The Wonder Years* when Kevin and Paul part ways, or made the punchline of every episode, as seen in *Family Matters*. These depictions had value in that they were being broadcast, and the show's popularity spoke to the characters being relatable, but there was still a bit more evolution to come before we reached the modern-day nerd/geek archetype.

Family Matters went off the air in 1998, with Steve Urkel having transformed into a "normal" enough character for Laura Winslow to agree to marry him. In 1999, a new series, entitled *Freaks and Geeks*,[27] appeared on NBC, but was cancelled in 2000. This show was unlike any other television show in its depiction of high-school life and being labeled a "geek,"[28] but the show's poor ratings didn't allow it to add much to the nerd/geek stereotype.[29–31]

While these shows were playing on American television screens, the terms "nerd" and geek" were becoming more widespread and synonymous. Three *OED* word-use entries reveal how the two words became synonymous. The first is from Rudy Rucker's book *Mondo 2000*, published in 1993. Rucker writes, "Geek is the proud, insider term for nerd. If you are not a dedicated techie, don't use this word."[32] This demarcation of the term "geek" as being a privileged term in the tech industry is telling and may explain how "geek" became a verb in the 1990s. With the growth of the technology industry and the predominance of technology in most Americans' daily lives, it's not surprising that the terms "nerd" and "geek" should become more common and intrinsically linked to technology in some form. Our nerd/geek stereotype is evolving into a more concrete characterization than "glasses" and "social awkwardness."

In a June 2001 *Independent* article the terms appeared together again, furthering the technology correlation once more: "We're the nerds, the geeks, the dweebs: the men and women who can spend 20 hours straight contemplating 600 bytes of obscure, arcane, impenetrable computer code."[33] This statement is rhetorically significant. There's an implied ownership and an embracing of the terms in an attempt to delineate those so categorized by their accomplishments. What the writer is saying is that if you can "spend 20 hours straight contemplating […]code," then you have earned the designation of nerd, geek, or dweeb. The negative title has been revised to include an almost superhuman ability to control the inner workings of technology. It's now a badge of honor that denotes an ability to control technology.

Finally, the *Chicago Tribune* attempts to differentiate between the two terms in their January 20, 2002 edition with the following statement: "Among Silicon Valley nerds, chip engineers … are the geekiest of all." In this statement, a hierarchy of nerdishness[34] is stated with the most extreme cases of nerdiness being labeled as "geekiest." What these three instances demonstrate is that the term "geek" is replacing "nerd" in common usage. This preference for "geek" versus "nerd" speaks to the twentieth-century construct with its reliance on technology.[35] It's no coincidence that Alec Hardison declares his computer prowess by declaring "It's the age of the geek, baby" in all those episodes of *Leverage*. An ability to control the computers that control our lives has become something valuable, to be desired versus derided. It is here that a shift in the stereotype is taking place. The connotations of being labeled a "geek" are shifting from negative to positive (or at least less negative). However, the two terms are so intrinsically linked in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that for one to change, there must be a similar change in the other term also.

It's here that we turn back to the medium that has predominated in the formation of our cultural concept of the nerd/geek stereotype by originally projecting it into our homes and making it a household word—television. Two more shows contributed specifically to the nerd/geek stereotype we see today. The first was a show with an interesting past, *Ugly Betty*.[36] *Ugly Betty* aired from 2006 to 2010 on ABC. However, it was an American interpretation of a daily Spanish telenovela entitled *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, which originally centered on the characters of Betty and her boss. The Spanish telenovela was quite popular in its market and an American version was planned for several years before the show actually made it to the air. The American interpretation of the telenovela was adapted for American television audiences and transformed into a weekly serial show, versus a daily serial. In the American version, Betty is most easily recognized by her dark-rimmed glasses and adult braces; in fact, the packaging for the show's DVD collection features a close-up of the Betty character's braces with a headline that reads "Ugly Betty," implying that the braces are what make Betty ugly and/or distinctive. Interestingly, *Ugly Betty* was popular with viewing audiences for the first three seasons, and the show has continued to be popular even after cancellation, gaining a cult following after its termination. The titular character of Betty adheres to earlier depictions of the nerd/geek stereotype as the series begins. Betty wears glasses, has adult braces, wears

clothes that don't match, is too naïve to understand that her co-workers aren't actually being nice to her without an ulterior motive, and initially struggles with her love life. However, as this introduction has previously discussed, Betty's gender marks her as different from the stereotypical nerd/geek. In previous nerd/geek stereotype depictions, when female nerd/geeks are depicted, they are accompanied by a male nerd/geek to balance out the pair. However, Betty is the sole nerd/geek on the show, which may speak to more gender equality as regards the nerd/geek stereotype.[37] Furthermore, over time, Betty transforms outwardly to adhere more to the "norm," which some may contend makes *Ugly Betty* another nerd transformation story.[38] So, if Betty has been transformed from nerddom to normal, what will bring the nerd/geek stereotype to the cultural construct we know and recognize today?

The second show that adds to our current understanding of the nerd/geek stereotype is *The Big Bang Theory*,[39] which aired on CBS in 2007 and has received much critical and audience attention since its first season. *The Big Bang Theory* depicts a group of nerds/geeks who are drawn together by their common interests initially. As the series starts out, four of the main characters are male and demonstrate "nerdy" or "geeky" personality traits, with one "normal" character (for contrast) depicted in the female character of Penny. As previously discussed, the "normal" character is necessary to establish the nerd/geek through opposition. However, as the series has grown more popular, *The Big Bang Theory* has gone in an unprecedented direction. Early seasons of the show introduced more "normal" characters to more clearly show the nerd/geek characters in opposition to the norm, in terms of physical stature, intelligence, and a sense of honor. However, as the series has grown in popularity, the "core" group has grown to include two more potentially "geeky" characters as the love interests of the male members. What marks *The Big Bang Theory* as the end of the current nerd/geek stereotype's evolution is that the characters are not being "transformed" into "normal" people, but instead their nerddom is being celebrated and it's often the normal characters who are the butt of the jokes.[40] Furthermore, the stigma of "nerddom" is being removed, as the characters posited as "normal" are embracing parts of geek culture. In the most recent season of *The Big Bang Theory*, the character of Penny (the "normal" character throughout the series' history) considers attending ComicCon, and the other female characters have been shown repeatedly interacting with elements

of "nerddom" throughout the series.[41] This is a reversal of the early trope of nerd/geek stock characters in need of transformation (or extinction). Now, the nerd/geek stereotype is accepted as is. And this is where our tale of evolution ends… for now.[42]

Society's complex relationship with the nerd or geek character in early depictions, and especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, speaks to our complex relationship with lives dominated by technology. The nerd/geek stereotype is a product of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a modern-day archetype born out of society's implicit reliance on, and potential resentment of, technology. When we, as viewers, laugh at the geek character who is unable to comprehend a basic social interaction while simultaneously being able to reprogram "600 lines of arcane [computer] code,"[43] we're allowed to acknowledge that there are parts of our society and its functions that we don't understand or control. By laughing at the nerd, we're giving ourselves permission to laugh at ourselves without feeling threatened. After all, we've been conditioned to expect that the "geek squad" will help us solve whatever the technological problem may be. We've come to embrace this stereotype because, in so doing, we embrace parts of ourselves.

Now that the evolution of the modern nerd/geek stereotype has been established, let's turn to this collection and its organization, which will take us to the depiction of the nerd/geek in media at the present time. This text is organized into four sections based upon the most predominant depictions of the nerd/geek stereotype in current American media.

The essays collected here come from scholars at varying levels and from a variety of fields. Their approaches to research differ. The way they refer to the nerd/geek stereotype often reflects further difference. Some consider themselves a nerd or geek. Others do not. However, what connects them all is their drive to understand the nerd/geek stereotype that is so often positioned as Other by American society, while being so intricately woven into our national consciousness.

Notes

1. Rice, "Making a Bigger Bang," 26.
2. Bishop et al., "Why We Harass Nerds and Freaks," 235.
3. Bishop et al., "Why We Harass Nerds and Freaks," 235.
4. Rice, "Making a Bigger Bang," 23.

5. Brian Ott writes that "Academic writing is far more indebted to the intellectual work and resources of the past than most scholars would like to admit" (xiii).
6. *OED Online, s.v.* "*Nerd*, n.," accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/126165.
7. The other definition of geek is "a performer at a carnival or circus whose show consists of bizarre or grotesque acts, such as biting the head off a live animal" (*OED*, "geek"). The term hasn't been used to refer to this sort of "geek" since the 1970s, so it is outdated and obviously doesn't reference the nerd/geek stereotype.
8. *OED Online*, s.v. "Geek.n.," accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77307?rskey=H4GazJ&result=1.
9. Issues of self-identification and "name-calling" will be addressed in the first section of this text.
10. Katrin Rentzsch, Astrid Schutz, and Michela Schroder-Abe, "Being Labeled *Nerd*."
11. See David Anderegg's *Nerds.*
12. Benjamin Woo, "Nerds, Geeks, Gamers, and Fans."
13. Nugent, *American Nerd*, 61.
14. Beatts qtd. in Nugent, *American Nerd*, 62.
15. Television's influence in politics has been widely documented since as early as the 1960s.
16. *SNL*, January 28, 1978.
17. Christine Quail, "Hip to Be Square."
18. *SNL*, May 20, 1978.
19. Nugent, *American Nerd*, 66.
20. "Geek, n.," *OED Online*, June 2016, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77307?rskey=H4GazJ&result=1 (accessed July 20, 2016).
21. "The Wonder Years," *IMDb*, accessed August 9, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094582/?ref_=nv_sr_1.
22. Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation."
23. Please see the chapter by Jonathan Flowers for a more detailed discussion of what it means to be a black nerd.
24. "Family Matters," *IMDb*, accessed August 9, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096579/?ref_=nv_sr_1.
25. Todd Jones, "The Dumb Jock and the Science Nerd."
26. See Jennifer Rachel Dutch's essay on nerd makeover films for a further discussion of this trope in popular media.
27. "Freaks and Geeks," *IMDb*, accessed August 9, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0193676/?ref_=nv_sr_1.
28. "A Geek Chorus."

29. Murray Forman, "Freaks, Aliens, and the Social Other."
30. "The Oral History of Freaks and Geeks," *Vanity Fair*, 2013, http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/01/freaks-and-geeks-oral-history (accessed August 9, 2016).
31. The show *Freaks and Geeks* has since become a "cult classic," turning out a number of "household name" actors, but the show's popularity while it was actually airing was limited at best.
32. "Geek, n.," *OED Online*, June 2016, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77307?rskey=H4GazJ&result=1 (accessed July 20, 2016).
33. "Geek, n.," *OED Online*, June 2016, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77307?rskey=H4GazJ&result=1 (accessed July 20, 2016).
34. According to the *OED*, the condition or quality of being a nerd.
35. Due to the similarity between the two words and their meanings, I will use the two terms interchangeably throughout this introduction and from here on.
36. "Ugly Betty," *IMDb*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0805669/?ref_=rvi_tt (accessed August 9, 2016).
37. See Alissa Burger's essay, "Growing Up Geeky," in this collection for a discussion of female geekdom.
38. See Jennifer Rachel Dutch's essay on nerd makeover films for a discussion of this trope in modern media.
39. "The Big Bang Theory-CBS.com," CBS, http://www.cbs.com/shows/big_bang_theory/ (accessed August 9, 2016).
40. Monika Bednarek, "Constructing 'Nerdiness': Characterisation in *The Big Bang Theory*."
41. Consider that the female characters actively engage in playing that "bastion" of nerddom—Dungeons and Dragons—in some episodes.
42. As the series is still actively producing new seasons, one cannot predict what is to come. However, after nine seasons, there have been some changes, but the physical and emotional markers of nerd/geek are still present in the core characters.
43. *OED*, "nerd."

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