Questions of Popular Cult(ure)

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Leanne McRae
Abstract

*Questions of Popular Cult(ure)* works in the uncomfortable and unclear spaces of popular culture. This thesis demonstrates how cult cauterizes ambiguity and functions as a framing agent for unpopular politics in popular culture. In tracking the flows and hesitations in the postwar period through the rise of the New Right and identity politics, this thesis shows how cult contains moving and malleable meanings that maneuver through everyday life. It is a slippery and slight subject that denies coherent categorization in definitional frames. This thesis negotiates this liminality by tracking broad social shifts in race, class and gender through textualised traces. The complicated concept of cult is activated within a series of case studies. These chapters are linked together to demonstrate the volatile variance of the cult category.

Section one contextualises the terrain of the intellectual work in this thesis. It paints broad brush-strokes of the postwar period, through an animated intersection of politics and popular culture. The first chapter defines the currency of cult in contemporary times. It is devoted to investigating the relationships between colonisation and popular culture. By pondering postcolonialism, this chapter prises open thirtyspace to consider how writing and madness performs proximity in the pre and post-colonial world. The ‘maddening’ of cargo cults by colonisers in Melanesia operates as a metonym for the regulation of marginal modalities of resistance. In popular culture, this trajectory of insane otherness has corroded, with the subversion of cult being appropriated by fan discourses, as worship has become ‘accountable’ for the mainstream market.

Chapter two unpacks *The X-Files* as a text tracking the broad changes in politics through popular culture. This innovative text has moved from marginality into the
mainstream, mapping meanings through the social landscape. Consciousness and reflexivity in the popular embeds this text in a cult framework, as it demonstrates the movement in meanings and the hegemonic hesitations of the dominant in colonising (and rewriting) the interests of the subordinate as their own.

Section two creates a dialogue between gendered politics and contemporary popular culture. The changes to the consciousness in masculinity and femininity are captured by *Tank Girl*, *Tomb Raider*, Henry Rollins and Spike (from *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*). These texts perform the wavering popularity of feminism and the ascent of men’s studies in intellectual inquiry. *Tank Girl* articulates unpopular feminist politics through the popular mode of film. The movement to more mainstream feminism is threaded through the third wave embraced by *Tomb Raider* that reinserts the popular paradigms of femininity, via colonisation. The computer game discourse permits a pedagogy of power to punctuate Lara Croft’s virtual surfaces and shimmer through the past into the present.

Tracking this historical movement, two chapters on masculinity brew the boom in men’s studies’ questioning of manhood. Henry Rollins is a metonym for an excessive and visible masculinity, in an era where men have remained an unmarked centre of society. His place within peripheral punk performance settles his inversionary identity. Spike from *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* demonstrates the contradictions in manhood by moving through the masculine hierarchy to deprioritise men in the public sphere. This is a mobile masculinity in a time where changeability has caused a ‘crisis’ for men. Both these men embody a challenging and confrontational gender
politics. Cult contains these characters within different spaces, at varying times and through contradictory politics.

Section three ponders the place and role of politics at its most persistent and relevant. It demonstrates the consequences for social justice in an era of New Right ideologies. The chapter on South Park mobilises Leftist concerns within an overtly Rightist context, and Trainspotting moves through youth politics and acceleration to articulate movement in resistive meanings. These case studies contemplate the journey of popular culture in the postwar period by returning to the present and to the dominant culture. The colonisation of identity politics by the New Right makes the place of cultural studies – as a pedagogic formation - powerfully important. Colonisation of geographical peripheries is brought home to England as the colonisation of the Celtic fringe is interpreted through writing and resistance.

This thesis tracks (and connects) two broad movements - the shifting of political formations and the commodification of popular culture. The disconnecting dialogue between these two streams opens the terrain for cult. In the hesitations that delay their connection, cult is activated to cauterize this disjuncture.
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