

# NEH Application Cover sheet (FZ-292729)

## Public Scholars

### PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Benoit Denizet-Lewis

(b) (6)

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**Fax:**

**Status:** Senior scholar

**Field of expertise:** Journalism

### INSTITUTION

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Emerson College

Boston, MA 02116-4624

### APPLICATION INFORMATION

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**Title:** *We Don't Know You Anymore: Identity Change in America*

**Grant period:** From 2023-09-01 to 2024-09-01

**Project field(s):** Interdisciplinary Studies, General; Social Sciences, General

**Description of project:** “We Don’t Know You Anymore,” a book under contract with William Morrow in the United States (b) (4), is an ambitious exploration of transformation and identity change in 20th and 21st century America. What does it mean to become a “new person,” and who gets to decide whether an identity change is legitimate? What are the limits and ethics of self-identification when identity is increasingly understood to be malleable and self-constructed? And what is the relationship between personal and societal transformation? I build on the scholarship of theorists from diverse fields—including philosophy, history, and gender and sexuality studies—to show that our experience of altering our most personal characteristics are influenced by deeply politicized and often incoherent beliefs about who is changeable, and who has earned or forfeited the right to redemption or reinvention.

### REFERENCE LETTERS

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Andrew Solomon  
Professor  
Clinical Psychology  
Columbia University

(b) (6)

Lance Richardson  
Biographer & 2021/22 NEH Public Scholar

(b) (6)

### Significance and Contribution

For my fourth book, *We Don't Know You Anymore*, I build on the scholarship of theorists from diverse fields—including philosophy, history, psychology, and gender and sexuality studies—to investigate how we conceptualize the “self” during a period of cultural, political, and technological disruption. At a time when “obsession with identity is gripping the world,” as the linguist Florian Coulmas put it in 2017, and as identity is increasingly understood to be malleable and self-constructed, we are faced with provocative questions about the limits and ethics of transformation and self-identification.

Three decades ago, psychiatrist and historian Robert Lifton proposed the “protean self”—which he defined as the “continuous psychic re-creation” of the self and its many possibilities—to explain the historical forces he believed caused an eponymous post-modern self in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Lifton, who placed his research in conversation with Carl Jung and Erik Erikson, celebrated these changes, arguing that proteanism could serve as a powerful antidote to fundamentalism and cultism, which he understood as an ideological inflexibility common to partisans of all stripes. But in a paper published last year (“Can Proteanism Be Grounded?”), the now 96-year-old Lifton acknowledges “the limits and complexities of shapeshifting.” Healthy proteanism requires personal and societal stability, he argues, but too many Americans have neither. Remarkably, we live at a time of both peak proteanism and peak cultism.

*We Don't Know You Anymore*, which is under contract with three publishers (including William Morrow in the United States (b) (4) ), builds on the work of Lifton and other identity theorists to explore how we arrived at our current moment, when a fascinating confluence of political and cultural developments—including intersectionality, political polarization, social media, a racial reckoning, and new cultural norms around gender—have combined to center personal identity in our national conversation. This book is the most important and ambitious of my career. In it, I tackle changing cultural and political assumptions that shape our understanding of the flexibility of desire, belief, and identity. I confront contentious ideas about who we consider worthy of reinvention and redemption. And I show how our experience of altering ourselves has long been influenced by politicized and often incoherent beliefs about spotted leopards and old dogs. In the United States, we are obsessed with change (the country was founded partly on the principle of reinvention, after all) but suspicious of many who claim to have achieved it. Depending on the context—typically whether we agree with the direction of someone’s shift—we see metamorphosis as a sign of strength and humility or weakness and opportunism: the shift as grift. I will show how even the most seemingly private transformation can be torpedoed by cultural judgment and cynicism.

As is the case of much of my work, including my previous books and my *New York Times Magazine* cover stories, *We Don't Know You Anymore* will combine theory and scholarship with deeply layered narratives. What is it like to believe something with every fiber of one’s being (and to take on a corresponding identity), only to come to believe something different—maybe even its opposite? For some of my subjects, their identity shifts felt volitional, part of a deliberate reinvention. For others, transformation seemed to happen *to* them; it was confusing, destabilizing, and difficult to explain. But explain we must, because our identities typically require buy-in from others. I write extensively about “change narratives” as articulated by a broad array of people, including ‘60s and ‘70s radicals whose activism was inextricably linked to their personal transformations, murderers who convinced skeptical parole boards that they had discarded a “negative identity,” and contemporary sexual and gender minorities whose identity changes come boobytrapped with culture-war politics. While I am not writing explicitly about social change, “we cannot separate personal growth and communal change,” as Erikson reminds us in his 1968 book *Identity*. This project will engage with a broad range of humanities work to show how cultural and political transformations shape seemingly personal change.

### Sources and Organization

My research has involved extensive interviews with those who claim an identity transformation, as well as reviews and analysis of scholarship (historical, philosophical, cultural), change memoirs, and representations of transformation and conversion in visual arts. I approach the subject of identity change through a dynamic, multidisciplinary lens. What follows are brief descriptions of seven chapters. Though

this book is not about me, I include my own experiences with identity change when relevant. I serve as a guide, one interested in change both in others and myself.

*Be the Change?:* My opening chapter (after the introduction) is centered at the California retreat center Esalen, which, since 1961, has existed at the crossroads of changing oneself and changing the world. I open with my first trip there, weeks before the pandemic began, when I met Americans engaged in diverse change attempts. Through their stories, as well as a riveting narrative centered on several Esalen teachers (including a philosopher, psychiatrist, and my New-Age father) who each had theories of how people could discover their true identities, I introduce a major theme of the book: Can personal change be divorced from societal transformation? And is every personal identity change now political?

*Say My (New) Name:* We change names in this country more than virtually any people on earth, and we do so for a staggering number of identity-based reasons. This chapter expands on the work of historians and sociolinguists and includes a narrative of several contemporary Americans who have changed their names multiple times. I also explore the concept of a “deadname,” a word meant to describe the discarded birth name of a transgender person, but one that rings true for many people for whom a name change is an attempt to start over. I grapple with this question: When we become a new person, how much of our former self do we really leave behind?

*Hearts & Minds:* Though the Trump era cemented the conviction among many that we are a hopelessly divided country (and that there is no use trying to persuade anyone of anything anymore), a growing body of contemporary research—and a long history of Americans changing political ideologies—suggests we change our beliefs more than we realize. In this chapter, I write about some of America’s most important party swappers, paying particular attention to how they understood and articulated their change. I also highlight the work of contemporary political scientists and sociologists who have found that we increasingly define ourselves by our political beliefs. So much so, in fact, that we sometimes shift our other identities (including our religiosity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity) to match our political identity. For many Americans, political affiliation can now be called a *master identity*.

*Your New Identity is Problematic:* Complicating meaningful identity change—whether to one’s name, spiritual beliefs, political ideology, sexuality, or gender—is that personal identity change isn’t strictly personal. Our identities are connected to those of our families and communities, and we typically select them from the options available on the identity menu. I center this chapter on two people who changed in controversial ways; through their stories, as well as an examination of the work of sociologists and cultural theorists specializing in race and gender studies, I explore how an individual’s transformation can be championed or attacked by groups seeking recognition, rights, or political power. But divisive identity change is not new. I put our contemporary identity wars in perspective by telling the stories of earlier shapeshifters, including a Jewish musician in 1930s Harlem who willed himself to be Black.

*It All Happened So Fast:* It is what one psychologist calls “the stuff of fantasy for clients and psychotherapists alike”—profound, unexpected change that alters our sense of who we are in minutes or hours, replaced by what Carl Jung called “a completely new set of conceptions and motives.” Early founders of religion and psychology believed in the possibility of instantaneous change, which they understood as less a shift in behavior and more a revolution in character. And though many people—including Malcolm X, Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson, and author Eckhart Tolle—claim such transformational moments, their experiences are often dismissed. In this chapter, I explore what some call “quantum change” through the lens of philosophy and theology, and I show how our skepticism about rapid change fits within a larger cultural framework about the unlikelihood of true metamorphosis.

*You, Only Different & Better:* Most of us aren’t lucky enough to wake up transformed. We struggle to change our personalities, temperaments, and internal sense of ourselves—what might be called our core

identity. In this chapter, I investigate the evolution of our thinking about the boundaries of personality transformation, with a particular focus on both scholarship (including from personality researchers and philosophers) and narrative accounts of those who have tried to become something new. Among my subjects are an 83-year-old Massachusetts woman who wonders whether she can fundamentally change so late in life, and a 27-year-old New Yorker enrolled in a transformation course for people with personality disorders. Through their intimate stories, I investigate the possibilities—and seeming limits—of fundamentally altering who we are.

*So, You Say You've Changed?:* How should we determine a transformed person? This has been an obstacle faced by myriad people interested in our capacity to change ourselves, from philosophers to neuroscientists to perhaps the two groups most invested in helping us flip the script over the last two centuries—clergymen and therapists. Has a person changed because she says she has? Certainly not. In fact, the louder one professes to have changed, arguably the less likely it is that one has changed at all. Take, for example, a person who goes from far left to far right politically. What can look like profound change often masks a fundamentally unchanged personality, one desperate for black-and-white answers to complicated questions. Other people change seemingly without wanting to or even realizing it. In this concluding chapter, I struggle with the above question by reckoning with the transformations (or seeming transformations) of men who have committed what many consider unforgivable sins: murder and Nazism. I take readers to California, for example, where I spent time with murderers who convinced skeptical parole boards to let them free. By reviewing years of their parole board transcripts, and by analyzing the work of academics who study identity narration, I investigate what “change narratives” are effective at convincing us of another human’s rehabilitation.

#### Competencies, Skills, and Access

This project is the culmination of a career writing and teaching about the politics of identity. As *The New York Times Magazine*’s primary chronicler of LGBT life for two decades, I elucidated identity-based movements and controversies, including same-sex marriage, transgender activism, bisexual erasure, and, most recently, the changing terrain for LGBT conservatives. But none of my previous work prepared me for the day Michael Glatze, a former colleague from a magazine for gay youth, announced he was no longer gay. Michael was claiming a remarkable trifecta of change—of his sexual identity, his spiritual beliefs, and his politics. While those who didn’t know Michael mocked or pilloried him in the press, I worried about my friend. Had he been brainwashed? Was he insane? Were the changes he was claiming even possible? I spent time with Michael at his Bible school in Wyoming and wrote a story about him that was turned into a film—“I Am Michael”—starring James Franco and Zachary Quinto. Since then, our battles over whose identities are legitimate, and which can be changed, have grown only more contentious. I explore these changes with my students at Emerson College, where I am a tenured associate professor and teach courses in longform writing and interdisciplinary studies, including a current class called “Why We Change Identities.” Though I now have a home in academia, I have always published for a general audience. My books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Travels With Casey*, are written for a wide and curious readership interested in narrative, historical context, and cultural analysis.

#### Final Product and Dissemination

*We Don’t Know You Anymore* is due in summer 2024 and will be published in 2025. As my editor writes in his letter, he envisions “a major publicity and marketing campaign and an announced first printing of 100,000 copies.” I plan to promote the book widely. (I have spoken about previous books on NPR’s *Here & Now* and *On Point*, *The Today Show*, and *Good Morning America*, and they were reviewed everywhere from *The New York Times* to *People*.) This book will include an extensive bibliography and notes section.

## Work Plan

My book, *We Don't Know You Anymore: Identity Change in America*, is due to my three publishers in summer 2024 and is scheduled to be published in 2025.

I am applying for twelve months of full-time funding beginning in September 2023. All work will be conducted in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

I have completed my research and reporting and have written three of my eight chapters. I will write two more chapters before the beginning of the fellowship period. During the fellowship period, I will write the remaining three chapters, as well as the introduction, conclusion, bibliography, and extensive notes section. Below is the writing schedule for the award period.

### September-November

Write "Your New Identity Is Problematic," a chapter exploring contentions identity changes involving race, gender, and sexual orientation.

### December-February

Write "Spotted Leopards & Old Dogs," a chapter focusing on historical and contemporary beliefs about who is changeable or worthy of reinvention and redemption.

### March & April

Write "Be the Change?," a chapter investigating the connection between personal and social transformation through the lenses of philosophy, spirituality (including New Age beliefs), and political science.

### May & June

Write the introduction and conclusion.

### July & August

Complete fact-check and notes and bibliography section.

## Bibliography

I have interviewed too many people to list them here. (I will reference some in my Narrative.) Below is a representative sample of texts—from many disciplines—I am reading as research for *We Don't Know You Anymore*.

- \**The Protean Self: Human Resilience in the Age of Fragmentation*, Robert Jay Lifton, Basic Books. 1993
- \**Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erik H. Erikson, Norton. 1968
- \**Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, edited by Maria Carla Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, NY University Press. 2001
- \**Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, edited by Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, Blackwell Publishing. 2003
- \**Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*, Baz Dreisinger, University of Massachusetts Press. 2008
- \**The Future of the Self: Inventing the Post-Modern Person*, Walter Truett Anderson, Putnam. 1997
- \**Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Anthony Giddens, Stanford University Press. 1991
- \**You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by Laurie Shrage, Oxford University Press. 2009
- \**The Language of Names: What We Call Ourselves and Why it Matters*, Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays, Touchstone. 1997
- \**You Must Change Your Life*, Peter Sloterdijk, translated from German, Goethe Institute. 2009
- \**James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Library of America. 1998
- \**Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman, A Stillpoint Press Book. 1978
- \**Character: The History of a Cultural Obsession*, Marjorie Garber, FSG. 2020
- \**Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections*, edited by Chris Cuomo and Kim Hall, Rowman & Littlefield. 1999
- \**Body Modification*, edited by Mike Featherstone, SAGE. 2000
- \**Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, Gayle Ward, Duke University Press. 2000
- \**Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Blackwell Publishers. 1994
- \**Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, Stanislav Grof & Christina Grof, Putnam. 1986
- \**Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, Eli Saslow, Doubleday. 2018
- \**In the Darkroom*, Susan Faludi, Picador. 2016
- \**Jean Toomer's Years With Gurdjieff*, Rudolph P. Byrd, The University of Georgia Press. 1990
- \**Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us*, Rachel Aviv, FSG. 2022
- \**Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Jeffrey J. Kripal, The University of Chicago Press. 2007
- \**Please Touch: A Guided Tour of the Human Potential Movement*, Jane Howard, McGraw-Hill. 1970
- \**The Transforming Moment*, James Loder, Harper & Row. 1989
- \**Cards of Identity*, Nigel Dennis, Faber and Faber. 1955
- \**Karlfried Graf Durckheim: Une Vie Sous Le Signe De La Transformation*, Gerhard Wehr, translated into French from German. 1997
- \**The Ordeal of Change*, Eric Hoffer, Hopewell Publications. 1963
- \**Can Personality Change?*, edited by Todd Heatherton and Joel Weinberger, American Psychological Association. 1994
- \**A Culture of Second Chances*, David Newman, Lexington Books. 2020

## **Benoit Denizet-Lewis**

### NONFICTION BOOKS & ANTHOLOGIES

#### ***We Don't Know You Anymore***

**William Morrow (USA), (b) (4)**

Under contract for this book about how and why people change their identities and belief systems. This project has received fellowship support from New America and Emerson College.

#### ***Travels With Casey: My Journey Through Our Dog-Crazy Country***

**Simon & Schuster, 2014**

Instant *New York Times* bestseller. The book was positively reviewed everywhere from *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly* to *The New York Times* and *People*, which named *Travels With Casey* its “Book of the Week.”

#### ***American Voyeur: Dispatches from the Far Reaches of Modern Life***

**Simon & Schuster, 2010**

Collection of work from early in my career focusing on sex, identity, and youth culture. *Publishers Weekly* wrote the book “offers stirring and sensitive portraits of individuals—frequently adolescents—struggling to articulate desire and identity while bearing the weight of societal taboo and marginalization.”

#### ***America Anonymous: Eight Addicts in Search of a Life***

**Simon & Schuster, 2009**

Narrative account of three years in the lives of eight people struggling with addiction. The book was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice selection and a best book of the year by the *Huffington Post* and *Kirkus*, which called it “an arresting, personal glimpse into the merciless world of drug and behavioral addiction.”

#### ***The Kids: The Children of LGBTQ Parents in the USA***

**The New Press, 2017**

Wrote the introduction to this collection of photographs and text about the children of LGBTQ parents.

#### ***The Letter Q.: Queer Writers' Notes to their Younger Selves***

**Arthur A. Levine Books, 2012**

Contributed an original essay to this collection.

#### ***Best African-American Essays***

**Bantam, 2009**

Contributed a previously published essay to this collection.

### TEACHING

#### ***Emerson College***

**Associate Professor, 2013-Present**

Teach undergraduate and graduate courses in longform writing and interdisciplinary studies, including courses about sexual identity and identity development and change. I also direct the school's Publishing Series.

#### ***The College of Wooster***

**Merton M Sealts Jr. Writer-in-Residence, 2012**

Taught courses in nonfiction writing.

## JOURNALISM

### *The New York Times Magazine*

#### **Contributing Writer, 2002-Present**

Author of seven cover pieces and a dozen features, including stories about identity, politics, and youth culture. My stories are among the most read in the magazine's history and have received numerous awards.

### *The New York Times Book Review*

#### **Contributor, 2013-Present**

Review fiction and nonfiction about identity, sex, LGBT life, youth culture, education, and poverty.

## FILM & DOCUMENTARY

### *I Am Michael*

#### **Co-Producer, 2017**

Served on the producing team for this film—starring James Franco, Zachary Quinto, and Emma Roberts—based on my *New York Times Magazine* article “My Ex-Gay Friend.”

### *White Hot: The Rise & Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch*

#### **Contributor, 2022**

Starred as primary expert in this Netflix documentary about the company and its founder.

## FELLOWSHIPS/AWARDS/HONORS

### *New America*

#### **National Fellow, 2021-2022**

Recipient of fellowship to work on *We Don't Know You Anymore*.

### *Emerson College*

#### **Huret Faculty Excellence Award, 2021**

Recipient of fellowship to work on *We Don't Know You Anymore*.

### *MacDowell*

#### **Fellow, December-January 2011**

Recipient of writing fellowship to work on a *New York Times Magazine* article and *Travels With Casey*.

### *GLAAD*

#### **2003 and 2010**

Two-time recipient of the “Outstanding Magazine Article” award.

### *Association of LGBTQ Journalists*

#### **2010**

Recipient of “Excellence in Journalism” award.

### *Alicia Patterson Foundation*

#### **Fellow, 2004**

Recipient of year-long journalism fellowship to research teenagers and suicide.

## EDUCATION

### *Northwestern University*

#### **1993-1997**

Bachelor's Degree, Medill School of Journalism.





November 27, 2022

To Whom It May Concern,

(b) (4), (b) (6)

[Redacted content]

Best,  
Mauro DiPreta

Mauro DiPreta : SVP & Executive Editor : William Morrow : 195 Broadway : New York, NY : 10007: (347)387-1670

New York, New York 10011-8702

TEL: (b) (6) FAX: (b) (6)

E-MAIL: (b) (6)

January 10th, 2022

Dear NEH Public Scholars Selection Committee,

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark brown ink, appearing to read 'A. Solomon', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrew Solomon

Author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon*

Professor of Clinical Medical Psychology, Columbia University Medical Center

Lance Richardson

(b) (6)

January 16, 2023

Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

(b) (6)

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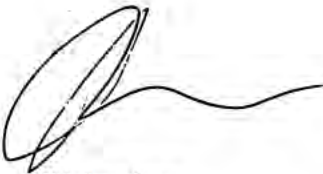
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Regards,



Lance Richardson  
NEH Public Scholar, 2021-22