

# Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

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Tradition, and Teaching*

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## Bodies in Motion: Challenging Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching [Dialogue: The The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, Volume 7, Issue 1 (February 2020)]

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**DIALOGUE**

*The Interdisciplinary Journal of  
Popular Culture and Pedagogy*



# Bodies in Motion:

## Challenging Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching

*Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*

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# Bodies in Motion: Challenging Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching

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## Challenging the Normative in Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Cultural and educational paradigms shift over time. Currently, we are amidst changing mindsets within American society, as well as internationally. As part of these changes, attitudes and practices also evolve, with effects and important considerations for teaching and learning. The once “traditional” or “normative” notions of culture and learning are shifting. Here I draw from Niall Richardson’s (2010) description of “normative,” as referring to something culturally imposed and suggested as “normal.” These shifts in representations of normativity have been shown in varied ways, such as in TV series’ changing narratives of motherhood, infertility and surrogacy (Le Vay, 2019) or in YouTube’s beauty community (García-Rapp, 2018). As audiences and scholars, we have an opportunity to learn from popular culture’s changing ideals of normativity.

In this issue, *Bodies in Motion: Rethinking Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching*, I am pleased to present a collection of eight rich articles. These works explore and evolve our understanding of popular culture and pedagogy to meet the needs of current and future generations. They critically engage with cultural expectations and pedagogical practice related to literary, musical, visual, textual and digital understanding. What we see, what we experience, and what and how we learn all provide means for challenging the normative in popular culture and pedagogy.

The first two essays both draw from a critical theoretical perspective of bell hooks and reconceptualize thinking about normativity in representation in body presentation and in musical form. The first of the essays, written by Marie Gethins reconceptualizes disability through an examination of *The Tin Woodman of Oz*. The author applies Chopfyt to show “the psychological effects of limb loss and the concept of usefulness.” Gethins explores the ways L. Frank Baum was influenced by the Civil War and World War I amputees while addressing essential “cultural lessons” of “characterizations of prostheses, physical normalcy, and what constitutes a sense of self.” Moving beyond “flat characters” portraying disability in children’s literature, Gethins details how Baum’s work in the *Tin Woodman* challenges cultural perceptions.

Subsequently, in Robert Tinajero’s essay, *Relandscaping the Rhetorical Tradition through Hip Hop*, he repositions rap music and hip hop culture from the margins of rhetorical studies to a central locus of discussion. Applying the term “relandscaping,” Tinajero argues for a “dynamic and inclusive rhetorical tradition.” In the article, he emphasizes a shifting: of perspective, of rhetorical subject, of circle of practice and shifting of theoretical frame, to reconceptualize rhetorical studies with rap music and hip hop culture involved.

The next two articles examine pedagogical practice. First, in Kyle Hammonds and Karen Anderson-Lain’s, *The Batman Comes to Class: Popular Culture as a Tool for Addressing Reflexive Pain*, the authors use a case study to examine culture through the application of comics and graphic narratives within the undergraduate classroom. Hammonds and Anderson-Lain demonstrate how critical pedagogy and “comics as a learning tool” can be applied in effective ways for teaching and learning in higher education. Then in Erin Guydish Buchholz’s article, *Pedagogy, Ideology, & Composition: Is There a Better Way to Teach?*, she presents valuable insights about stimulating students’ critical thinking. As demonstrated through a research study integrating

“significant learning experiences,” Guydish Buchholz concentrates on student growth, drawing connections between the development of a new pedagogical practice and real-world learning and application.

The final four essays re-examine the visual and literary in film, written text, cultural event, and video games. In Natasha Chuk’s, *A Gaze of Cruelty, Deferred: Actualizing the ‘Female Gaze’ in Cate Shortland’s Berlin Syndrome (2017)*, the author upends the concept of the male gaze to reexamine the female gaze. In her essay, Chuk uses Cate Shortland’s *Berlin Syndrome (2017)* to lead the reader through a mechanized and reinforced cinematic construct. In Kristin Leonard’s essay, the author discusses the “delicious sensory smorgasbord of grammar and syntax strategies” presented in Virginia Tufte’s *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. She notes in *First-Person Adolescent Storytellers and Virginia Tufte’s Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style* that amidst the excellent text there is a general lack of first-person adolescent storytellers. As such, Leonard uses two first-person adolescent narrators, one from Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Fever 1793* and another from Moira Young’s *Blood Red Road* to extend the utility of Tufte’s syntax to a yet fully explored genre. Then in Luc Guglielmi’s, *Finding the Sacred in the Profane: The Mardi Gras in Basile, Louisiana*, the author links spirituality around Ash Wednesday to the celebratory nature of Mardi Gras. He reconsiders the aesthetic event through folklore and analysis to show how it is “tolerated” and “accepted” by the Church. The final essay, by Graham Oliver, rethink how to analyze video game storylines. In *Renegade or Paragon?: Categorizing Narrative Choice in Video Game Storylines*, Oliver suggests a “nuanced” manner for “dissection of gaming narratives.” He argues for the need to “push the boundaries” to better understand narrative for audiences and narrative change in general, presenting a new typology for game studies.

Lastly, in addition to the eight articles delving deeply into issues of popular culture and pedagogy, we are pleased to share a *Musing* on pedagogy and three *Book Reviews*. The *Musing*, by B Mann and Meg Greenberg Sandeman, shares pedagogical practice with high school students to support teaching and learning about problematic narratives. The *Book Reviews* include Julie Watts review of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games (2019)*, and Laura Davis’s review of Angie Manfredi’s edited collection, *The (other)F Word: A Celebration of the Fat & Fierce*. Forthcoming is a review by Holly Chung of Anna Tso’s *Hong Kong Stories (2017, 2018, 2019)*. Across these three reviews, the authors take readers across worlds: from fantasy, to worldly travels, to embodied personal experiences.

As with any product, it is only as good as the individual parts and the people involved. To that end, I would like to thank the exceptional work of our *Dialogue* team for this issue: Managing Editor, Kelli Bippert; Book Review Editor, Karina Vado; Creative Designer, Douglas CohenMiller; Copy Editors, Miriam Sciala and Robert Gordyn; and the peer review team and authors.

Overall, *Bodies in Motion: Rethinking Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching*, provides insightful commentary and innovative approaches for taking another look and reflecting on our own academic and personal lives. As we move into 2020 with the release of the first issue of the year, we look forward to your feedback about the articles, *Musing*, and *Reviews*. Moreover, we look forward to continuing moving beyond “traditional” and “normative” ways of practice and thinking and encourage you to think creatively about ways you can contribute to *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*.

Anna S. CohenMiller, PhD  
Editor in Chief

CohenMiller

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## ***The Tin Woodman, Captain Fyter, and Chopfyt: L. Frank Baum's Portrayal of Body Image and Prostheses in the Wake of World War I***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century children's literature frequently depicts characters with disabilities as flat stereotypes — villains or saintly invalids. L. Frank Baum's *The Tin Woodman of Oz* (1918) provides a sharp contrast to these typical portrayals, as well as contemporary "socio-cultural" beliefs on physical normalcy and sense of self. Written as the U.S. entered World War I and details of trench warfare reached the home-front, it presents an interesting exploration of society's response to physical disability and prostheses. In addition, it highlights the psychological devastation associated with body changes.

During Baum's formative years, disabled Civil War veterans returned to New York state in large numbers. Initially respected for their service and their subsequent loss, Civil War veterans gradually found themselves the subject of resentment across much of the United States. Many cities passed ordinances prohibiting the disabled from frequenting public areas to avoid "disturbing" the populace. Baum's portrayal of three characters contrasts with contemporary "socio-cultural" mores.

In *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, the Tin Woodman and Captain Fyter, who progressively dismembered themselves and replaced body parts with tin prostheses, are shown in a positive light. When these "tin twins" Captain Fyter and the Tin Woodman encounter Chopfyt — a man assembled from a combination of their flesh body parts — the three characters reflect on what constitutes physical normalcy, as well as the value and beauty of prostheses. Through Chopfyt, the psychological effects of limb loss and the concept of usefulness come to the fore.

This paper considers the influences the Civil War and World War I amputees may have played on Baum's writing of *The Tin Woodman of Oz* and what cultural lessons underlie his characterizations of prostheses, physical normalcy, and what constitutes a sense of self.

**Keywords:** disability, prostheses, amputee, Oz, World War I, physical normalcy

Gethins

## BODY

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century children's literature features many characters with disabilities, usually depicted as flat stereotypes — villains or saintly invalids (Dowker). L. Frank Baum's *The Tin Woodman of Oz* (1918) provides a much more nuanced portrayal with characters considering how body image and prostheses form a positive basis for their identities.

During Baum's formative years, disabled Civil War veterans returned to New York state in large numbers. As masculine independence was conflated with control and self-direction by working men (Williams-Searle), amputees struggled to present themselves as vital in an increasingly hostile social climate. In the mid-nineteenth century, American culture viewed "natural" as conformed to God's design and equated it with goodness. Equally, the opposite of normal was defective or monstrous (Baynton, 19). Several U.S. cities passed ordinances prohibiting the disabled frequenting from public areas to avoid such "disturbing" sights (Schweik, 3).

Baum provides a sharp contrast to these sociocultural beliefs in *The Tin Woodman of Oz*. Two characters who progressively dismembered themselves, replacing body parts with tin prostheses, are shown in a positive light. When these "tin twins" Captain Fyter and the Tin Woodman encounter Chopfyt — a man assembled from a combination of their flesh body parts — the three characters reflect on what constitutes physical normalcy, as well as the value and beauty of prostheses. Accepting their physical change leads to personal success for the tin men. However, Baum includes a caveat; while "otherness" is accepted in the fantastical land of Oz, it is the tin men's pride in their prostheses that leads to errors in judgment causing physical damage and prohibiting their ability to act in times of crisis. Baum wrote *The Tin Woodman of Oz* while U.S. involvement in World War I was at its peak, with the horrors of Western Front trench warfare being detailed in news dispatches (Loncraine). By the end of World War I, about 4,000 amputations were performed on U.S. soldiers (Schlich), much lower than the 60,000 during the American Civil War. However, these news reports possibly reawakened the author's childhood memories of Civil War amputees, bringing contemporary societal beliefs into focus, perhaps informing his writing *The Tin Woodman of Oz*.

A consideration of Baum's background as a part of contextual analysis of these three characters in *The Tin Woodman of Oz* provides an exploration of Baum's views on personal and societal responses to the concepts of physical normalcy, prostheses, and what constitutes a sense of self.

## EXPOSURE TO CIVIL WAR AMPUTEES

Born in 1856 into a middle-class family, L. Frank Baum spent most of his childhood on a large estate in Onondaga County, outside Syracuse, New York. Although his father did not serve in the armed forces, Baum's formative years from five to nine were likely colored by the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). His parents named another son after a Unionist general, and his uncle Adam Clarke Baum enlisted as a Union surgeon and sent detailed letters back home (Loncraine). New York state provided the largest number of Union soldiers, a total of more than 360,000 (Durr), with 12,265 coming from Onondaga County (Loncraine). The combination of new ammunition that caused devastating wounds and the resulting access to more effective pain relief resulted in large scale amputations (Loncraine). Three-quarters of all Civil War surgeries were amputations — approximately 60,000 in total ("Maimed Men"). At the time, American society viewed disability as a window into character (Garland Thomson). A missing limb could be interpreted as evidence of moral degradation and loss of virility (Carroll). In 1863 Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: "Now, alas there are few of us who have not a cripple among our friends, if not our families" (Bellard). He strongly advocated for artificial limbs to make amputee vets feel "whole again" (Holmes). As a result, a prosthetics industry flourished during the war and for many years afterwards with nearly 150 patents issued for artificial limb designs between 1861 and 1873 (Bellard). In 1862, the federal government implemented the Great Civil War Benefaction that provided

Union vets with \$75 for an artificial leg and \$50 for an arm prosthesis (MacRae). By 1864, the Confederacy gave similar payments (quoted in Bellard). In addition, two Union battalions were formed in 1863 for disabled soldiers to continue war-related work. However, many disabled veterans did not want or were unable to return to serve. The homecoming of the disabled veterans in large numbers to the non-war society profoundly altered cultural attitudes (Blanck). Between 1862 and 1888 the Federal government granted 168,155 pensions to Union veterans that had undergone amputations or had sustained significant battlefield wounds (Blanck). In 1894, a New York statute provided street peddling privileges for disabled veterans on any commercial street or in any park within the state — an attempt to offer a possible pathway to income generation (Pace).

However, general public admiration for disabled Union veterans began to shift with newspapers voicing the opinion of an increasingly intolerant populace, portraying disabled veterans as a group of money-grabbing dependents (“Maimed Men”). Cities passed ordinances prohibiting the “unsightly or disgusting” from public view (Schweik, 1), known colloquially as “Ugly Laws”. In 1867 San Francisco implemented the first — a direct response to a former Union soldier living on the streets while awaiting an almshouse completion (Schweik). Against this shifting social backdrop, in 1868 Baum, aged twelve, was sent to Peekskill Military Academy. He found the regime cruel, frequently writing to his father with details of abusive staff. After eighteen months in the Academy, a weak heart diagnosis sent Baum home to complete his education (Rogers). Away from the rigors of the academy, his exposure to the military continued through the numerous Civil War veterans in Syracuse. It is likely Baum witnessed the growing cultural resentment these vets faced.

There is ample evidence L. Frank Baum drew upon this life experience for elements incorporated into the Oz series. One of the roads that lead away from Peekskill Military Academy was paved with Dutch yellow brick. Originally used as ballast in the 1700s, the bricks were repurposed for local roads (Loncraine). The character name Dorothy Gale is based upon a beloved infant niece of Baum’s wife who died as he was writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Schwartz). Seventeen years before the publication of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Baum and his brother Benjamin founded a petroleum company. Covering the July 1883 company opening, the *Syracuse Daily Courier* reported their premier product was rust-resistant axle grease. L. Frank Baum served as the chief salesman for the next four years. Arranging a client window display that featured a metal man later inspired Baum to create the Tin Woodman character that needed regular oiling of his joints to prevent rust (“Oil in the Land of Oz”). Considering his tale of flesh Nick Chopper’s transformation into the Tin Woodman, Baum’s exposure to disabled Civil War veterans and their prostheses played a strong role in character creation. Baum’s residence in Chicago (1891-1909), a city synonymous with Ugly Laws’ aggressive enforcement (Schweik) also must have been an influence. Against dominant “socio-cultural” attitudes, he portrayed limb replacement as progressive and worthy of celebration, not derision.

### **FLESH INTO TIN – A BETTER MAN?**

Introduced in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the Tin Woodman plays an integral part across the series as a whole, appearing in thirteen of the fourteen Oz books written by Baum. His origin story is detailed in this initial book. As the flesh man Nick Chopper, he fell in love with a witch’s servant, Nimmie Amee, and proposed marriage to her. Unhappy with this development, the witch enchanted Chopper’s ax causing him to progressively cut off body parts. After each loss, he had them replaced with tin prosthetics. At each stage of replacement, Nimmie Amee found her fiancé even more attractive. When his transformation was complete, she highlighted the advantages such a tireless husband could offer. However, the Tin Woodman’s love for Nimmie Amee disappeared along with his flesh heart, and so, he abandoned her. Throughout the series, other characters observe that his metal body must be a disadvantage, to which he responds by listing the benefits of never requiring food or sleep, as well as the undeniable brightness of his appearance. It was his desire

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to retain his social identity as a woodman that motivated his seeking prosthetic replacements. However, as Joshua R. Eyler explains, “Both the missing limbs and the tin serve to stigmatize him in their own ways: the former marginalizes him from other woodmen and the latter embodies his difference from the perceived norms of Oz.” (325). Yet the manner in which he lost his flesh body can be linked to his repeated claims of being a “better man”. The loss resulted from his desire to marry Nimmie Amee. The Tin Woodman craves heteronormativity and fears that as a metal man, his masculinity could be discounted (Eyler).

For the Tin Woodman his disability is not his metal form, but his lack of a loving heart. He justifies his abandonment of Nimmie Amee on this basis. Once he acquires a velvet and sawdust heart, the Tin Woodman is quick to note his belief that the replacement organ has limitations: providing kindness, but not romantic love. Eyler states that the Tin Woodman’s “disability comes from his awareness of the constructions of normality, constructions into which he believes he no longer fits” (325). Underlying the Tin Woodman’s boasting about the superiority of his tin form is a fear that he could be discounted as a woodman, that his prosthetic body impinges on his sense of manhood (Eyler). The Tin Woodman and his companion the Scarecrow represent two male identity extremes (Laurie). Too hard, the Tin Woodman can think, but cannot feel. Too soft, the Scarecrow feels, but cannot think. Outside physical normalcy, each can achieve qualified psychological success.

Although the Tin Woodman professes that he cannot feel romantic love, in *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, other characters convince him that based on a manly sense of duty, he should still marry Nimmie Amee, and the group sets off on a quest to find her. This plays to his fear that with his prosthetic body, he may fall short of being a true man. Baum relies on contemporary “socio-cultural” tropes of masculinity to amplify the impact of disability on the Tin Woodman’s sense of self-worth for early twentieth-century readers (Eyler). Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes, “Not only is the relationship between text and the world not exact, but [disabled] representation also relies upon cultural assumptions to fill in missing details” (11). Although gender roles in the United States began to shift with the Women’s Suffrage movement, in which Baum’s mother-in-law was a key figure, for most Americans in 1917, men continued to be viewed as having the responsibility of being a strong provider (Grayzel). Any physical disability would affect his fulfilling this responsibility, particularly for a job based on manual labor such as that of a woodman.

Several events on the journey force the Tin Woodman and his companions to reconsider aspects of their identity and body image. When the giantess Mrs. Yoop transforms him into an owl, the Tin Woodman discovers that the metal he considered superior to the flesh becomes ridiculous as an owl. His metal feathers clatter with the slightest movement. The saucer-like eyes reflect and intensify daylight making it difficult to see. “Consider *my* humiliation!” chirped the owl (Baum, 92). Later the Tin Woodman wonders, “What is a tin owl good for?” (Baum, 94) In his usual form as a metal man, he sees value and purpose. After this mishap is rectified and the characters return to their proper forms, the group continues their adventure. The Tin Woodman recognizes his old forest home but is shocked to find a second tin man in the woods, Captain Fyter. The Tin Woodman no longer is the unique figure that he has boasted to be throughout the earlier chapters. However, the “tin twins” soon bond over their shared opinion that metal bodies are superior to the flesh.

Baum reinforces the beauty of both tin men’s prosthetics over “natural” flesh through Captain Fyter’s parallel origin story. He, too, fell in love with Nimmie Amee, the witch enchanted his sword, and he progressively chopped himself to pieces, each limb fabricated and replaced by the same tinsmith that created the Tin Woodman’s prosthetics. Captain Fyter notes that Nimmie Amee was not attracted to him until he acquired his tin replacements:

“When I got my tin legs, Nimmie Amee began to take an interest in me; when I got my tin arms, she began to like me better than ever, and when I was all made of tin, she said I looked like her dear Nick Chopper and she would be willing to marry me.” (Baum, 197)

Nimmie Amee's reaction contrasts with the pervasive mindset of the time that abnormal equals subnormal (Baynton). Here, prostheses make both men more desirable.

The group continues their quest to find Nimmie Amee, stopping at the tinsmith's cottage. There, the Tin Woodman discovers his old flesh head in a cupboard, unconnected to any other body parts, but very much alive. Despite the severed head's claim that his brains and intellect are as "good as ever," the head has little memory of his past and has "no interest in happiness." Nick Chopper's head articulates the idea that created body parts are not equivalent to the flesh. In fact, they diminish an individual. Even as a disembodied head, Chopper believes that he is a higher caliber of person than a manufactured tin man. He says, "It would be unnatural for me to have any interest in a man made of tin" (Baum, 215). Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick note that severed heads are expository — that they display a range of messages which rely on the absence of the body (34). Nick Chopper's head lacks agency: he cannot move. Here, the severed head's response is to seek isolation from society. The Tin Woodman never wavers from believing his prostheses are an overall improvement.

"When [the tinsmith] had joined the arms and legs to the body, and set my head in the tin collar, I was a much better man than ever, for my body could not ache or pain me, and I was so beautiful and bright that I had no need of clothing." (Baum, 26)

This point is emphasized again when the group of travelers visits the tinsmith:

"It doesn't matter, however," said the Tin Woodman. "Our tin bodies are more brilliant and durable and quite satisfy us."

"Yes, the tin bodies are the best," agreed the Tin Soldier. "Nothing can hurt them."

"Unless they get dented or rusted," said Woot, but both the tin men frowned on him. (Baum, 207)

Baum disproves the tin men's notion of durability in a later scene where, as Woot foreshadowed, they become badly dented, necessitating fairy aid for repair.

"It was the collision," said the Tin Woodman regretfully. "I knew something was wrong with me, and now I see that my side is dented in so that I lean over to the left. It was the Soldier's fault; he shouldn't have been so careless."

"It is your fault that my right leg is bent, making it shorter than the other, so I limp badly," retorted the Soldier. "You shouldn't have stood where I was walking." (Baum, 239)

Although Baum provides this check on the boasting by the tin men, clearly, both have retained spiritual wholeness. They retain full memories of their flesh past and are integrated into Oz society, making active contributions to the success of the story's quest. In contrast, Nick Chopper's head is unpleasant, has few memories, and seeks isolation.

While the Tin Woodman conversing with his former flesh head is unsettling, the tinsmith's confession that he created an assistant by gluing together various parts from the two men's flesh bodies is a particularly strange revelation. Named Chopfyt — a portmanteau of Nick Chopper and Captain Fyter — this assembled man disappeared as soon as he heard his intended function. When the travelers eventually find Nimmie Amee, they learn that she has married Chopfyt. As with Nick Chopper's head, this motley constructed man treats the two tin men with disdain. He is "cold," "indifferent," and "insolent" (Baum). Nimmie Amee describes him as having a "mixed nature." Chopfyt is the very embodiment of a divided self (Loncraine, 273), has no past,



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and refuses to converse with the guests. Like Nick Chopper's head, Chopfyt wants to live in isolation from the world beyond Nimmie Amee's cottage. When the tin twins object to Chopfyt's possession of their former body parts, Nimmie Amee scolds them:

"I see no reason why you should object to him. You two gentlemen threw him away when you became tin because you had no further use for him, so you cannot justify your claim to him now." (Baum, 278)

Baum shows that the tin men must let go of ownership of their former flesh limbs and that acceptance of their prostheses is constructive. Sense of self and memories are not tied to body parts. The Tin Woodman and Captain Fyter contribute to society, have active roles, and are even more attractive post-transformation. Baum suggests that acceding to physical change, and to an extent disability, can lead to positive outcomes (Ness). In both cases, the tin men are more content in their manufactured bodies with the tinsmith confirming they are superior to the flesh:

"I am sure their tin bodies are a great improvement on their meat bodies."

"Very true," said the Tin Soldier.

"I quite agree with you," said the Tin Woodman. "I happened to find my old head in your cupboard, a while ago, and certainly it is not as desirable a head as the tin one I now wear." (Baum, 223)

In contrast to the tin men's positivity, Nick Chopper's flesh head and Chopfyt's haphazardly constructed body are unpleasant and resent their situations. The head wants to be left alone in the closed cupboard and happiness is of no value to him (Baum). Despite marrying Nimmie Amee, Chopfyt scowls and is rude to his visitors, anxious for them to leave (Baum,). After these two encounters, the tin men are ever more convinced of their prostheses' superiority. However, the author also provides the caution that overconfidence in prosthesis superiority can lead to a downfall – whether in seized joints or denting the body, resulting in an inability to act.

## **INFLUENCE OF WORLD WAR I ON THE TIN WOODMAN OF OZ**

The First World War began on June 28, 1914. Baum's publisher approved the plot outline for *The Tin Woodman of Oz* on August 10, 1916 (Rogers). The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, with two of Baum's sons immediately enlisting — both as officers. The eldest, Frank Jr., soon left for France. Baum wrote to him, "I continually pray for a speedy end to this terrible war and your safe return" (Loncraine, 275). As he wrote the draft, the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front filled newspaper columns. While it was too soon for returning disabled U.S. soldiers, those on the home front received stories of what they encountered in Europe. "Off ship this A.M. Marched through part of Glasgow... people all seem glad to see us...saw lots of crippled soldiers here." (Moyle, 3)

Rebecca Loncraine notes that World War I fed into Baum's preoccupation with body dismemberment and amputation forming an essential aspect of the work with the tin twin's detailed maiming, and their broken bodies reassembled as Chopfyt, but with evident psychological devastation (273).

The Tin Woodman and Captain Fyter origin stories, which detail their dismemberment and gradual body part replacements, reveal that World War I dominated Baum's thoughts while writing *The Tin Woodman of Oz*. Chopfyt, glued together from the two men's castoff body parts, illustrates emotional turmoil — a divided self who can never be complete or whole, uncertain of his persona he will remain forever troubled. Baum indicates that the sense of self is part of remembered experience. The two tin men retain their memories and personal identities, despite losing their flesh bodies. In contrast, Nick Chopper's head and Chopfyt have no

memory of any previous lives. They are left only with the material, not spiritual, and are immensely unhappy.

Two other characters in the traveling group observe this differentiation:

“But listen, Nimmie Amee!” said the astonished Woot. “He really is both of them, for he is made of their cast-off parts.”

“Oh, you’re quite wrong,” declared Polychrome, laughing, for she greatly enjoyed the confusion of others. “The tin men are still themselves, as they will tell you, and so Chopfyt must be someone else.” (Baum, 276-7)

However, the tin men view Chopfyt as inconsequential, a non-entity not worthy of existence, and offer Nimmie Amee a rather dark remedy.

“If you don’t like him,” suggested the Tin Woodman. “Captain Fyter and I can chop him up with our axe and sword, and each take such parts of the fellow as belong to him. Then we are willing for you to select one of us as your husband.”

“That is a good idea,” approved Captain Fyter, drawing his sword. (Baum, 277)

Despite the First World War being one of the deadliest conflicts in history (Nash), U.S. military deaths were relatively slight compared to other nations’ forces. Approximately 4,000 amputations were performed on U.S. soldiers (Schlich), a fraction of the 60,000 that occurred during the American Civil War. During the eighteen months that Baum wrote and edited the draft, it is unlikely that he encountered many of these amputees. Rather, it is more probable that his childhood memories of Civil War amputees were reawakened by news dispatches and his son Frank’s detailed letters from the Front. Sequestered in his Los Angeles home, the author’s health was in severe decline. He delivered the galley proofs for *The Tin Woodman of Oz* to his publisher on February 14, 1918, made a will, and entered the hospital for a gall bladder operation with the fear that his weak heart would not support him through the surgery. Baum lived another year and three months, essentially bedridden. He drafted and revised two additional Oz books, but *The Tin Woodman of Oz* was the final book published while alive. It proved to be one of his most popular releases and caused sales of the previous eleven Oz books to rebound after eight lackluster years.

## CHALLENGING CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder propose the term “narrative prosthesis” to describe the use of disability as a literary device which is “a destabilizing sign of cultural prescriptions about the body and a deterministic vehicle of characterization for characters constructed as disabled” (50). Although Oz is a fantastical world, and therefore, not limited by realism and societal conventions, L. Frank Baum uses the two tin men’s disability to challenge early twentieth-century American readers’ cultural perceptions. In line with Mitchell and Snyder’s formula “Difference demands display. Display demands difference.” (55), Baum harnesses the idea of body replacement as a thematic agent that drives the narrative in *The Tin Woodman of Oz*. The story of how the Tin Woodman came into being provided an opportunity for a new story: rectifying his abandonment of Nimmie Amee. The Tin Woodman takes great pride in his replacement body, proposing that he is a “better man” because of it. Nimmie Amee finds both of the metal men more attractive after their transformations from flesh to tin. In contrast, Nick Chopper’s flesh head and Chopfyt believe this difference of the tin men makes them inferior — a pervasive cultural view at the time. In 1917, the stated goal of the Artificial Limb Laboratory at the U.S. Army’s flagship medical center, Walter Reed General Hospital, was to provide amputee veterans with prostheses that could enable them to pass as able-bodied (Schlich).

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Baum upends readerly and societal preconceptions of amputees through the positive views that the tin men and Nimmie Amee have of their prostheses. They do not try to hide their transformations, rather their tin bodies are a source of pride for both men. In the majority of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century children's literature featuring physical disability, a cure or some significant alteration to the disabled character provides the story's resolution (Keith). Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1881) presents Clara leaving her wheelchair after a course of alpine air, goat's milk, and the charms of Heidi altering her attitude to life. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) Colin stands and walks with exposure to nature and gentle encouragement despite having been wheelchair-bound for years and medically assessed as having a "spinal deformity." Yet, again Baum goes against convention. The Tin Woodman resumes his place as Emperor of the Winkies, while Captain Fyter serves as a soldier in the Emerald City, the distance between their locations enabling each tin man to shine in his own universe. Neither character undergoes a physical change, and they continue to believe in the superiority of their metal bodies over the flesh.

Not only does Baum challenge societal conventions of body image and physical disability in *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, but he also explores the internal — what defines a sense of self. Although both the Tin Woodman and Captain Fyter are completely transformed into metal men, they retain memories of their past lives with flesh bodies and the positive aspects of their personalities. The flesh head of Nick Chopper recalls very little of his past and appears determined to be left in a dark cupboard undisturbed, so he does not have to think or interact with others. Chopfyt is surly and unpleasant with no memory of his past. In his critique of the book, Gore Vidal describes Chopfyt as, "a most divided and unsatisfactory man, and for the child reader a fascinating problem in the nature of identity" (Vidal). While it can be argued that physical disability is a "master trope of disqualification" from society (Mitchell and Snyder, 3) in most literature of the early twentieth-century, here Baum portrays the two tin men as being spiritually integrated with others in the group via their constructive personality traits. While the tin men receive their disabilities as punishments, they are in retaliation for loving Nimmie Amee, not for transgressions or bad deeds. Equally, their "cure" — receiving prosthetic tin bodies — is not through a change of attitude or temperament, but simply by having had the good fortune to be near an expert tinsmith. The Tin Woodman's ascendancy as Emperor of the Winkies and Captain Fyter's return to active duty in the Emerald City are evidence of upward personal trajectories. Rather than being a societal disqualification, their physical disabilities are beneficial.

Baum indicates that by accepting physical change and their prosthetics, the Tin Woodman and Captain Fyter continue to succeed in life while retaining a core sense of self. Eyler notes that in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum uses the characters' disabilities and relationships with their prostheses to shift perceptions and "offers an opportunity to open up a dialogue about disabilities" (331). This is just as valid an assessment for *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, written and published during a period when the scourge of World War I produced a new group of amputee veterans, potentially influencing generations of readers in how they think about physical change, prostheses, and sense of self. More than one hundred years on, *The Tin Woodman of Oz* continues to provide a sympathetic view of prostheses as a new wave of disabled veterans return to the United States from Afghanistan and Iraq.

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A medical writer for more than two decades, Marie Gethins also has more than 80 creative writing publications. Marie is a Pushcart, Best of the Short Fictions, British Screenwriters Award Nominee and a recipient of the 2016 Frank O'Connor Bursary. In 2019, she presented academic papers at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA), Irish Association for American Studies (IAAS), Children's Literature Association (ChLA), International Gothic Association (IGA), and Gothic Spaces Tokyo conferences. Awarded B.A.s in English Literature and Dramatic Art/Dance from U.C. Berkeley, she has a Master of Studies in Creative Writing from the University of Oxford and is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick.

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## Relandscaping the Rhetorical Tradition through Hip Hop

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### ABSTRACT

The field of rhetorical studies is rich and complex but has, in many ways, ignored or marginalized the study of rap music and hip hop culture. This article analyzes ways in which hip hop rhetoric adds to the terrain of rhetorical studies and posits ways that it can shift perspectives, subjects of study, practice, and theoretical frameworks within the discipline. There are also reasons hypothesized for why hip hop has been marginalized in pedagogy and academic writing within the rhetorical tradition and why it should not be ignored.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, discourse, rap, hip hop, rhetorical tradition

Tinajero

In “Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric,” Jacqueline Jones Royster writes:

What we choose to showcase depends materially on where on the landscape we stand and what we have in mind. The imperative is to recognize that the process of showcasing space is an interpretive one, one that acknowledges a view and often re-scopes that view in light of aesthetic sensibilities—values, preferences, beliefs. We landscape. (148)

Royster sees the field of rhetoric as a “richly textured” epistemological terrain, constantly being shaped and shifted by new voices, new realities, and new rhetorics. But in many ways, for many years, the soil has been stagnant with historically dominant voices. Royster’s call for a fresh and rebellious approach to rhetorical historiography is heeded in the study of Hip Hop Rhetoric.

This notion of “landscaping,” or what I like to call “relandscaping,” because it more succinctly points to the inherent revisionary component, is a central theme in rhetoric, as the field has evolved from initially focusing only on historically elite voices (Western, White, privileged, males), to historically ignored and disenfranchised voices, such as those of women and racial minorities. Echoing Royster’s call for a more dynamic and inclusive rhetorical tradition is Michael Leff, who states, “tradition...is a living force that requires constant change and adaptation...” (144) and Patricia Bizzell, who believes, “...we must hear from rhetoricians who have struggled with culturally complex venues in which they were marginalized, if we are to live and work and function as responsible citizens in the American multicultural democracy” (117), among others (Charland 2003; Glenn qtd. in Portnoy 2003; Berlin 1994; Jarratt 1991). Attitudes such as these, and the implementation of such attitudes, have begun to have a diversifying effect on the field.

“Rhetorical history” is now commonly approached as the “histories of rhetorics,” an approach that has enriched the field and, in some ways, made more legitimate the lives, experiences, and discourses of a growing number of peoples. This approach is a catalyst for uncovering/highlighting “new” discourse communities. Hip Hop Rhetoric, as a relatively new terrain in rhetoric, is a meaningful, useful, and instructive lens from which to approach the ever-expanding realms of the field. My aim is to be a voice in that process of relandscaping—a voice that helps Hip Hop Rhetoric come alive in the discipline, in its historiography and in pedagogical circles. I hope to join the conversation in the rhetorical parlor, while luring some to the back alley to discuss a dynamic, but marginalized, rhetoric—Hip Hop Rhetoric.

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

The work of relandscaping the rhetorical tradition involves shifting and reshifting its terrain. This occurs when our perspective on what we do in rhetorical studies and how we do it changes. In Royster’s words, we must shift where we stand, shift rhetorical subjects, shift the circle of practice, and shift the theoretical frame. All are integral parts in the important changes that continue to influence the field. In **shifting where we stand**, we change our point of view and begin to notice the plethora of and substantive existence of discourses—oral, written, visual, and technological—outside of the historical norm. This can mean looking at “new” groups, such as African American women, which Royster has done much of, or looking at non-traditional modes of discourse, such as “anonymous songs, poetry, folktales, griot histories, and so on” (151). A rather new and often ignored place to “stand” is with Hip Hop Rhetoric, a strong catalyst in shifting the rhetorical terrain and opening new possibilities for research.

In **shifting rhetorical subjects**, we continue to uncover, recover, and recognize traditionally silenced voices. Our perspective on whose rhetoric matters evolves and diversifies. While much of the focus in changes to the rhetorical tradition has been on women’s discourse (i.e. Aspasia, Enheduanna, Pan Chao, Sor Juana, Ida B. Wells, Gloria Anzaldua, etc.), there are a plethora of voices left uncovered and ignored in rhetoric, one

of which is the dynamic voice of Hip Hop. While some serious work has been done by a handful of scholars (*The Hip Hop Reader* 2008; Richardson 2006; Campbell 2005), there is much more that can, and should, be done, considering the impact of Hip Hop Rhetoric on American and global culture, and its direct illustration of traditional *and* modern definitions of rhetoric.

In **shifting the circle of practice**, scholars must reconsider “what constitutes rhetorical action or participation,” moving beyond the traditional arenas of “the courts, the pulpit, [and] the arenas of politics and public service” (Royster 157). For those outside the field, it is common to associate rhetoric only with political discourse, and inside the field, it continues to be the norm to focus mostly on the rhetorical spheres mentioned above, and nothing else (though this is rapidly beginning to change). With Hip Hop Rhetoric, we are forced to turn our gaze towards non-traditional textual/visual/special avenues such as song lyrics, musical beats, music videos, “mixtapes,” “underground” videos, video games, graffiti, popular magazines, and websites, which request our close attention to minority-produced poetry, and racialized, gendered and sexualized discourse (both private and public)—all of which constitute a paradigmatic shift in what constitutes the rhetoric’s circle of practice.

Finally, in **shifting the theoretical frame**, we shy away from constraining non-traditional viewpoints and theory. In order to highlight new features of the rhetorical terrain, we should allow for new perspectives and new lenses from which to view rhetoric and allow new paradigms to affect our analysis of the multi-faceted rhetorics which exist in our world. This includes not only adding “new” voices to the landscape but challenging the very paradigmatic foundations which have placed “traditionally traditional” (Bizzell 110) rhetorics at the apex of a socially constructed rhetorical hierarchy. Hip Hop Rhetoric provides one venue from which to shift the normative theoretical frame as it originated from a very different world-view than that of traditional rhetorics, one of marginalization.

Thus, the rhetoric of Hip Hop provides an avenue from which to do this shifting work, a shift that is meaningful and important if relandscaping is truly a central component of the field of rhetoric. As Royster notes critically, “we must not only work at uncovering and analyzing these catalysts for change, but also be involved in “knowledge-using,” that is, in persuading those inside and outside of the discipline that “new” rhetorics, such as that of Hip Hop, are “valuable...in the re-envisioning of what constitutes knowledge” (161). Thus, my work in this area is a call for the critical use of Hip Hop Rhetoric in our ever-evolving creation of what constitutes important rhetoric, rhetorical historiography, and rhetorical tradition. By intellectually spotlighting and analyzing different rhetorical and cultural aspects, the landscape of Hip Hop Rhetoric, and rhetorical studies in general, will grow and become more kaleidoscopic in its makeup—a positive change if we are interested in avoiding a narrow and elitist tradition.

## DEFINING HIP HOP AND HIP HOP RHETORIC

Hip Hop is a musical genre as well as a cultural movement. Its beginnings are from African American communities in New York in the early 1970s, but its roots trace back to Jamaica and, according to Kermit Campbell (“gettin”), West African griots (traveling poets/historians/singers). DJing, the playing and mixing of music, was central to early Hip Hop but quickly incorporated a verbal component as DJs became MCs and shouted out impromptu poetry and sayings while the music played.

This verbal component developed into longer and more complex rhythmic speaking and became what we know as “rapping” today. Thus, rapping and Hip Hop are intricately connected and even used as synonyms by many. But, Hip Hop encompasses other components beyond both the music and the rapping. Dancing and graffiti are also central pieces to the culture of Hip Hop and have continued to evolve since the 1970s. These four components, DJing (music), MCing (lyrics), dancing, and graffiti, are seen as the four central elements



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of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop has been historically connected to marginalization and struggle. Throughout the short history of the movement, Hip Hop lyrics have focused on issues central to racial minorities, the poor, the oppressed, and those attempting to break from cultural norms. From Melle Mel's "The Message" (1982) to Jay Z's "Minority Report" (2007), and countless others, counter-hegemonic rhetoric has been central to much of Hip Hop. This counter-message has also manifested itself in a highly sexual, violent, and materialistic discourse, which has been at the center of opposition to Hip Hop music and culture (from Bill O'Reilly to Bill Cosby). But it must also be stated that rap music, which emphasizes violence and sexuality, is only one part of the Hip Hop rhetoric and does not represent its entirety. Hip Hop is continually diversifying and incorporating any number of themes and messages.

From its humble beginnings on the streets of the Bronx, Hip Hop has catapulted onto the national and international scene. Regional Hip Hop, such as East Coast, West Coast, Third Coast, and Midwest styles, have developed with their unique beats, rhyming, and dress and "just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene" (Pryor). The influence of Hip Hop culture has been enormous and continues to grow, as does its rhetorical output which includes music lyrics, videos, movies, popular publications, video games, and internet content.

Hip Hop as a whole is not easily defined, but "Hip Hop" will be used here to represent both the general cultural movement and the music itself. The term "rap" will be used mainly to represent specifically the musical and lyrical output of Hip Hop, and "rappers" as those who deliver the lyrics. Though it blurs strict definitions between the two, "rap" and "Hip Hop," at times, will be used interchangeably, a common occurrence among those familiar with the culture of Hip Hop.

The designation Hip Hop Rhetoric succinctly joins Hip Hop and the academic field of rhetoric. Rhetoricians interested in Hip Hop Rhetoric engage in the critical analysis of the rhetorical output and/or culture of Hip Hop through the lens of rhetorical studies, and vice versa. More generally, Hip Hop Rhetoric is also the rhetorical output of Hip Hop culture. The output may be in the form of lyrics (written and performed), musical beats, websites, magazines, interviews, and the visual rhetoric of music videos, dress, and even vehicular alterations. Thus, as with the rhetorical analysis of any group or culture, any rhetoric (oral, textual, visual, etc.) produced by the group can be a launching point for understanding and analysis. In this case, the analysis comes through the academic lens of rhetoric.

## THE (SHIFTING) RHETORICAL TRADITION

Despite the enormous influence of Hip Hop culture, Hip Hop's voice has been and, to a very large degree, continues to lie on the margins of formal academic rhetorical study. This fact is highlighted in a discussion of the rhetorical tradition, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, which melds the concepts of relandscaping through Hip Hop and important aspects of rhetorical studies

The words "rhetorical tradition" take on a double meaning for rhetoric scholars. They represent both the history of the field of rhetoric and, more specifically, the anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition*, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. On the face of it, the former seems the more important of the two, but one ought to realize that the former is in many ways constructed, packaged, and maintained by anthologies, such as the latter is. As in history, psychology, physics, literature, and all other disciplines, the anthologized texts and knowledge are what shape the field and give it its disciplinary boundaries. Obviously, an endless number of discourse communities and rhetorics have existed throughout human history, but by choosing specific texts and deeming them important/essential/foundational, we construct disciplines and foundations for knowledge-building. In this way, we create a landscape of/for the field of rhetoric.

The problem within the Western rhetorical tradition (as in many other fields), is the fact that the epistemic foundations have been laid by the historically powerful—White, privileged, male. While these foundations should not be erased, they should, nonetheless, not be continually held as the venerated norm. In Western culture, the roots of rhetoric have always been traced to Ancient Greece, namely Plato and Aristotle, while the voices of the socially marginalized have been ignored and silenced. The landscape of traditional rhetorical studies and historiography has focused on figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Erasmus, Bacon, Blair, and Burke, . what Bizzell labels as a stock-exchange metaphor the prized and highly stable “blue chip stocks” of the tradition (112), while leaving out women, racial minorities, and other historically subjugated groups. Traditional rhetorical historiography has also focused on those that have textually theorized the nature of rhetoric, on those that use Greek, Latin, or Standard English, and on those that speak from an economically and culturally privileged position. Fortunately, this has begun to change.

As Bizzell discusses in “Editing the Rhetorical Tradition,” “the rhetorical tradition is always being edited” and it has begun to embrace more voices and experiences (109). This editing includes the actual text, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, the preeminent and highly influential anthology that is now in its second edition. Bizzell goes on to state that while changes are taking place, they are quite slow, as traditional rhetoricians/rhetorics remain resilient in a field where even up to the mid-1980s, elite discourses still dominated). And even when Bizzell and Herzberg were editing the first volume of the anthology to produce the second in the late 1990s, there were no calls by reviewers to have fewer of the “traditional” rhetoricians (111), which would have created more space for the non-traditional. Luckily, Bizzell and Herzberg included a greater diversity of voices.

Early in the twenty-first century, significant changes have taken root as women, racial minorities, bilingual, and non-traditional theorizers of rhetoric, have made their way into the rhetorical tradition and *The Rhetorical Tradition*. The addition of rhetoricians such as Aspasia, Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz, Francis Willard, Fredrick Douglas, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Gloria Anzaldúa illustrate some of the relandscaping that has taken place. These additions are promising, but there remain countless voices that still remain sidelined in rhetorical studies. One such voice is that of Hip Hop, an influential genre and culture which encompasses a vast number of voices and experiences—some of which will be highlighted throughout my work.

And while some work has been done on Hip Hop in the field of rhetoric, the closest Hip Hop Rhetoric gets to achieving a valued and sustained post in the rhetorical tradition/*The Rhetorical Tradition* is through Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s discussion of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a topic closely related to Hip Hop discourse (see *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 2nd Ed.). But this is not sufficient because Hip Hop Rhetoric moves beyond linguistics to examine the entire rhetorical output of Hip Hop culture. This output is vast but constitutes one of the main reasons Hip Hop Rhetoric should be a component of the academic rhetorical tradition. I term it “academic rhetorical tradition” because Hip Hop Rhetoric is already a living and complex rhetorical phenomenon, yet one that has been largely ignored in the academic field of rhetoric. And why should Hip Hop Rhetoric not be ignored by the rhetorical tradition and *The Rhetorical Tradition*? Some reasons are:

- Hip Hop Rhetors are directly involved in the critical use of language to persuade and entertain.
- Hip Hop Rhetors show a “metacritical awareness of how language can be used to do things in the world [including] persuading [people] to make important political change” (Bizzell 115)/
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is rhetoric born of the margins and is an illustration of a counter-hegemonic textual and visual discourse (i.e. language, social commentary, dress, etc..)
- Hip Hop Rhetoric illustrates hegemony at work (dominance, appropriation, and consent).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to look beyond traditional rhetorical texts.

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- Hip Hop Rhetoric can be used to teach traditionally Western aspects of rhetoric (i.e. invention, memory, delivery, pathos, ethos, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to discuss central themes in contemporary rhetoric (i.e. race, gender, power, sexuality, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to look at the continued dominance of the male voice in many discourse communities.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric allows us to jump international and cultural borders as it continues to spread throughout the world to places like Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, etc.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric asks us to look at issues of technology and rhetoric, including the use of technology to produce and disseminate rhetoric, and issues of technological access.

All of these are reasons why Hip Hop Rhetoric should hold an important place in contemporary rhetorical studies and why adding Hip Hop to the landscape that is the rhetorical tradition is a valuable endeavor.

Ultimately, we must consider and reconsider what counts in rhetoric, especially because, since the 1970s, rhetoricians have taken a critical look at the rhetorical tradition, but we have a long way to go and many more voices to consider when discussing rhetorical historiography. In her discussion of feminist rhetoric in “Telling Evidence: Rethinking What Counts in Rhetoric,” Carol Mattingly states, “We have barely begun to explore the broad range of texts that can contribute a vibrant understanding and appreciation of women’s role in rhetoric” (100). The same can be said of Hip Hop Rhetoric, as it is a multi-vocal discourse, which, as the points above illustrate, can become an important voice in rhetorical studies. Hip Hop Rhetoric can contribute a vibrant understanding and appreciation of a marginalized culture’s role in rhetoric.

Hip Hop is a major part of contemporary American (and to a growing degree, Western and international) culture, but remains only a niche discourse in the field of rhetoric. Why is such a dynamic and influential discourse largely ignored in the academic discipline of rhetoric? Some possible answers include the following:

- Hip Hop Rhetoric is not critically understood by many (most?) academics in the field.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is strongly associated with violence and misogyny.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric asks us to look at very non-traditional “texts” (i.e. music lyrics, “battling,” music videos, websites, blogs, underground “mixtapes,” videos, social media, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is strongly associated with AAVE and “street slang”.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is frequently laced with profanities.
- Much of Hip Hop Rhetoric thrives on popular culture (i.e. references to TV shows, popular movies, popular magazines, sports figures, social media, etc.) as opposed to traditional reference points such as literature, the Bible, and “historical” figures and events.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric involves music.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric’s roots are not in Ancient Greece but mainly in Africa (i.e. griots).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is seen as a purely negative force by many conservative *and* sometimes liberal academics.
- Those most influenced by Hip Hop culture are not in positions to affect change in the academic sphere of the rhetorical tradition.
- Many of the most influential Hip Hop rhetors in the United States are/were from poor racial minorities.

Thus, there are reasons, both simple and complex, why Hip Hop Rhetoric is still a marginalized rhetoric in rhetorical studies and why it can serve as a rhetorical mechanism in the process of relandscaping. While inroads have been made with conference presentations, a handful of published articles, a few book-length discussions, and little pedagogical work, there remains a vast and fruitful terrain to be unearthed.

### THE ALLEY BEHIND THE PARLOR: BURKE, HOOKS, AND HIP HOP RHETORICIANS

Relandscaping, adding diversity to the “terrain” of the rhetorical tradition, is not a new idea, but it is still confronted by centuries of hegemonic rule. The adding of new voices, new experiences, new rhetorical acts, and new rhetoricians to the rhetorical tradition, is both important and arduous. Kenneth Burke and bell hooks shed some understanding on the importance and reality of this relandscaping.

One of Burke’s central metaphors in describing rhetorical acts is “the parlor” (*The Philosophy of Literary Form*). He sees discourse as taking place in specific situations/communities with each of us entering those situations/parlors with no explanation from those already present, hearing the conversation, and ultimately entering and affecting the conversation (“put[ting] in your oar”). The conversation was going on long before we arrived and even when we leave, as individual agents, the conversation/parlor continues (110-111). Different rhetorical situations exist around us—the academic journal, the political debate, a meeting among new coworkers, a conversation about the best football team, a discussion over what new car to buy, among others. All are “parlors” we enter as speakers, hoping to know or learn the dynamics of the situation in order to intelligently take part in the conversation.

The rhetorical tradition is a parlor. To enter its doors, to understand the conversation, and to take part in the ongoing discussion, one would have needed to know about the rhetoric which has been labeled as elitist for centuries—namely that of White, Western, privileged, males. However, this rhetorical parlor, including its texts, discourse, and participants, has transformed over time, with its most major shifts beginning in the mid-1900s with the addition of nontraditional voices such as those of females and racial minorities. In many ways, the parlor of the early 21st century would be unrecognizable to classical and Enlightenment rhetoricians. New paradigms have now come into play.

Many who are in the field of rhetoric no longer want to fit into the traditional rhetorical parlor or impress those that see traditional rhetoric as pristine and didactically unproblematic. And many, like Ernest Stromberg, emphasize the fact that the rhetorical parlor has not, and does not automatically imply “equal access...and equal opportunity” (4). New paradigms are being created and a new landscape is being produced where traditional voices are giving way to historically ignored and marginalized voices. Subcultures and countercultures are slowly and steadily gaining a stronghold in rhetorical historiography and, as bell hooks writes, these counter-voices are “central locations[s] for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse” (149).

Like Royster, hooks is interested in shifting the landscape of rhetoric and claims that those “who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice [must] identify spaces where we begin the process of re-vision” (145). Hip Hop Rhetoric is one of those spaces. The culture and discourse of Hip Hop is very popular, but, paradoxically, it is also still the “exotic Other” in many ways because it points to something different than what has been displayed and theorized in traditional rhetorical historiography. Despite its historical roots, it remains counter-traditional and in the alley/margins of the rhetorical tradition.

But, importantly, hooks reminds us that the margin is not simply a site of deprivation but a place of productive resistance and a site of “radical possibility” (149). In simpler terms, it is a fresh and counter-traditional lens from which to view rhetoric and society. The voices of Hip Hop Rhetoric are not only voices of pain, hurt, and hate. Though they include these, they are much more than that. Among a plethora of other characteristics, they also include struggle, hope, healing, family, race, and religion, and employ rhetorical tactics that would make both Aristotle and bell hooks appreciative.

Hip Hop does not fit comfortably in contemporary rhetorical studies, though it is a relevant and influential rhetoric. It resides in a place near but outside the parlor of the rhetorical tradition. It is a place with an edge and a dark side, a place that opens a channel to new and unknown regions, and a place of marginality but with proud roots—Hip Hop Rhetoric is the intricate alley behind the rhetorical parlor. This alley is host to the important work of relandscaping and hook’s notion of re-visioning the margin. Despite the

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growing diversification of the rhetorical parlor, Hip Hop has remained in its shadows. Though socially and historically relevant enough to deserve a place in discussions of the rhetorical tradition, Hip Hop Rhetoric remains and continues to evolve in the margins of such discussions. Nevertheless, exclusion has not weakened or diminished what is a vibrant discourse.

Hip Hop Rhetoric may be looking into the parlor of the rhetorical tradition from the back alley, but it also functions and prospers without its inclusion. It is both self-sustaining *and* important enough to be included in academic discussion of the rhetorical tradition. After all, this alley is full of colorful and intriguing voices—sad, joyful, hopeful, proud, angry, resisting, hurtful, and hurting voices—all complex voices, some of which need to be part of the Rhetorical Parlor.

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## The Batman Comes to Class: Popular Culture as a Tool for Addressing Reflexive Pain

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, a case study approach is used to examine ways in which comics and graphic narratives can be used to provide a context within which undergraduate students may theorize about culture. The authors employed *Batman: Year One* as an organizing narrative for students to theorize about culture and communication. Specifically, students were challenged to (1) understand applications of communication theory in the context of graphic narrative, (2) use graphic narrative as a space for theorizing about communication and culture outside of comics, (3) utilize narrative theory to extrapolate meaning from complex, multi-modal forms of communication. While this case study is situated within the Communication Discipline, the project may be customized to fit courses related to Rhetoric (English), Narrative Theory, or Critical/Cultural Studies.

**Keywords:** popular culture pedagogy; Batman; graphic narratives; comics; Narrative Theory; Critical/Cultural Studies, communication

Teachers who address critical/cultural topics in the classroom are undoubtedly familiar with the emotional pain that students may encounter in the process of self-discovery. Critical pedagogue, bell hooks described pain in the context of the classroom as being a vulnerability for both students and teachers in addressing cultural tensions. By “exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom”, teachers sometimes feel the sting of resulting “chaos and confusion” (hooks, “Teaching to Transgress” 30). What is meant by “pain” in the classroom is that reflexivity regarding positionality may be an existentially threatening process for students and teachers alike? Put another way: people may feel guilty, hurt, oppressed or a range of other emotionally impactful experiences when discovering how quintessential communications may work to reinforce structures of power. These feelings, while arguably necessary in furthering education, are often the result of realizations regarding moral culpability tied to power, position, and privilege. Details of tying critical explorations to course content and the use of tactics to excavate critical analysis will be discussed later in this essay.

hooks has met with some success in overcoming this pain (“Teaching to Transgress” 42-43) by utilizing case examples from media, such as film and television, as a field for topical exploration. By employing recent and well-known examples of communication encounters among fictional characters, hooks is able to connect her students to one another through a common, “popular” culture (“Teaching Community” 34-36).

While some instructors have expressed success regarding the incorporation of popular culture narratives in their classrooms, little work has been done toward describing exactly how these narratives function in the classroom. This essay strives to “create theory from the location of pain and struggle” in the classroom by arguing that popular narratives are useful in addressing the pain of reflexivity (hooks “Teaching to Transgress” 74). Specifically, graphic narrative will be presented as a productive field of play in which to objectively address challenging topics before making more subjective and reflexive applications. This essay will offer a rationale for the pedagogical potential of graphic narrative, present the details of a sample project using graphic narration as a learning tool, and discuss the outcomes of employing the project.

## RATIONALE

Graphic narratives provide advantages to the higher education classroom by contributing to “safe” environments for exploring sensitive cultural topics (e.g., Cook and Frey; Krusemark; Rahman and Zeglin; Zehr). Uncovering playful environments for students is valuable for education in several ways. First, the traditional “uncertainty reduction model” (Berger and Calabrese 101-109), which is frequently employed in educational contexts treats exclusion of data as the acquisition of knowledge. In order to cultivate an appreciation for novelty and discovery, educators might acknowledge play as “the force of uncertainty which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual” toward “innovation and creativity” (Bial 135). Environments which “involve... ‘real’ words and actions that are paradoxical ‘not-real’ because they are ‘framed’ within the context of play” are useful for learning because they permit a sort of practice exploration of concepts before asking students to make more serious applications (Bial 135). Critical communication pedagogues, Fassett and Warren, viewed the use of performance concepts, such as play, as being pedagogically desirable when they articulated that “performative theories are valuable in education because they help us see the stable, the taken-for-granted, the assumed as enactments, as processual, as historical, and as contextual” (75). In other words, performance and play help learners to see patterns/rituals (certainties) in the world around them by encountering ambiguity and unexplored terrain (uncertainties). Encountering play may require exploring fields outside of the immediate classroom, though – fields that might be either fictional or “real.” In advocating for YouTube as a pedagogical field, Kellner and Kim aptly noted that “the real value of education as self-realization can never be confined to a class” (16). This essay posits that, like YouTube for Kellner and Kim, comics might provide learning space for communication content experimentation that is accessible both inside and outside of the classroom.



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Educators have already published a number of volumes dedicated to the study of popular culture as a part of pedagogy (e.g., Buckingham). Many scholars are dedicated to studying specific areas of popular culture, such as comic books (e.g., Dong; Gerde and Foster). Dong's edited volume, for instance, is committed to exploring strategies for analyzing comics through a critical lens. A plethora of articles probes similar concepts, such as Cook and Fey's "Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society." Other articles have demonstrated more content specificity, generally maintaining critical approaches but applying pop culture toward particular disciplinary content. For example, Rahman and Zeglin's "Holy Psychopathology Batman: The Pedagogical Use of Comic Books in the Teaching of Abnormal Psychology" featured a discussion of how psychology students might benefit from creating case studies and diagnoses of fictional characters. (Langley's book, "Batman and Psychology" advocated a similar approach to the one employed by Rahman and Zeglin.) Krusemark's work in the area of leadership also aptly conveys how popular culture might be pedagogically employed in topic or discipline-specific areas. For example, in her article "Teaching with Batman and Sherlock: Exploring Student Perceptions of Leadership Using Fiction, Comic Books, and Jesuit Ideals" Krusemark argued for the benefits of comics in the classroom by explaining, "Variety in reading, for the 21st century student, includes daily communications with not only text, but also visuals. Comic books, as popular culture readings, are multimodal readings that include text *and* visuals" (73, emphasis added). She further explained that her particular application comics included asking students to interrogate the leadership qualities of superheroic characters, such as Batman. The exemplary work of scholars such as those mentioned throughout this section demonstrates that scholars both find popular culture artifacts to be beneficial pedagogical tools and are hard at work determining the most valuable ways to leverage popular culture for particular disciplinary content. However, despite the array of literature dedicated to knowledge regarding popular culture in a plentitude of disciplines, surprisingly little work examines how comic books operate as communication media or the multiple, intersecting modes of communication that diffuse comic book myths. Interest in the communicative functions of comics appears to be rising. For example, Brooker wrote volumes on the cultural history of Batman mythos. Work in the vein of Brooker's interests remains largely untapped, though. Comics, including superhero myths, hold the potential to engage audiences in multiple levels of learning through their multimodal communication (Botzakis 118-121, Krusemark 73), emphasizing the need to study what pedagogical techniques might be developed as related to these unique popular media and their communicative functions. For instance, playful fields for communication content engagement, such as comics, may act as a learning transition between cultural ignorance and the awareness that comes with the emotional pain described by hooks ("Teaching to Transgress" 74). According to hooks, this pain emerges in reaction to increasing personal reflexivity from critical inquiry.

One way that popular narratives are helpful in addressing the pain of reflexivity is by employing a pseudo-method of "academicizing" (Fish 27). Fish proposed that "to academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency... and insert it into the context of academic urgency" (27). Fish aimed his theory at reducing emotional investments in the classroom in favor of performing objective analysis. Generally speaking, Fish's intended applications would be contrary to the beliefs of critical pedagogues and are not holistically recommended by these authors; however, a temporary academicization of content may work to set the stage for a productive post-academicized discussion of critical topics and ease the blow of potential guilt associated with such discussions. There is precedent for such a model in comics studies, even though the technique has been subject to little research and writing. For example, regarding his experience with using comic books in the classroom, Hoeppner proposed an "approach [that] looks somewhat similar to critical theory, [but] is somewhat different in that it does not necessarily carry an ideological agenda of its own, but rather strives to take a step back and look at the texts critically – but with an open mind" (182). True critical pedagogues would, of course, not stop with the introduction of the fictional field of play, leaving students

without guidance in unpacking content, like Hoepfner. Instead, teachers, in keeping with the instructional aims and values of their pedagogy, should follow-up academicized explorations of fictional fields of play with conversations comparing and contrasting student experiences toward social problem-solving (Fassett and Warren 37-60).

The reason popular culture stories are ideal is that they contextualize true-life problems in the realm of fiction, which seem to somewhat release the issues from their real-world urgency for a period of time in which readers can process information through playful engagement. For example, in her discussion of fairy tales – a form of fictive popular narrative – Kelley argued that popular fictional stories “reflect society and culture by showing different ways of being” (40). In other words, engagement with fictional contexts encourages empathy with characters in imagined settings – settings that may also be reflective of those familiar to readers in their face-to-face communications. Further, Harmon and Henkin more recently found similar results regarding the instructive nature of popular culture while training graduate student teachers to use young adult books as teaching tools. Harmon and Henkin’s work was specifically geared toward the end of teaching critical/cultural concepts – in this case, social justice. Their study found that instructors who used young adult books to contextualize social justice discussions with students were more able to articulate concrete examples of social inequity after their use of the book than before their incorporation of popular culture. Particularly, Harmon and Henkin found that “participants’ definitions of social justice changed from general ideas to more detailed understandings of the concept” by the use of young adult books. We posit that Kelley’s overall argument regarding the importance of teaching critical analysis in fictional fields of play should be extended from young children to include adult learners as well. Harmon and Henkin’s study reinforces this argument by communicating the combined benefits for adults – both teachers and learners – in using fictional fields of play. For children and adults alike, aesthetic distance – a step toward academicization – is maintained by the illusion of fiction and therefore functions as a playful context of exploration. Research (e.g., Botzakis) has also been completed specifically tying comics to these learning benefits, which will be addressed later in this essay. Again, though: using popular narratives alone is too detached from true-life discussions to be *sufficiently* critical. The pain of cultural topics such as power, positionality, and privilege cannot be fully addressed until the topics are made personal. Teachers *must* still encourage students to look for solutions to problems that may be actualized in the communities in which the learners belong.

Toward the end of developing teaching strategies for education that utilize comics as fields of play for content, the remainder of this essay will largely act as a reflection on the ways that graphic narrative – particularly Frank Miller’s *Batman: Year One* (“Year One”) – was applied to the introductory communication course as a semester-long endeavor.

## CASE STUDY OBJECTIVES

We utilize a case study approach to demonstrate praxis in the classroom. Robert K. Yin argued that the researcher’s experience in the field of inquiry informs their insights to the inquiry. Thus, researchers are embedded as part of the case study. Furthermore, Yin explained that previous literature and research should provide theoretical guidance in case studies. Additionally, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt designed a theory-building approach using case studies, which demonstrates the importance of enfolding previous research into cases in order to allow for theoretical development (533). Thus, existing research on the use of popular culture and higher education and narrative theory forms a lens of analysis to demonstrate the theoretical and practical implications of the Batman course.

*Year One* acted as a springboard for discussion in all five units of our basic communication course: foundations, public speaking, rhetoric and advocacy, interpersonal and organizational contexts, and performance and culture. This case study is drawn from an Introduction to Communication course taught at a

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large southwestern university over two semesters with four different groups of students. The 112 students who participated in the course came from a variety of majors primarily from the College of Business and College of Library Arts and Social Sciences. The majority of students were freshmen (62%), while the remaining were sophomores (25%), juniors (7%), and seniors (8%). Specific demographics regarding gender, age, and race were not collected. The course fulfills a core-course requirement but is one of several options students have to earn core credit.

The faculty and staff involved in teaching the basic course employ a critical communication approach (Fassett and Warren 27). Therefore, in addition to teaching skills such as the basics of public speaking, approaches for interpersonal conflict resolution, and strategies for effective group communication, we also encourage students to think about how power is used and structures of power may be manifested in our mundane communications. One tactic for opening discussion on culture in the basic course is to introduce popular culture narratives as examples and/or fields of play.

In this particular instance, we incorporated popular culture narratives in the introductory communication course with the utilization of Miller's *Year One*. The learning objectives for incorporating *Year One* – include: motivating and engaging students with stories about a popular character (hooks “Teaching Community” 34-36), offering a case study (Svinicki and McKeachie 44-45) with thematic unity for consistency and context, and providing a way for students to trace their own lived narrative progression (Gravley, Richardson, and Allison 20-21). More simply: the graphic narrative helps facilitate a classroom climate that can explore the application of course concepts and offers a useful “jumping off” point for investigation of other various forms of communication.

*Year One* specifically connects with critical classroom objectives because Batman is a character who is principally concerned with justice and ethical questions embedded in explorations of justice (White and Arp 5 – 37). Miller's story is about two young protagonists – a policeman named Jim Gordon and a wealthy recluse/vigilante named Bruce Wayne – who learn to collaborate with one another in addressing criminal activity in fictional Gotham City. Each character uses dramatically different methods in their attempts to make Gotham a safer place and each one wrestles with the ethics of their actions in pursuit of a greater good. In the pages of *Year One*, several social concerns are explicitly addressed including racism, police (and other government) corruption, cycles of violence, and social justice methodology. Other critical/cultural interests are also implicitly addressed in Miller's text, such as the significance of history/context in understanding how social concerns are framed. This implicit issue of context may also inspire questions regarding the methods of history-keeping and telling.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

There is precedent for the use of comic books to educate adult learners. Gerde and Foster (abstract), have used issues of X-Men to teach business ethics. They argued that “the strengths of the [comic book] pedagogy include crossing cultural barriers, understanding the complexity of individual decision-making and organizational influences, and the universality of dilemmas and values” (Gerde and Foster abstract). Comics, then, are ideal case studies for problem-based learning (Svinicki and McKeachie 207-209), which are useful for critical inquiry. The andragogical potential of graphic narrative has also been elaborated on by Botzakis, who worries that “schools in the United States risk irrelevance by rejecting certain text types out of hand and restricting what counts as a text worthy of instructional use” (114). His interviews with adult comics readers recognize that comic books are still stigmatized in the United States – as also confirmed in a study by Lopes (abstract) – even though readers often access multiple dimensions of learning through them, including “critical, moral, literary and dialogic dimensions” (Botzakis abstract). He discovered that, despite

stigmatization of the medium, comic book stories still provided readers with tools that “helped... make sense of life events” and to “reflect on [their] own social world” (119). Essentially, the participant[s] “used comic books as theory-building tools” by using fictional contexts to ponder the application of true-life social action. More recent research has also generalized these findings to other superhero genre stories as well. For example, Callens found that TV adaptations of comics such as *The Walking Dead* (Darabont et al) acted as excellent contexts for examining psychology of needs, ultimately concluding that “what makes popular culture case studies not only fun but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic” which means that “students can easily identify with the [content] concepts being studied” (abstract). In a separate study, Neely explained why *The Walking Dead*’s hyperbolic genre qualities may be beneficial in education by probing pedagogical potentialities in the show’s most dire social circumstances. He concluded that the extreme circumstances of the show offered multiple dimensions of teaching/learning to the audience. More simply: in the case of our project, we were pleased to use a story that could potentially reap benefits via form (graphic narrative) and genre (superhero).

The selection of a Batman story was strategic. The literature on Batman as a cultural icon has already been produced in communication studies (Brooker) and by scholars from other related fields, such as psychology and philosophy. As Langley argued, Batman is no doubt the most psychologically driven (5 - 7) and philosophically interesting character in superherodom. Batman’s peculiar position as both a psychologically driven and rhetorically presented icon leaves narratives about the character open to accessing multiple areas of communication studies.

Therefore, in addition to the standard textbook, we had students read *Year One* and readings on comics theory. The supplemental readings (Langley; McCloud; Rhodes and Johnson; White and Arp) were used to link comics theory to course content. For example, one regularly discussed topic in the basic communication course is perception. The process of perception, involving a personal collection of information from context and the framing of this information using past experience, is easily explained using McCloud’s notion of “closure.” According to McCloud, closure allows readers to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” between comics panels, essentially slowing down and making the perception process – using experience to make sense of communication moments – blatant and visible (67). When studying the topic of perception in communication, we referred to *Year One* for specific examples of closure at work and use chapters from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* to bridge the comics example with communication theory on perception. Significantly, the comics example gave students more than standard orthographic text for understanding perception. Through *Year One* and *Understanding Comics*, students had a visual representation of a perception model. This visual representation offered students multiple processing tools for broaching the topic of perception, including the highly concrete orthographic language, more iconic visual language through comics images, and contextual sense-making via experiencing multiple words and images working in concert with one another. Comics engaged students both verbally and nonverbally, which more closely mirrors face-to-face communication experiences than simply reading out of a textbook.

Perhaps more importantly, *Year One* served as a semester-long case study. *Year One* was ultimately a popular and accessible narrative that students could refer to for examples of communication concepts throughout the semester. By starting discussions with a common example, we were able to observe that students during the “Batman semester” more easily navigated controversial and potentially painful cultural topics. Personal stories from students’ previous cultural experiences seemed to be more clearly and easily communicated to classmates if the related communication theory was paired to a common, fictional example before personal self-disclosures began.

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**Assignments.** Six major assignments (two of which were exams over general course content) were assigned in addition to online journals. Students completed two major speech projects: a “super-self” informative speech in which students introduce their interests and hobbies (what makes them “super” or unique) and a “Hero’s Journey” persuasive speech in which students propose ways they may apply their “super power[s]”/talents/interests from the first speech toward public advocacy in some way. The speeches work together to promote reflexivity and the eventual realization of agency in the form of in-class advocacy presentations. Students are also required to write two essays: an interpersonal analysis of Batman characters and a narrative analysis of *Year One*. The first essay creates safe opportunities for students to practice solving interpersonal conflict using communication theory. The second essay asks students to excavate arguments and values from rhetorical artifacts. All of the assignments are geared toward giving students space to practice the application of communication theory before asking them to think about how those applications may transfer to true-life experiences. Details of these assignments will be explained in the Activities & Class Discussions section below.

**Activities & Class Discussions.** A discussion was the primary instructional techniques used in order to help students develop an understanding of the ways in which the course concepts were at play in *Year One* and to prepare for their assignments. Students would read a chapter from an introductory communication textbook each week. Over four weeks (corresponding to the four chapters of the graphic novel) – once every two weeks after the start of the course – students would additionally read a chapter from *Year One*. The instructor facilitated class discussions every week following a general question order, 1) ensured student recall of concepts from the communication textbook, 2) invited location and investigation of communication textbook concepts in the context of the *Year One* plot, 3) prompted analysis of plot points using communication terms or theory, 4) called for evaluation of character communications in *Year One*, and 5) asked for student application of communication concepts in domains outside of the *Year One* book. Discussions also became more complex and students demonstrated competencies beyond those that were just listed; however, the enumeration given should serve to demonstrate the basic starting structure utilized by instructors in conducting a class discussion.

In order to explain how these class discussions produced unique points of interest in communication content or prepared students for major assignments, a brief summary of *Year One* is warranted. Miller’s book basically retold the original story of the Batman character, drawing from Finger & Kane’s (1939) seminal introduction of Batman but also filling in details and expanding on the earlier story. *Year One* is the story of two crime fighters in fictional Gotham City: Bruce Wayne and James “Jim” Gordon. Bruce is a wealthy Gotham socialite who, at the start of the story, has just returned from a long trip to Asia. Jim is a police sergeant in Gotham who is wrestling with the obvious corruption in his department. He wants to help reduce crime in Gotham, but structural problems (i.e., the corruption of his captain and the city commissioner) generate difficulties in making enduring change. Bruce, trained as a ninja during his travels, hopes to fulfill a vow to his murdered parents that he would wage war on the criminals of Gotham City. In an attempt to induce dread in the criminals he intended to fight, Bruce donned tactical armor fashioned after the likeness of a bat (an archetype inspired by a vision Bruce experienced in an injured, and perhaps medicated state). Bruce’s vigilante activity as the “Bat-Man” frequently impinged on the illegal operations of the corrupt Gotham City Police Department officers. During his “war on crime,” Bruce/Batman realizes that Jim does not participate in the illegal activities engaged by many other Gotham officers and they strike up a loose partnership. The partnership basically functions by Batman disrupting the operations of corrupt police while Jim uses the law to combat Gotham criminality without serious structural barriers. The major conflicts of the story include Bruce’s questioning of his endurance to keep his vow and Jim’s moral uncertainty about working with a

vigilante. Themes about police brutality, the tension between legal justice and alternative modes of justice, and the role of ethnicity and socioeconomic status in framing justice are all prominent in the story.

*Year One* gave storied examples of individuals in conflict with broad social forces (e.g., the criminal justice system or economy). The social structures described in the narrative were strategically leveraged for our introduction to communication course with an emphasis on critical/culture studies. The class discussion yielded conversation about themes such as justice. For instance, the corruption of the Gotham City Police Department pressed students to call the morality of the American criminal justice system into question. At the same time, the brutality of Batman's vigilante methods and the fact that Batman does not operate under formal social boundaries indicated problems with individualistic, alternative modes of justice as well. Students grappled with what constitutes justice and the role that communication plays in enacting justice. Critical communication concepts such as empathy, advocacy, and dialogic engagement played key roles in these conversations. In addition to exploring the cross-section of communication and justice, classes often steered the discussion in ways that compared true-life events to plot tensions from *Year One*. For instance: several "Batman classes" were conducted around the time that Michael Brown, jr., an unarmed 18-year-old person of color, had been shot down by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Students were able to facilitate talk about the subjects of police brutality and racism by speaking in terms of the actions of *Year One* character, Detective Flass. The character is Jim Gordon's police partner and is portrayed as an overtly racist officer in Miller's book. The story provided an opportunity for students to springboard into conversations about police racism. In addition to police brutality, racism, and the cross-sections thereof, students also used Miller's narrative to address concerns related to violence, homelessness, relationship fidelity, and environmental care.

Accomplishing productive student discussions about matters such as justice and power was a key instructional objective of the teachers; however, the plan for this class was to also take matters a step beyond mere discussion. Class conversations provided students with conceptual and theoretical tools for completing major course assignments – including activities with advocacy foci. Three major assignments, one paper and two speeches, were employed during the "Batman classes," in addition to periodic examinations. The paper asked students to examine an interpersonal conflict between characters in a Batman story. Class discussion regarding *Year One* gave students the opportunity to practice taking textbook concepts (such as models of interpersonal communication or theories of interpersonal conflict) and applying them to story characters. This assignment basically asked students to take the sort of analysis modeled in-class meetings and apply it on their own. Meanwhile, the speech assignments worked together, relying on a superhero theme, to jointly promote critical thinking about the role of the self in advocacy for social change. The first speech assigned asked students to talk about their own "superpower" – something that they identified as a personal interest or talent. Discussion from *Year One* prepared students for the first speech by encouraging them to explore the virtues and vices of each character and the values that they represented. For instance, Jim Gordon does not have any superpowers in the traditional sense; however, his strength as a character who aspires toward heroism is that he seems to legitimately care about other people. In other words, we could tell that Jim's empathy was essentially his "superpower." Students were encouraged to think along these lines in order to develop a notion of their own strengths for the first speech assignment. Afterward, during the second speech assignment later in the semester, students were asked to speak about how they could apply their superpower to help with an issue that was important to them. This speech was persuasive in nature and featured a clear advocacy component because students were expected to research how they could get involved with an issue. During the second set of speeches, students frequently gave examples of using their superpowers in their own lives to promote communal good. For example, some students – noticing the heavy smog of Gotham City in *Year One* – investigated environmental health concerns. Based on this research, they proposed that their superpower was something akin to endurance or mindfulness. Therefore, in their final speech, they discussed

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how commitment to (endurance with) new lifestyle habits, such as improved garbage disposal and recycling behaviors, would assist them with cultivating and maintaining environmentally healthier life choices. They also spoke passionately about their new commitments and used their speech to explain their position to their classmates, including: 1) why they felt so strongly about making changes after researching environmental health concerns and 2) describing how others could make changes in relevant areas of their lives as well.

Throughout the course, *Year One* essentially served as a context or field of play in which students could think about applications for the communication content that they were learning from their textbooks. Class discussions blending content from both the textbook and Miller's *Year One* prepared students for accomplishing larger class assignments by giving them opportunities to talk through complex communication phenomena and providing practice for later class activities.

## DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, our experience was that students in the "Batman Class" indeed felt more comfortable when first discussing critical/cultural topics in the context of fiction and then true-life, than other students who did not theory-build using popular culture. In the Batman/Communication course, a handful of students in each section were hesitant to use comic books at the start of the class. Not every student had been exposed to graphic narrative in their previous experience. On the other hand, we also encountered a few avid Batman fans who were incredibly enthusiastic – so much so that they occasionally needed to be reminded to refer only to the story that the whole class had read instead of accessing their full bat-knowledge. After practicing the application of communication theory on *Year One*, students had little trouble linking theory to discussions of true-life applications. The "Hero's Journey" speech that most prominently asks students to "narratize" (Allison 121) – tell future-oriented stories – about true-life uses for communication theory was, by-and-large, successful as a bridge between the fiction/reality gap in discussion of critical communication praxis. The observed outcomes are significant because students clearly communicated their connections with fictional content, applied the concepts learned through fictional fields of play in face-to-face scenarios and acknowledged ways to continue using course content in out-of-class contexts. Popular culture acted as a unique facilitating function in that *Year One* was both individually and communally explored by students, who co-created goals for how to behave in the world outside of the comic by using the text as an imaginative playground. In short, *Year One* served to encourage students to be reflexive regarding common narratives from other sources (e.g., conceptions of people of color, police, and others learned from family, TV, books, etc. which were surfaced in the comic book) and then plot future action based on more conscious acceptance or rejection of previously internalized narratives.

The outcomes associated with meeting the learning objectives should be considered the greatest strengths of the course – specifically, discussions on potentially "painful" subjects seem to indeed be more quickly and easily breached in the context of fictional narrative, making more personal critical discussions more productive in future lessons. Content knowledge gathered from fictional fields of play were also easily cross-applied to face-to-face interpersonal scenarios by most students. Some limitations of the project include: time taken to orient classes both to the selected graphic narrative and to comics theory, increased course readings (drain on student time/energy), and delays in an interpersonal content application. In other words, course content is more slowly personalized to students' lives when increased readings and fields of play are introduced (a benefit or limitation, depending on one's pedagogical style). Also, *Year One* is not without its own critical problems. A critique of Miller's treatment of socioeconomics, privilege, and/or race may be called into question by the instructor or students. Potentially problematic areas in a rhetorical artifact also provide an excellent opportunity for discussion, though, and might act as problem-posing scenarios for application of critical ethics. In keeping with the previously discussed Freirean framework, we relied on principles of

the pedagogy of the oppressed to guide our framing in the class. Freire's praxis is ideal for framing popular culture narrative responses because his principles of dialogue emphasize communal action – a necessity for successful classroom climate and cohesion. Particularly, students were encouraged to find praxical solutions to the problem-posing scenarios by first realizing oppression, then dialoguing as a class community in order to theorize potential solutions, and, finally, setting goals for ethical future action.

Additionally, we caution teachers using superhero stories to have clear and early discussions of the intended aesthetic distance between exaggerated realities of fiction and face-to-face communication encounters with others. Most importantly, a discussion of violence as allegory, as opposed to a legitimate communication solution for social ills, is recommended as a precursor to utilizing superhero stories in the classroom. A discussion of critical communication ethics and commitments (Fassett and Warren 37-60) may be a helpful way to frame reading superhero stories. Students should be aware that advocacy tools such as dialogue are preferable to the physical violence found in many popular stories. Fortunately, the need for such discussion is in-line with the aims of critical inquiry. Such is one example of the great potential for critical pedagogues to turn limitations into opportunities.

This essay has warranted theoretical ground for the use of comics in critical/cultural studies, expounded on the potential benefits of comics as a learning tool, and offered brief examples of how the suggested use of comics may be actualized. The aims of the essay were more toward carving theoretical space for the inclusion of comics in critical pedagogy than to provide instructions for how to enact the use of comics in the classroom; however, other work has been done to more thoroughly explore the actual implementation of comics in communication courses (e.g., Hammonds and Anderson-Lain, 2016). Many collections, such as the afore-mentioned Dong (2012), also already exist to provide a specific discussion of how to concretely implement lesson plans regarding topics in the purview of critical pedagogy, including ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, cultural studies, and composition, rhetoric, and communication. Future research in this area should be praxical, surfacing links between critical pedagogy, comics theory, and research and praxis within a variety of disciplines.

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## Pedagogy, Ideology, & Composition: Is There a Better Way to Teach?

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### ABSTRACT

While academia tends to focus on differentiating various groups of students, prioritizing similar learning practices can have surprising and potentially transforming outcomes. In classrooms that are often filled with students who do not quite comprehend the significance of critical thinking processes or practices, the role they will play as global citizens, or why studying abstract topics is necessary, interchanging effective pedagogy from one classroom or student type to another may result in more engaged and productive learning. Additionally, students may mature and create their personas more clearly when classes interject 'basic' classroom practices such as modeling respect while discussing politics or more 'advanced' techniques like scaffold writing and hands-on activities. If instructors are more reflective as they interact with students as adult learners, their lessons may provide chances to explore identities, ideologies, and a deeper comprehension of the impacts of their actions within and on society.

This article will discuss a combination of personal experience and research-based pedagogy with the aim of illustrating useful ways to stimulate students' critical thinking abilities. While many educators and recent assessments have focused on significant learning experiences and valuable course outcomes, this research focuses on creating practices to serve students better within writing courses, general education, and in their future careers. Interchanging conversational practices, writing activities, and research processes across classrooms with specific student demographics (such as developmental learners, international students, non-traditional students, and traditional college learners) may be key in helping students understand how their academic education could serve them more usefully in their post-graduation communities.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, reflective practices, diverse learners, student-centered learning, general education

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## INTRODUCTION

Teaching in different institutions, programs, and with different students requires varied techniques, topics, and evaluative materials. I have taught age groups from preschoolers to non-traditional students and in programs in and outside of academia. And at the end of the day, teaching is teaching. It requires patience, courage, and a desire to foster someone else's growth in a manner that works for them (not always for you or me). As such, some of the practices in one area can be usefully transferred to another, but sometimes our training or understanding of "groups" of students inhibits that.

My college students work with playdough in English 101, my Introduction to Literature students participate in scavenger hunts, and my Intensive English students play jeopardy. For the most part students have a positive reaction with these activities, as well as some of the other 'wonky' lessons they participate in. All of these are relatively standard creative classroom practices- so what is it that needs to be done more, better, or differently to encourage meaningful outcomes for careers, not just for college or writing, but for the diverse student body higher education services?

When I first began teaching, I looked to my other adjunct colleagues to get a sense of what I was about to encounter. In my early trainings, many instructors bemoaned the level of apathy they encountered in their classrooms. As I have formed my own pedagogical approach and continued on my academic journey, I had to begin questioning whether the apathy was on the part of the learners or the instructors. Was the 'apathy' symptomatic of instructors who insisted that their students should be ravenous for knowledge, should love learning for learning's sake, or should prioritize education disregarding the life changes many first-year students undergo? Is this just another railing against the industry killing millennials?

Perhaps the solution to the critical thinking crisis lies in a better blending of rigorous expectations, practical life instruction, and career skills preparation and practice. These elements are often addressed in all classrooms, but in differing proportions. In order to attain higher-level critical thinking skill sets, all college classrooms need to model civil conversation, idea exploration, and professionalization. For me, this often involves engaging political or current event topics, transparency in lesson purposes, and clear connections of lesson outcomes with students' future circumstances. Such practices have developed by teaching different types of learners in varying classroom settings.

## VIGNETTE

Here is why: The morning of the 2016 election, I woke up early, stared at the ceiling after looking up the final results on my Facebook before deleting the app off my tiny blue lighted phone, and rolled over among the mound of blankets and pillows next to my fiancé asking him, "How do I do this?" It is not so much that I was desperate for Hillary to win, and it is not exactly that I was so opposed to Donald Trump. But it was that I was going to have to go into a classroom in Western Pennsylvania at a private Catholic University filled with a diverse group of students ranging from gay and out to people of color to straight, white, and conservative, and I was going to have to tell them all that it was going to be ok. That despite the fearful rhetoric used to win the election, that no one's rights would be under fire, that no one's identity would make their lives more difficult, and that we could all still get along. And I did not know how to do that.

Fortunately, our theme for that semester was analyzing American identity through literature. So, after some chatting with my fiancé, but mostly to myself, while he was literally a soundboard (it was 5:30 in the morning), I decided my class would start by looking at past political speeches and newspaper reports of such. We then listened to clips of speeches by both 2016 political candidates. We ended by discussing ways to critically read resources, look for political agendas and how to be conscientious about our own belief systems in conversations with others.

Now, I am not by any means proposing that this little hour and a half lesson solved the world's problems or even the ones those students were having in that particular class. But it opened my eyes to how effective, constructive conversations can be developed. Student's reflections from that semester demonstrated how rarely this dialogic had been modeled for them and that was when the significance of discussing politics and ideologies in an open-minded manner in all my courses became key to my personal pedagogy.

## BACKGROUND

Although this crucially changed my personal pedagogy, many instructors are already doing this. They have already embraced this thought process (See Bruce McComiskey's *Teaching Composition as a Social Process* and/or Seider et. al.'s "The Impact of Community Service Learning Upon the Expected Political Voice of Participating College Students"). But in many cases, there remains a question- have they truly? Some instructors have been engaging political discussions within their classrooms; some for decades, while others are beginning to flirt with the topics of discussion. Others, however, use this approach to promote their own ideological agenda, and as such, there has been a push in some fields to resist incorporating politics into classroom discussions (See Maxine Hariston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing;" H. Richard Milner IV's "Yes, Race and Politics Belong in the Classroom" is useful for discussions approaching politics, race, class, and ideology in freshman liberal arts classes).

To best balance this, while approaching politically loaded topics, instructors should be reflective regarding personal biases, students' agency development (and where offensive concepts begin), and allow interrogation of their own, as well as their students' ideals. This process, for me, has developed from encounters with Intensive English Program students expressing vastly different ideologies based upon unexpected reasonings. Regardless of personal preferences, the reason for the lack of political engagement in the classroom may be deeper than individual agendas.

Institutions may be creating a resistance to this type of instruction. Bill Readings' *University in Ruins* provides a study of the university system and makes many observations that, unfortunately, still hold true about a continued problematically globalized and corporatized intellectual system. However, if instructors can alter thinking in their classrooms, they may be able to challenge institutional agendas and thought processes concerning the goals of academia. For example, Readings' comment that holds the most hope for me and has the potential to aid in the ailing university structure is his assertion that "the aim of pedagogy should not be to produce autonomous subjects who are supposedly made free by the information they learn, which is the Enlightenment narrative... teaching is a question of justice not a search for truth... pedagogy can hold open the temporality of questioning so as to resist being characterized as a transaction that can be concluded, either with the giving of grades or the granting of degrees" (Readings 19).

So, as Readings instructs here, my first mission in developing a more useful pedagogy across courses was to engage, engage politically, and engage with questions. I would not teach politics; I was going to teach processes for productive thinking and communication. Perhaps more importantly, I was going to be transparent about what we were doing, why, and how our practices could be used by students in their futures.

## IS THE ISSUE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OR CLASSROOM APPROACHES- OR BOTH?!

While teaching a few sections of English 101, I was fortunate enough to be placed in an Intensive English Program. The international students here typically completed between one to three years of coursework to introduce and develop academic writing, listening, reading, and speaking skills. By the close of the final course, students were required to construct a ten-page research paper, using scholarly sources, and write at a level approximately equivalent to freshman native speakers. Not only was the skill level students acquired through

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these courses astounding, but they were engaging with highly political topics, ranging from air pollution to global warming to the problem of money laundering and global water shortages.

These students were researching and writing about politically geared topics in a social and cultural climate vastly different, in many cases, from their homelands. While these students were busying themselves with in-depth explorations of these topics, many native English-speaking composition and research writing students were explaining how there was nothing they cared about, writing about sports, or discussing a hobby. While both groups were engaged, one was clearly gaining a deeper understanding of topics that are unarguably important when taking one's place in the world as a responsible global citizen.

I had to ask why. Why would students who lived under strict regimes and non-democratic societies be so curious about political issues? And, perhaps more importantly, why were students living in a country founded upon the principles of active civil engagement so willfully ignorant of these conflicts and their decisive role in them? Part of the answer was that students had different life experiences. Many of the students in the Intensive English Program discussed having to wear masks when going out on the streets of their cities, their being restricted from having recess due to air quality, and incentives for planting trees or plants on balconies of high rises. One particular student cited, in her paper discussing global warming, a field trip in high school where she went out of the city to plant trees. She emphasized the impact this experience had on her understanding of environmental issues and her role in them as a young adult. These students were experiencing the effects of 'hot topic' issues while the native speaking students were enjoying (largely) middle to upper-class lifestyle with backyards and state parks. They had consistent access to technology and most were being insulated by the very institution that should have been explaining and showing just how much their world was expanding in these few years at the university and in the next couple as students become professionals.

Additionally, problem-posing education was not modeled in the majority of these native English speaker's writings. And, again, I had to ask why? Why when we performed a reading or analysis of a webpage or video did students simply want to respond to questions on a worksheet and close the proverbial "book?" Why was there so much resistance to open-ended questions or discussions? Why did students avoid asking their own questions and finding answers? It was not because they were avoiding hard work. In fact, remaining silent on their part was probably more stressful- as they sat in their creaking chairs, keeping their phones in their laps and attempting to avoid checking social media while waiting for me to instruct or impose some sort of mind-blowing intellectualism into their beings through visual osmosis. So, eventually, we talked.

Students reiterated an oft-experienced reality in American education: students are told they are learning to critically think, but they are not. According to Jani and Mellinger in "Beyond 'Writing to Learn': Factors Influencing Students' Writing Outcomes," their study revealed that "students wanted to be trained to provide a certain service rather than to be educated to reflect critically on the context of the service being provided. They viewed themselves largely in a passive role as receivers of information" (148). These students, like my own, were struggling to re-conceive their duties as learners. Students' past experiences were framing their present ones- and not in a useful manner. They told me that most of their English classes had often been reading and answering questions about themes, symbolism, character development, or had consisted of sleeping....I could have told them that this was going to be a different kind of English study, but I wanted to engage my students, not tell them.

When I started teaching at community colleges, these types of activities became even more important. Many of these students were more likely to be invested in the community they were learning in, therefore, discussing local politics, policies, and elections held more weight than at some other institutions where I had been instructing. Furthermore, these courses had to evolve to be much more practical in application, particularly regarding the construction of Developmental English courses. Students asked aloud, 'Why do I have to take English if I am going to be a welder, a dental hygienist, a preschool teacher?' Again, I have

learned to justify this in a multitude of ways and to hone instruction so students (hopefully) find value in the education they participate in.

However, to me, the true response arises from McComiskey's argument that "Preparing students for participation in postmodern communal democracies entails providing students with critical cultural knowledge as well as practical rhetorical skills with which to apply that knowledge. For if critical knowledge never enters the flow of public discourse, then it perishes in the silence of its knower" (121). These courses need to teach students how to think, communicate, and usefully critique social processes, figures, and systems in which they are participants as well as the significance of *why*. However, this process must be devoted to allowing students to develop their own critiques and support. If it is reduced to an espousal of beliefs by the instructor or a recitation of those beliefs by the student, the process becomes disingenuous and provides the groundwork for a potential backlash against those ideologies promoted. Instead, honest exploration of issues is crucial for these students, their families, and their communities as they encounter power struggles, policy changes, and enter adulthood.

Teaching in practical avenues has helped inform my pedagogical practices heavily, and I would urge everyone in academia to find a way to practically teach for at least a few years. Working in Developmental and Intensive English programs has helped immensely in this regard, although both are still in academic environments with academic goals informing the curriculum. Both programs require a much more practical approach to the use of English and writing skills. Working with students in these environments reinforced some conclusions in Moss et. al. in "Does Classroom Composition Matter? College Classrooms as Moderators of Developmental Education Effectiveness." According to these scholars, the environment, interaction with fellow students and outside resources, and engagement with the instructor determine the success or failure of Developmental pedagogy practices. My time in these two types of courses has reinforced these conclusions *and* spurred me to incorporate these concerns more reflectively in other classrooms. How could I help students understand that until coming to America one of my international students had only seen forests during field trips to plant trees? How could I interest them in the funding of local before and after school programs within their communities that my community college student was researching? These teaching experiences were two of the most stimulating factors in revising my pedagogical approach to academic writing as a way to develop responsible global citizens.

I began reexamining my instructional practices-sticking staunchly to the syllabus, practicing rhetorical approaches, developing composition skills within the classroom for the classroom- and reflecting more on how to communicate with students as well as how to teach them to communicate. As Mina P. Shaughnessy explains in "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," I had to "DIV[E] IN... decid[e] that teaching them [to write well] is not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (317). I had to revise the way classrooms were constructed for these students, changing them from centers of power and authority to places of questioning and exploring.

The "Why?" and "How come?" questions of childhood had to be encouraged again as they experienced the childhood of their adulthood- and the taboo of questioning in education needed to be broken. Students needed to develop a desire to learn for reasons other than having the right answer or getting a piece of paper at the end of a few years in exchange for a couple of thousand dollars- and I was responsible for aiding in their learning as well as in researching how their learning could or should be useful.

So I continued being a learner, in order to become a better instructor. I had been a teacher long before I had graduated with my credentials, and in realizing this, it struck me that most of my students would (and will) have this experience (of teaching) as well. They might not recognize their roles as teachers- they may be called Coach, a colleague, or a parent- but if they do not learn to be reflective and curious now, then I (and the academy) have failed in teaching them significant life outcomes. As such, students in all of these types

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of classrooms deserved to have an education that provides them with career applicable skills, the ability to interact responsibly, and skills to develop an interest in topics that may be new, controversial, or of opposing ideologies to their own.

## IMPLEMENTATION

So I started small. I began rethinking prewriting activities. Traditional pedagogical practices urge instructors to use topics and activities with which students can relate and see the significance of. Many educational practitioners recognize the value of incorporating topics students are familiar with as well as referencing contexts where students will apply their classroom practices to create significant learning experiences. A great deal of composition and peer-tutoring pedagogy also stress the importance of allowing students to find their voices. Both of these were going to be highly important in constructing these new activities. Since learning management systems have become such an ingrained part of the majority of college coursework, this seemed to be a good place to allow students to construct their thoughts initially.

As most of the teaching I do is composition or research writing, one of the first activities I developed was asking students to research a political party's platform (of their choice) using the internet. They had to outline the party's most important goals and examine whether there was any explanation provided as to how those aims would be achieved. Students were also required to pose a comment or question to another student's post. The aims of this activity are obvious to most instructors- it is geared to honing critical reading, thinking, and articulating one's thoughts clearly before engaging them with others. Furthermore, using webpages distanced the student from the politics if s/he either identified with or rejected that particular platform. As McComiskey discusses, this asked students to use "writing and culture as dialectical social processes through which they can derive a degree of agency" (25). Students encountered belief systems, agreed or questioned them, and explained why. Furthermore, they were required to begin a dialogue with others in this activity. This asked students to maintain objectivity and respect while discussing sensitive topics- undoubtedly a vastly important skill during professionalization, and for family gatherings.

My classrooms tend to be characterized as a democratic and conversational space. Recently, my concepts of classroom conversation have been reshaped as I have reflected on ways that conversations occur in my IEP (Intensive English Program) classrooms in comparison with my native English-speaking classrooms. Although I have only taught writing courses in the IEP program, these classes are never mutually exclusive and due to my teaching style in particular, my classes incorporate reading, listening, and speaking skills. We have classroom debates, peer review works collectively with a projector, and incorporate listening and speaking skills when learning and reviewing grammar. Occasionally, when a student is having difficulty grasping a concept, I allow another student who speaks his/her native language (if available) to explain the activity or assignment in their first language. The student who was having trouble comprehending the directions must then explain, in English, what the other student clarified for him/her. Activities like these allow students to grow through confusion, interact with one another and in ways where I am not guiding their learning process.

Each of these is important keys to learning that I have honed in peer tutoring sessions with both native English speakers and second (or third) English language users. These practices have transferred into my native English-speaking classrooms as I have worked to accommodate differing learning styles, paces, and agency. In doing so, I have begun using peer 'explainers' to clarify information, review sample essays on a projector, and have students prepare presentations or grammar information sheets within my native English-speaking classes. Motivating students to engage in various ways with complex topics can sometimes be the work of their peers, rather than that of their instructor, or even developed by themselves as they find the niche that makes their work interesting to them. These practices have already been recognized and explicated by Hanson et. al.



However, the implementation of techniques to meet Effective Teaching Principles are worthy of examination and construction as disciplines, fields, and the university system remains in flux in an increasingly globalized academia (Hanson et. al.).

Clarifying the complexities and tangible examples of “hot topic” or “restricted list” ideas often encourages students to significantly learn and critique them. I encourage my writers to engage in what they are passionate or curious about. As they research and write on these topics, like abortion, I encourage them to become more global in their thinking. When we discuss abortion, we research it and analyze countries that have enforced abortion policies or lacked access to abortion. Introducing students to some of the complexities involved in Ireland’s repeal of the 8th Amendment began to raise questions of socio-economic status, healthcare availability, and life-or-death situations for pregnant and/or miscarrying women. Using Twitter’s #repealthe8th handle to explore some of the personal stories complicated the issue in ways that would not have been attainable in other ways. The personal stories here developed respectful discussions and a face to some abstract concepts that are too often seen in black and white or righteous terms; students found one thread discussing a mother who almost died of sepsis due to a denied abortion that would have left her other two children motherless especially complex (I have since tried to relocate this particular thread unsuccessfully). These discussions are aimed at analyzing issues, becoming educated about what impact they have on individuals, and being able to have civil conversations. Therefore, students of varying skill levels learn to regard the impact of culture (and its codes) as well as how to interact with others respectfully.

Practical aims of our classes work have been especially prioritized, based on what students across varying classrooms have explained in midterm and end of the semester evaluations. Instead of discussing equal opportunity employment specifically, we read stories of interviewers and interviewees and connected them to these policies as justified or problematic. In one unit students responded positively to the examination of an article (“I Won’t Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here’s Why” by Kyle Wiens) and employee evaluations/observations I have culled from professionals in various fields over the past years. Students see bureaucracy in action (which balances political discussions). This activity and its discussion help emphasize the value of the course and its practical aims. Students begin to see the value of critical thinking, reflection, and professionalism early on in their academic work as they examine professionals being praised for independence, self-motivation, and creative thinking. At other times, students focus on how observations or evaluations are developed- what skills are important and why? How do these skills connect to job performance and policies? We then return to related topics such as equal opportunity, affirmative action policies, and wage rates. The connections between tangible ‘real world’ activities and university practices have considerable impact on student comprehension and engagement.

Rather than problematizing issues, as some pedagogies require instructors to do, these topics are already controversial. All that is required then is an interest in the topics, the development of an informed opinion on them, and a comprehension of the significance of these issues in action. These key components to more effective classroom practices are present in the blending of cultural studies, transparency in purpose, and clear explanation of goals within lessons outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Students in higher education, in all types of classrooms and classified as various types of learners, deserve the equal advantage these critical thinking, cultural studies based, and professionalization focused activities offer. Furthermore, these discussions create more in-depth discussions regarding cultural values and cultural norm construction than some types of popular cultural analyses or mass media discussions. And, perhaps most importantly, these activities are geared towards connecting students and individuals with abstract topics.

Using or referencing “adulthood” activities, as my students like to call them, draws a line between critical thinking, cultural studies, and professionalization amongst a variety of my students. Students are encouraged to express their opinions, engage with one another, and use rhetorical devices in honing and articulating their

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thoughts on these topics. Going back to the political party research and discussions, the second step students take is to research particular candidates in order to consider how the knowledge they have acquired may help them usefully in electing officials, participate in performing support roles for a candidate, or in recognizing ways that a particular candidate might help or harm their social status if elected (if students are too young to vote- as in dual enrollment- or are international, they are asked to do the same work in preparation for future participation here or abroad, respectively). I introduce students to the process of registering to vote. If it is election season, or if there is a special election, I offer resources to do research on candidates and their platforms. Additionally, if students show me a picture of themselves at their polling place on the day of the election, I give them extra credit. Students love this activity. It combines selfie-taking, activism, being part of their community, and someone acknowledging their taking steps to become a responsible participating adult- which leads back into one of my priorities (teaching students how to be aware citizens).

The reason I introduce the discussion of extra credit here is twofold. Students are not forced to participate but are encouraged in a 'choose your own adventure' style of classroom design. These extras relate to a desire that Jani and Mellinger detected in their research on college writing practices. Students value assignments that connect "personal experience to course concepts" (150). They also indicated that outside resource use was beneficial and carried over into the likelihood of collaborative work practices in the students' careers. For example, if students have registered to vote on campus, they have often taken their roommates with them or friends from a club they are in. Additionally, while these are not required assignments, they are encouraged and occasionally these types of activities have resulted in students running for student government offices and feeling confident within academia and in their larger socio-political circle.

During the revision of my pedagogy, I have noticed some students resist politics. They have been raised to believe that it is not polite conversation, is a private matter, or is simply something that they have learned and have no desire to explore further or question. So sometimes, being creative and transparent in discussing political topics is required. For example, rather than discussing the student loan debt issue or free college programs, we discuss the advantages and flaws of Rhianna's offer to pay for some students' college semesters with proof of high performance. Approaching topics this way gives students a tangible concept of the political ideal discussed- a practice often used with developmental and second language learners. Additionally, students typically engage more enthusiastically with cultural references they are familiar with, or at least have some background in. Framing political topics within social or cultural circumstances disarm these conversations and often makes students feel less trepidation. "Edutainment" conducted in this way- with transparency of skill development and justification of chosen cultural referents- achieves two goals that strengthen coursework utilizing political discussions or current events regardless of the classroom or learner type.

There have been some challenges in reenvisioning my classrooms as places for civil, political, global, and social conversations. Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of instruction in this manner arises in determining when to interject in conversations, when to allow students to dialogue, and when to shut down a line of thinking that is on its way to becoming offensive or hurtful. In the world of 'snowflakes,' true conservatives, capitalists, socialists, varying sexualities, and diverse religious adherents, the potential for disagreement is high and the possibility of offense grander when having these types of conversations. Getting to know my students has helped tremendously, as well as fostering a respect for my classroom on their part and an admiration for them on my part. There have been times where I have asked students questions to develop a line of thinking in a way that displays its offense, or potential offense, through metaphor.

Occasionally, I have asked students to hit the 'pause' button, do some research, and report back on their conclusions. For example, in one course we were discussing gun control after a mass shooting and a white, American, conservative, male student insisted that if every female was armed with a gun rape would never occur. We paused his assumptions, and he reexamined them in his research project. He found that

attempting this argument was flawed, logically and according to research. So instead, we developed his argument by examining authoritative resources and constitutional law. This student was still permitted to express his opinion and explore the topic in a passionate manner. However, he was now better informed, more capable of articulating his stance, and aware of some concessions or conflicts with his position. Allowing myself to recognize cultural assumptions that may take place within my classrooms of international students has helped me better comprehend and discuss oppositional viewpoints to my own within other classrooms (for example, avoiding a “What the...?” knee jerk reaction to the previous student’s initial position on gun control). Working with students learning a language and cultural code has helped me understand how to develop a ‘cultural code’ within my classroom to foster more respectful and open engagements.

Even as some students struggle with college adjustments and real-world situations, others excel at college and have simplified homelives. In other words, they are at college to focus on college and are looking to complete the required work to leave with their degree, which is beneficial, goal-oriented learning. However, reaching these students in meaningful ways can sometimes be challenging. Mindsets must be shifted from teaching to a test (or an evaluation) to learning for professional setting use. In this case, using writing to learn can be especially useful. These types of activities invite critical thinking, hypothetical prompts, and are good avenues to allow students to accumulate the work they have done in one area.

Writing to learn also provides space for students to create and explore how their lives connect with their chosen topics or research (Fry and Villagomez). In other words, when exploring topics of global significance, implementing write to learn assignments has allowed students to connect their experience with a family member who has autism with an examination of therapies offered and funded, or a close friend’s struggle with cancer that concluded with the challenge of paying her medical bills with a discussion of laws regulating insurance coverage.

For example, a friend of mine wrote “Treating Cancer Patients Like Criminals Won’t Solve the Opioid Crisis.” This article connects with students on many levels- cancer survivors, opioid crisis experiences, interest in medical careers- and it is a well-written piece easily lending itself to critical thinking and debate about policies, medical treatment, and stereotyping. Students read this article at home and write for a few minutes before we begin a discussion in class regarding what issues are raised, why, and what should/can be done. They are encouraged to incorporate personal experiences in their writings and discussion *if* they concretely connect it with a point from the article. In this case, students write to learn regarding content and practice. In short, students use personal experiences and connections to see the significance of the political topics explored rather than me telling them these ideas and their opinions matter.

Again- this is nothing new. What is new, however, is allowing students to explore those narratives in professionalized and researched writing as a balanced approach, not as a narrative focused assignment. Additionally, encouraging students to express whatever opinion they formed in a well-developed piece to be objectively evaluated, even if it was an unpopular position or one that did not align with the instructor’s, could be key in creating professionals who can engage usefully with controversial topics and handle conflicts in the workplace with grace.

## PURPOSE OF PEDAGOGY CHANGES

James M. Lang writes that “we see only the tiniest slices of our students’ lives, and those tiny slices rarely reveal to us what matters to them most, or what major events or people are shaping their lives right now” (181). He provides much insight and practical advice for teachers early in their careers and for others looking for a refresher. His point here is significant. He also provides an introduction for the extension of this idea: that instructors should be (or are) one of those shapers of students’ lives. While Lang is explaining

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why school, and perhaps one's course, in particular, may not be the high priority that an instructor desires, he also lays the ground for instructors to reflect on exactly how impactful s/he might be on a specific student or students. Often images of students escaping to schools as the 'greatest hello and the hardest goodbye' are located in identifying ways to be supportive to students who have difficult home lives, most often in grade schools.

However, once a student arrives at college this mindset might become prevalent or arise where it had not been before. Fry and Villagomez, as well as Hanson et. al. and Moss et. al., have found in their research that instructor feedback/engagement is one of the most valued aspects of a college course. It often aids in determining whether a student has a useful or off-putting experience. As such, coming to understand (not judge) students' opinions and aiding them in exploring those stances should be part of our job descriptions (as opposed to indoctrination). Helping students become engaged, political, and responsible citizens can offer them a sense of worth, aid in creating their agency, and empower them during their struggles.

Some will argue that political writing in a composition classroom is a vehicle for the instructor's ideologies or negates student's beliefs. However, when conducted appropriately, students can and should explore ideas that they feel have merit, especially if they differ from those of the instructor. The writer's job in these cases is NOT to convince the reader to agree with him or her, as is so often, unfortunately, espoused as the purpose of college writings. The writer's goal is to explain his/her reasoning well enough that the reader can agree to disagree or at the very least see the merit in the writer's position.

Often, academics may find themselves forgetting that colleges are not designed to produce students who think alike, either with one another or with their instructors. Additionally, faculty may sometimes fail to consider how useful illustrative reasoning may be in fields where disagreement is common, or where growth comes from diverse viewpoints. As such, students who have positions differing from that of the instructor should be encouraged to explore their viewpoints. Perhaps more importantly, in answering this concern, the students who agree with the instructor's ideologies ought to be encouraged to reexamine the issue or topic from a different standpoint or to take up a fresh view for the position's advocacy. This will prevent a student from simply repeating what an instructor may have consciously or subconsciously discussed concerning a particular topic. Both of these strategies allow students to feel validated and encourage intellectual growth as well as composition and rhetorical skill development.

In addition to avoiding the potential indoctrination of students, some concerns arise in whether students are equipped to interrogate such complex topics as politics, religion, and social norms. Some instructors avoid these topics, explaining that students do not yet have the cognitive tools or intellectual backing to discuss them. To these instructors, I would simply ask, if they have not acquired these tools yet, and we will not be introducing them now, when will these students learn? What opportunities will arise for these students to enhance their thought processes? Perhaps this lack of cognitive development is why we have come to be a society that screams at one another in echo chambers of politically reifying social media bubbles, rather than one that can civilly discuss differing political views and develop solutions to complex disagreements. Perhaps our Ivory Tower ought to be servicing students who are not gaining these skills or models in their secondary education classrooms rather than turning tail and saying that the process is too arduous.

## CONCLUSION

The recent past of the university system has been characterized by multicultural, inclusive discussions; Writing Across the Curriculum programs; team teaching; interdisciplinary practices; and de- and reconstructionist studies. While the expansion of academia in terms of topics and pedagogical techniques is beneficial to students and faculty alike, considering the connections between these different topics and types of teaching may prove more useful, particularly regarding the potential to hone citizenship, human

relations, and switch-coding skills in graduates. More significantly, if instructors can manage to use their teaching strategies and curriculum across various demographics and courses, perhaps they can stimulate the growth of skills students may well use after graduation, such as critical thinking, communication, and reflective practices regarding interpersonal relationships and in professional settings. Rather than limiting or differentiating students and topics, distributing and adopting classroom techniques, styles, and topics of study may prove more beneficial to a greater number of students. Academia's strength comes from its sponsorship of exploration and connection rather than its differentiation and limitations.

In this learning model, students are exactly that, students. As Clawson and Page explain at the close of their work, "Students should not be 'customers' or 'clients' who are offered a 'product' (an education or, at the very least, a diploma)" (52). They should not be taught politics at all. Instead, what they should learn is self-value, self-confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to hold conversations across battle lines regardless of the setting. Recently, one student who finished a semester of English Composition wrote in her reflection that "Before coming to this class, I didn't care about anything. Now I have topics to care about, and I have reasons why I care about them." If the goal of a college education is to encourage students to be responsible citizens, productive employees, and effective communicators, then arguably, a model such as this used early in a college student's education, sets the stage for a continued communal participation while in residence at the university and hopefully as a more engaged citizen upon graduation.

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## A Gaze of Cruelty, Deferred: Actualizing the Female Gaze in Cate Shortland's *Berlin Syndrome* (2017)

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### ABSTRACT

Australian director Cate Shortland's dramatic thriller *Berlin Syndrome* (2017) follows the conventions of the genre involving a psychologically unstable male perpetrator and his female victim, thus could hinge on patriarchal control. Instead, based on a close reading of feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey's theoretical definition of the former, Shortland's cinematic apparatus can be read as an inverse of the male gaze, a type of systematic 'female gaze'. This observation both warrants clarification of the term and concept behind the female gaze and suggests a pressing need to re-evaluate the language of cinema and its habitually damaging depictions of women. In doing so, it may encourage a counter cinema in which such cinematic language is more readily accessible and asserted from a non-male perspective. This essay addresses the question of the female gaze, a term that refers, in fuzzy terms, to the subversion of the male gaze in cinema and elsewhere. To do this, key points in Laura Mulvey's argument are unpacked in reference to other examples of male-on-female on-screen violence — a kind of accepted and frequently employed gaze of cruelty extending Antonin Artaud's celebration of the theater of cruelty. All of this is in support of the argument and demonstration of how Shortland upends key cinematic and genre conventions throughout *Berlin Syndrome* to effectively enact what the female gaze purportedly entails.

**Keywords:** Laura Mulvey, male gaze, female gaze, film studies, theater of cruelty

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The emergence of the female gaze is unquestionably a response to Laura Mulvey's influential essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, written in 1973, and the work of other women's studies and film scholars more broadly. In her essay, Mulvey introduced the concept of the male gaze. While it was imperfect and reflected her notably limited view of female agency at the time, interest in the possibility of its inverse, the female gaze, has increased amid recent breakthroughs in female empowerment, creative contributions, and overall intolerance of unequal distributions of power. The female gaze is also a byproduct of our growing visual culture and the affordances it brings. Our present media environment is dominated by images delivered by the readiness of prosumer tools and quickly disseminated by a host of networked communication channels by professionals and amateurs alike. These conditions inevitably grant more diverse approaches to creating images, ushering more diversity among creators with wide-ranging outlooks. This uptick in multiplicity and experimentation is reflected across all visual discourse: film, television, social media, and beyond. The question of the female gaze feels especially promising and relevant in an age increasingly replete with empowering movements, meaningful discourse, and solidarity among women. It also feels like a necessary and powerful rebuttal against a significant and long history of violence against women on and off the screen. This essay is not concerned with the quality or character of such movements and actions; rather the tools used to overcome narrative depravity and overt sexism in the visual discourse. It is also concerned with accurate labels and definitions used to acknowledge changes, developments, and the conveyance of visual perspectives, especially on-screen. What exactly is the female gaze, and would we be able to recognize it if we saw it?

I wonder if Mulvey's male gaze is in fact so pervasive, training generations of audiences and creators alike to see and comprehend the world through its patriarchal brand of ocular insularity, that the default mode of comprehension inadvertently mirrors its limits on-screen. I wonder if the details and breadth of Mulvey's argument have been overlooked, disregarding some of the more nuanced claims she made, potentially rendering the term "male gaze," and its largely undefined counterpart "female gaze," ineffective when used in unexamined, detached ways. One problematic result of this is the widely accepted idea that a female gaze is automatically achieved when a female/female-identifying creator is behind the camera as the "bearer of the look" and during situations in which a female character is looking at something, regardless of whether the look is mechanized and reinforced by cinematic constructs. However, I argue the female gaze is possible but requires an effusive undoing of the technically and socially structured ways on-screen characters and their stories are depicted, beyond merely the inevitable culmination of a female creator's input or the dominant presence of a female on-screen character. Through a critical analysis of Australian director Cate Shortland's film *Berlin Syndrome* (2017), I make this argument by unpacking the roots of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, describing how and in which ways it persists, and how one might ameliorate its effects by introducing and ultimately normalizing an appropriate and demonstrative technical rebuttal in the form of the female gaze.

*Berlin Syndrome* begins quite conventionally from a narrative and cinematic perspective. This goes against a tradition in feminist films that tackle the tenets of patriarchal systems through remixing genres and rewriting women's roles by including well-rounded, sometimes unlikeable women, or by telling stories from a strong female perspective. Like the male gaze, the female gaze is concerned with multiple aspects of the moving image, including filming, characters, and audience engagement. In situations in which the qualities making up the male gaze are ignored, the objectification of female characters can persist, despite efforts to avoid it. At first blush, *Berlin Syndrome* feels this way: like a film hiding its objectification of women behind a strong female lead and a female director. Its narrative substance, a story about female torture and murder at the hands of a delusional male, is not new. In fact, *Berlin Syndrome* follows most of the narrative conventions of the suspense thriller subgenre of which it is a part. In it, Teresa Palmer plays an Australian photojournalist named Clare on tour in Berlin who meets a handsome guy named Andi, played by Max Riemelt, with whom she shares an evening in his apartment. When he goes off to work the next morning (as a high school English



teacher), she takes her time waking up and leaving his flat only to discover she is locked in and unable to find a way out. At first, Clare accepts it was merely an error — she had not found the key Andi must have left behind for her to use — but when she is locked in on the second day, it is immediately clear to her that she is being held captive. Very shortly after this discovery, Andi tortures her intending to eventually kill her.

This film's story has extensive roots in cinematic history, joining the ranks of other films and franchises that fetishize the tortured female body, sometimes with a seemingly strong female character that serves to conceal the imbalance of power, perspective, and agency between genders. The number of films featuring gratuitous violence against women is numerous, and we have come to expect them as viewers. Hollywood films have especially contributed to this: films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) groundbreakingly imposed on audiences one of the first gruesome exploits of the female body on the big screen. The unforgettable shower scene, in which Marion Crane is brutally murdered by an unknown stranger, is perhaps so widely known today to the point its impact is somewhat depreciated and banal to audiences. It may even seem comical because it feels unrealistic compared to more recent films, which push the boundaries of realism or enter the realm of stylized violence in a kind of cinematic theater of cruelty. Since this time, there has emerged a range of cinematic approaches that stretch from sophisticated disturbance, like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac: Volumes I and II* (2013), and Nicolas Winding Refn's *Neon Demon* (2016), to grittier films by lesser-known directors, often executed in franchises, like the *Hostel* films (2005, 2007, 2011) and *The Human Centipede* movies (2009, 2011, 2015), and one-offs like *Captivity* (2007). As we watch these films, we are left to our own imaginary devices to steward empathy toward a victim who narratively warrants it but is mechanically denied it in cinematic form.

These films express the kinds of gut-wrenching, discomfort-inducing theatrics theorized by Antonin Artaud, who was interested in creating an experience in which the boundaries between audience and performances are perforated to produce an overwhelming emotional and visceral effect, the ultimate spectacle of sensation, particularly by way of cruelty. In his enthusiastically written manifesto on the subject, he wrote, "Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds."<sup>1</sup> And while films are notably different than theater, filmmakers continuously demonstrate the desire to engage the theatrics of cruelty and further push its limits of visual representation. The separation afforded by images, no matter how seemingly absent, is an ever-present protective layer shielding our gaze from the real and satiates our curiosity. What does cruelty have to do with the male gaze? These films combine the once avant-garde creative interest in engaging audiences through the use of shock and horror, with the pleasure derived from looking, and the overarching cinematic apparatus that maintains the active/male and passive/female argued by Mulvey.

At its core, the male gaze is about patriarchal power but also is based on two psychoanalytic theories related to visual pleasure. Mulvey writes, "The cinema offers a number of visual pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking)."<sup>2</sup> According to Freud, scopophilia is sexual pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects, such as films or photographs. For Mulvey, cinema is not inherently an erotic object, rather an invitation to look into a private and separate world other than our own. She says, "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus on the human form."<sup>3</sup> This pleasure in looking is specifically assigned to bodies, and under patriarchal dominance, these bodies "to be looked at" are dominantly female. In *Berlin Syndrome*, though Clare is a photographer by trade, Andi is interested in images as well. She takes pictures of buildings and cityscapes, while he focuses on the human form, taking Polaroids of the women he meets (and

1 Artaud, Antonin (1958), *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press), p. 99

2 Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 16.

3 Ibid., p. 17.

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tortures) without their consent or prior knowledge. For Andi, a photographic image is a form of ownership and, by extension, so is his gaze. He enjoys the control of looking and choosing the recipient of his gaze, which transforms into a weaponized catalyst for additional damage and ultimately the death of his subjects.

Mulvey continues, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” She thus introduces the notion of the male gaze, writing, “The projecting male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”<sup>4</sup> The way this plays out cinematically varies, such as through the use of lengthy-shot durations and camera movements lingering on a woman’s face and body as well as the use of soft or warm lighting to further idealize and feminize her features. Again, following the conventions of mainstream filmmaking, Clare is portrayed through the objectifying gaze of Andi/the audience during their first night together. Though she is unaware of his untrustworthiness at this point in the film, in retrospect, this cinematic framing reinforces her unawareness, and perhaps settles any doubts in the viewer as well, so as to create a starker contrast between the established male gaze and the unexpected turn toward the female gaze shortly thereafter.

Mulvey’s understanding of scopophilia in so far as it relates to film then combines the historically subordinate role of women (on- and offscreen) and the pleasure in looking at erotic imagery, which relates to the second psychoanalytic theory: Jacques Lacan’s<sup>5</sup> notion of the mirror stage, which is generally a reconsideration of Freud’s ideas, focusing on the infant stage in which a child recognizes its own reflection and idealizes the mirror image over its “real one,” seeing it as a more complete, independent version. Mulvey’s translation of this theory to film focuses on the relationship between the viewer and the on-screen subject, which becomes a “screen surrogate” or “ego ideal,” or essentially a superior reflection of the viewer. This aspect of Mulvey’s theory is often ignored or altogether dismissed as it requires familiarity with Lacan’s particular brand of psychoanalysis. Still, it actually correlates with other widely accepted ideas about how we relate to images more generally. Perhaps first and foremost, Lacan’s interpretation of the glorified mirror image builds on the Greek myth of Narcissus, who was paralyzingly mesmerized by his own reflection. This line of thinking continued through Susan Sontag when she invoked Plato’s allegory of the cave<sup>6</sup> and Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophies<sup>7</sup> on the powerful illusion of immortality to assert we “prefer the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being.”<sup>8</sup> John Berger<sup>9</sup> added to this idea and addressed the ideological struggles we negotiate when filming an unstaged event, and in the process thoroughly examined the power relations between subjects doing the looking and subjects intended to be looked at. Roland Barthes<sup>10</sup> also attributed the idealized image to its use in journalism and advertising, and this line of thinking continues as we contemplate the idealized image in its more ubiquitous form of the selfie, which of course also piggybacks on the ways these images challenge traditional structures of empowerment and ownership. Brooke Wendt describes a similar surrogate relationship and fascination with the idealized

4 Ibid., p. 19.

5 Jacques Lacan’s development of Freud’s ideas were delivered in seminars during the years he was teaching and were later published in various volumes.

6 This allegory is located in Plato’s *Republic*, originally published around 380 BC.

7 These ideas can be found in *The Essence of Christianity*, originally published in 1841.

8 Sontag, Susan (1977), *On Photography* (New York: Picador), p. 153.

9 Two relevant sources include *Ways of Seeing*, originally published in 1972, and *About Looking*, originally published in 1980.

10 A number of works are relevant, including *Camera Lucida*, originally published in 1970 and a collection of essays called *Image, Music, Text* (edited by Stephen Heath and published in 1978), in which the essay “Rhetoric of the Image” is included.

self, arguing, “Fascinated by the promise of pluripotentiality, we create numerous selfies with many different looks that can be hashtagged to theoretically unlimited and virtual locations.”<sup>11</sup>

That we hold images at a distance and with high regard is a testament to their power, especially in a visual culture that favors seeing and looking as dominant modes of experiencing the world. We recognize and cherish photographic images for their realism, or verisimilitude, and because they can be staging grounds for fantasy. During Clare’s time in captivity at Andi’s apartment, she explores her environment in a desperate search for clues about her captor. In the process, she finds Polaroid images of her naked body inserted in an Egon Schiele art book. The images were obviously taken following their first evening of consensual intercourse. However, it is clear how Andi photographed her body was a surprise to her. More importantly, the pictures showed he had written *MEINE*, the German word for *mine*, on her bareback with a black marker. Idealization and fantasy merge and are particularly troubling in the image-world in light of the popularity of cruelty in cinema, particularly toward women.

The normalization and frequency of such sadistic fantasies account for the continuation of images of helpless, struggling, often bound, preferably beautiful female victims on screen. In her book *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson asks, “Is violence simply the sharpest, the fastest, the most immediately or physiologically affecting?”<sup>12</sup> Despite any mixed feelings toward their reception, violent scenes achieve a narrative and aesthetic payoff we have been conditioned to expect, thus allowing for scopophilic desires in viewers to be stirred, which continuously justifies their frequency and the overall acceptance of them. Clare is in Berlin because she is interested in GDR architecture and would like to publish a book of her photographs on this subject. Early in the film, this seems to touch a nerve with Andi, and he cannot understand why she is making a fuss over East Germany, telling her, “you can suffocate anywhere.” She offers a lighthearted response and asks him to translate “suffocate” into German, to which he feigns having difficulty and comes up with the word for “strangle” instead, and jokingly demonstrates it on her. It is a moment of realization for the audience who, up to this point, has likely picked up on clues that indicate he is untrustworthy and, in this moment, are forced to confront the joking-but-all-too-realistic strangling of the film’s protagonist. It is a foreshadowing device as well as a demonstration of how he finds his symbolic mother in Clare, and he struggles with both wanting to keep her forever and kill her.

The audience begins to discover Andi’s perverse interest in torturing Clare, and at least one other tourist from Canada before her, is the result of his overall hatred toward women, stemming from his mother’s “abandonment” of him and his father when Andi was just a child. “She defected,” we learn when Andi argues with his father, hinting at his resentment toward her and his projection of it onto other women. His choice to live in an abandoned building in the former GDR, East Berlin, is part self-inflicted punishment and part staging ground for entrapping his victims. He seems to be enacting a different Freudian behavior: that of *fort/da*<sup>13</sup>, a game of controlling presence and absence enlisted to mitigate the trauma of loss. Andi wishes both to reenact his mother’s act of abandonment and symbolically replace his mother by keeping women against their will. With Clare, he takes this a step further by forbidding contact with her mother, even texting her on Clare’s behalf, and withholding the necklace her mother gave her for protection. These gestures are punishments against her and symbolically against his mother, with whom he has a bitterly severed relationship.

Other hints allude to the similarities between Clare and his mother, and this is important because the film has established that Andi hates women by way of hating his mother, the first woman he has ever encountered. As a wandering tourist, Clare has plans to leave for Dresden the next day after meeting Andi. When she mentions this, he acts hurt by this realization. She interprets his pouting as his interest in her, but

11 Wendt, Brooke (2014), *The Allure of the Selfie* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures), p. 7.

12 Nelson, Maggie (2011), *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), p. 93.

13 Freud discusses this coping mechanism in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, originally published in 1920.

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for the viewer, it is apparent there is something more sinister and potentially possessive going on. When she bumps into him again, she approaches him, and without turning around to look at her, the camera closes on his profile to disclose his infantile reaction to her plan as he says, "I thought you wanted to leave." This line links Clare to his mother, and the association continues into the next scene.

The power of Andi's hatred toward women is significant because it justifies his actions from a narrative standpoint, but it also means this film will serve as the stage for his cruel acts of rage on women. For audiences, it is the ideal surrogate image conventionalized by the male gaze. The fake strangle was just the beginning. As Mulvey puts it, "The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it proves inseparable the associations he makes between sexual attraction, violence, and power, along with fantasy and emotional healing. Again, this echoes Mulvey's assertion that mainstream cinema privileges the scopophilic identifications between male agency and female oppression. In this quite familiar cinematic narrative, Andi is the male perpetrator in control of the female character. According to the conventions of this subgenre, his desires, as twisted as they may be, should dominate the screen even if we are meant to sympathize with Clare. But this faux strangle will prove a trick in a short while, as it becomes apparent it is not the last time Andi demonstrates violence toward Clare -- in fact, he will perform actual violence on her -- but it is the last time the cinematic apparatus will demonstrate his power over hers.

While *Berlin Syndrome* initially feels as though it is another conventional film wielding a patriarchal gaze, it proves it is possible to tell truly a engaging, even horrifying, cinematic story without assaulting our senses with visual dynamism that proffers violence against women with a lingering, sensationalized approach. While *Berlin Syndrome* begins with the male gaze fully intact, it forcefully deviates from this visual convention to provide an adequate platform from which a truly strong female character can operate. Though the narrative qualifies a kind of violence described above, its filmmaking refrains from indulging its full capacity. The film treats its main storyline in a way that defies expectation through repeated moments of visual deferral at the moment when Clare (and the audience) realizes she is trapped. Here, the relay of narrative information intensifies, and filmmaking diverges into an unexpected but welcomed territory, befitting of the strength of the female character.

Though seemingly subtle, this shift has tremendous effects, offering some recourse on behalf of Clare and aligning her strength and resilience from a narrative standpoint with the way she is depicted on screen. In other words, subverting the coded language of the male gaze enacted by the cinematic apparatus offers a subtle but effective alternative to portraying the on-screen victim. Perhaps more powerfully, it denies one of the key conventions of this subgenre, the so-called payoff of portraying violence to its fullest degree on screen. While conventional film perspectives favor detailed imagery through close-ups and repetition, Shortland's camera resists full disclosure of many violent images, showing them in shorter shot durations, out-of-focus, and at angles that further distance the viewer from the subject of the gaze, like over-the-shoulder framings and unusual long-distance shots.

The same is demonstrated in the scene when Clare finds the Polaroid images of her labeled body. Here the fragmented way in which *he* photographed her body greatly differs from Shortland's approach in other scenes, demonstrating the specific ways cinematic techniques shape meaning and identification for the viewer. Andi's Polaroids treat Clare's body as parts: photographed as though being collected, identified, and cataloged. (And, we later learn, it is. Clare discovers a hidden photo album of numerous women photographed in similarly disturbing ways.) But Shortland's camera, again, treats Clare's discovery with an over-the-shoulder framing, which lets shadows and the glare of light interfere with the content in the images but reveals enough of the subject to communicate important narrative information. Rather than dwell on these images and linger on the manifestations of Andi's twisted anger, the camera emphasizes Clare's response—a close-up of her

14 Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 20.

face and eyes—choosing to humanize her and increase our identification with her. Shortland relishes in the moments when Clare actively chooses to look away. As this film is largely about looking — both Clare and Andi are photographers in their own right, and we join their photographic journeys at micro and macro levels — Shortland turns to these small but powerful gestures of looking away or looking only momentarily to cinematically empower Clare. It is one final photograph — an image Clare took of her tortured body — which she sneaks off to the world outside the apartment that ultimately sets her free.

These choices create a technical disassociation between Shortland's camera's gaze and, thus the gaze of her audience, subjecting it to a kind of deferral. The expected payoff is hinted at but never fully achieved. One must infer rather than confront the extent of brutality in these images, avoiding indulging and lingering in their visual pronouncement. Put another way, the payoff is withheld from view, and we derive pleasure in not looking. This technical dissociation more effectively activates, for better or worse, a sense of doubled identification, observed by Teresa de Lauretis and other scholars who note the double desire of the female spectator, who identifies with both the usually male active subject and the usually female passive one.<sup>15</sup> *Berlin Syndrome's* version of the victim-versus-perpetrator shows Clare is not entirely passive in a refreshing deviation from the traditional narrative film model of a female victim. Still, there is plenty of cinematic evidence throughout history that demonstrates this is not enough. A strong female victim is often photographed like a passive one, which can visually negate the strength of her character. A shift is required in how female bodies are looked at, and maybe it begins with a non-heterosexual male behind the camera. However, I would argue this is not a prerequisite for or a guarantee of successfully avoiding the conventions established by Hollywood or mainstream narrative cinema. What makes Shortland's film stand apart from others is her treatment of the female body by way of the cinematic apparatus specifically, not a rewriting of the narrative conventions of a cis female victim fighting off a cis male perpetrator, which changes not just the characterization of the story but more importantly the mechanism through which it is channeled. This allows both the apparatus and the narrative to support each other's meaning and overall message.

In video game parlance, this is known as ludonarrative symmetry, which means the mechanics, or the actions you take, and the game's narrative match each other. In mainstream narrative films, there has been a consistent dominant mechanic, as it were, for handling female victimhood and violent acts against her, which gives audiences the narrative and cinematic perspective of the perpetrator and his desires. Shortland bends these rules through the combined use of off-screen space and rack focus, a technique that selectively obscures objects in the frame, during violent scenes. These mechanics spare us full visual disclosure of Clare's vulnerable body put on display for Andi's and by extension our visual pleasure. In one example of this, when it becomes certain Andi plans to keep Clare prisoner, he ties her to the bed before leaving for work. The camera wanders into this scene as though with an attitude of partial blindness: Clare's hands and feet are bound, but the camera's gaze refuses to linger on her vulnerability in full, revealing narrative aspects of the scene in only fragments. It is a way of cinematically conveying the disturbing nature of Andi's actions, not necessarily as a moral judgment but as a representation of the kind of delirium that precedes shock or loss of consciousness, which formally represents Clare's point of view, not Andi's. Though he is the active agent in the scene, and Clare the passive victim, the camera's perspective does not indulge this imbalance in power, instead asserts its alternative to actively change the structure of looking. As a result, we can align our gaze with Clare's, conferring on the experience a kind of testimony. This form of identification not only helps to establish an alternative way of examining female victimhood on-screen but is a more accurate representation of Clare's character. Her eventual escape from captivity is a product of her resilience, resourcefulness, and clarity under pressure. Showing her in distress may provide a more dramatic contrast to her release, in an ignorant reduction of the audience's need for oversimplified melodrama, but it also weakens the purpose of

15 De Lauretis, Teresa (1984), *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

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including a believable, strong female character.

By locating the features of the male gaze and, ultimately, the traditions of mainstream narrative cinema, it is easier to understand how the female gaze might be mobilized. Despite its age, and perhaps because it is the first of its kind, the concept of the male gaze remains a clever way of framing the conditions around the cinematic apparatus, the narrative conventions that dominate mainstream cinema, and how we might conceive of a remedy for the issues they present. It is important to emphasize, as Mulvey indirectly does, the undoing of the male gaze is not completed or made possible by the mere fact that a woman is behind the camera or narratively doing the looking for two key reasons. First, this view denies that a film language exists and was created, is maintained, and remains dominated by a heterosexual male perspective. Second, it ignores the qualities of the cinematic apparatus itself, which is denied neutrality under the current patriarchal system. With this in mind, I agree with the assertion Mary Ann Doane made in 1988, writing, "This state of affairs -- the result of a history which inscribes woman as subordinate -- is not simply to be overturned by a contemporary practice that is more aware, more self-conscious."<sup>16</sup>

While awareness and self-consciousness are valuable, particularly among the increasing number of women as producers of content, there is more at work in the male gaze that goes uncomfortably deeper, to the point where, among both male and female creators, it recurs as the dominant, default mode of cinematic engagement, primarily in mainstream narrative filmmaking but with trickling effects across the globe. Awareness and self-consciousness do not go far enough, and often are relegated to external discourses surrounding film narratives. As films like *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) and *The Favourite* (2018) demonstrate, a female-dominated narrative does little to obliterate the mechanical structures of the male gaze. And even among female film directors, key moments in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), for example, expose the persistence of the patriarchal gaze. More effective, demonstrable change comes from within the language of film itself, actively subverting cinematic language that frames ideas and understanding of narrative content, creating a one-to-one relationship between strong female characters and the ways they are mechanically depicted on-screen. If we can harness and articulate the ways in which dominant modes of cinematic language can be overturned, then we can leverage its effects. Despite its quasi-torture porn storyline, *Berlin Syndrome*'s cinematic form and composition subvert the very elements of the male gaze in a noticeable shift away from its objectifying stance at a critical narrative point in the film, mirroring the shift in power structure between the antagonist and protagonist, ultimately subjugating the male gaze. If there is a definition of the female gaze, then this is it.

Again, decades ago, Doane wrote, "Cinematic images of woman have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility."<sup>17</sup> While films like *Berlin Syndrome* prove it is possible, alternative portrayals remain extraordinary and rare, despite an increasing number of women writing, directing, and photographing films. Zoe Dirse's approach to the female gaze comes closest to what I think is successful about Shortland's work in *Berlin Syndrome*. As a documentary filmmaker who shoots her own films, Dirse's work contributes to how we might, as she puts it, "theorize experience not as something that is unmediated or value free but, rather, as something that is culturally produced."<sup>18</sup> Her gaze is not male, Dirse argues, and by extension, neither is the gaze of her camera and ultimately, her audience. However, mainstream narrative films, as a whole, differ from documentary filmmaking because they primarily operate through a patriarchal lens, which requires more nuanced approaches to subversion.

16 Doane, Mary Ann, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in *Feminism and Film Theory* ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 216.

17 Doane, Mary Ann, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in *Feminism and Film Theory* ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 216.

18 Dirse, Zoe (2013), "Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) behind the Camera," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 3(1): 15–29.

Perhaps we have the expectation all wrong when attempting to disrupt the male gaze through the creation of its opposite in the female gaze, a concept with shifting definitions and philosophies. The female-versus-male gaze suggests this polarity is the only model. What is troubling about the term female gaze, and worth including as part of an argument for stronger clarification of its origins, is it prolongs and reinforces a gender binary. The answer to the patriarchy problem is not necessarily resolved by replacing it with a matriarchal one. Moreover, I think the subversion of the male gaze is not and should not be reduced to the technical arrangements of this binary, especially when its terms, under the strict and lengthy edicts of patriarchal structures, are unequal, as are the creative industries through which any disruption might occur. While contributions from creators who identify as female are of course worthwhile, this factor only accounts for part of what is required to dismantle patriarchal frameworks of storytelling. If we dig a little deeper into how to subvert the male gaze, it would then be possible to encourage any content creator to be mindful of this opportunity. Moreover, contributing to a binary way of thinking can be oppressive in itself, and also adds to the weaknesses of Mulvey's ideas, namely that her theory of the male gaze overlooks important differences such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

With all of this in mind, Cate Shortland's *Berlin Syndrome* is not feminist because her gaze is female, but because her camera did not play into the conventions of a familiar narrative that makes it nearly impossible to offer recourse. The story of a psychologically troubled male who takes out his rage on women is subverted by tactical use of camera angles and framing that favor and empower the female victim. This use of tasteful restraint is also evident in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), which flirted with the possibility of violence against a group of vulnerable women but never engaged it. Seemingly small choices like these have a tremendous impact in terms of the viewers' overall takeaway of the film, the identifications modeled and portrayed, and the persuasive power of both. While uncommon and comparatively less popular, films can break from problematic conventions and offer alternative visual perspectives around the subject of cruelty, particularly with regard to the female body. If we can pinpoint an alternative language of cinematic techniques, mechanically guiding the audience's gaze toward new ways of seeing, then it will not matter who is behind the camera.

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Natasha Chuk researches and writes about the affordances and limitations of creative technologies as language systems at the intersection of formality, expression, and perception. She wrote the book *Vanishing Points: Articulations of Death, Fragmentation, and the Unexperienced Experience of Created Objects* (Intellect, 2015), which examines the relationship between presence, absence, and perceptual experience across a variety of artworks, including film, photography, and video games. She teaches courses in film studies, digital culture, and media theory at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

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## First-Person Adolescent Storytellers and Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*

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### ABSTRACT:

In *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, Virginia Tufte illustrates how grammar, word choice, and syntax strategies help to generate the perfect juxtaposition of words and punctuation that will make each sentence pop (Clark). Tufte's handbook includes examples from a variety of texts; for example, John Keats, Andy Warhol, Ernest Hemingway, Julia Child's *The Joy of Cooking*, and more. However, there is a noticeable lack of adolescent narrators in Tufte's smorgasbord of literature examples. This lack is significant, due to the popularity of first-person narrators in adolescent literature. Therefore, in order to analyze whether Tufte's syntax strategies can also be applied to first-person adolescent narrators, two contrasting teenage protagonists were examined: Matilda, in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793*, and Saba, in Moira Young's *Blood Red Road*. The final analysis illustrates that Virginia Tufte's syntax strategies, in *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, are equally effective when applied to first-person adolescent storytellers, particularly strategies that include verbs, fragments, and the creation of cohesiveness.

**Keywords:** adolescent fiction, grammar, first-person narration, Virginia Tufte, creative writing strategies, young adult fiction

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## INTRODUCTION

I first discovered Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style* while preparing for a fiction workshop with Breena Clarke at the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA creative writing program. Clarke mentioned Tufte's handbook in her welcome email, announcing that we would analyze our sentences to make "each comma account for itself while trying to discover the perfect juxtaposition of words and punctuation that will make our sentences pop." The idea of making each comma accountable intrigued me; without hesitation, I ordered the book from Amazon. I discovered that Clarke's directive perfectly explains the *raison d'être* of Tufte's *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. In a little less than three-hundred pages, Virginia Tufte includes many useful strategies that enable writers to craft powerful and precise sentences that are alive with meaning. From Chapter One, "Short Sentences" to Chapter Fourteen, "Syntactic Symbolism," she presents a delicious sensory smorgasbord of grammar and syntax strategies, as well as great literature. In fact, it is easy to forget that Tufte's handbook is primarily a text that centers on form and syntax, for her examples pool from a variety of sources, such as Faulkner, Joyce, Warhol, Nabokov, Julia Child's *The Joy of Cooking*, *The King James Bible*, and the *9/11 Commission Report*. The brief passages illustrate – through a collection of styles, voices, and content – that Tufte's syntax strategies work. Still, the handbook lacks examples with first-person adolescent narrators. This is a significant lack, too, particularly since young adult literature is popular in today's culture, as Tunnell and Jacobs explain.<sup>1</sup> The genre of young adult literature often features stories told through the eyes of an adolescent, first-person narrator, since the first-person viewpoint places young readers "in the character's shoes" (McCoach par.3). Therefore, a closer analysis was necessary to determine whether Tufte's strategies would also apply to the first person adolescent storyteller.

Because the world view and experience of an adolescent is usually less-sophisticated than that of an adult, it is only logical that the narrating "voice" of an adolescent would be less likely to contain colorful appositives, multi-syllable adjectives, or most of the infinitive passages that Tufte highlights. However, the strategies in Tufte's handbook are more than syntax strategies for the learned, the literary, and the elite. They are well thought out strategies that align with real speech and storytellers. Furthermore, a close analysis of two first-person adolescent narrators, Matilda, in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793*, and Saba, in Moira Young's *Blood Red Road*, illustrates Virginia Tufte's strategies, in *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, as applying equally to all first-person narrators, including the first person adolescent storyteller.

## NOVELS AND NARRATORS

Two contrasting young adult novels were examined, one historical fiction and one post-apocalyptic (fantasy) fiction. Both feature a first-person female storyteller, both are contemporary, and both have met with literary success. Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793*, narrated by fourteen-year-old Matilda Cook, takes place in 18<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia during an outbreak of yellow fever. The second novel is Moira Young's *Blood Red Road*, the first book in her *Dust Lands Trilogy*. The story is narrated by eighteen-year-old Saba and takes place in a post-apocalyptic wasteland that appears to be Earth. The opening paragraph of each story was examined with the premise that each opening was specifically crafted to capture the reader's interest and curiosity, along with other passages that denote action and inspire strong emotions.

1 Tunnell & Jacobs explain the factors that contribute to the rise of young adult novels, including a rise in retail sales of books for children and young adults, a rise in school purchases to satisfy literature-based reading philosophies, sales from school paperback book clubs (e.g., Trumpet Club, Scholastic, Troll, Weekly Reader), and ALA established book prizes for young adult literature, such as the (2000) Michael L. Printz Award for young adult literature and the (2001) Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award (85)

**LITERATURE REVIEW: SYNTAX, STYLE, AND VOICE**

The perfect juxtaposition of words and punctuation that allows a sentence to “pop,” as Clarke explains, is the often-elusive quality of “real voice” in fiction. Comprised of words on a page, and the arrangement of words, punctuation, and phrases known as “syntax,” the voice of a storyteller should be real, honest, and believable. The quality of real-ness is best explained by Ernest Hemingway, who asserts that it is the writer’s duty to create “living people” (qtd.in Bell 77). James Hilton adds to Hemingway’s insight, suggesting that “a genuine creation (of fiction) should have character as well as be one” (qtd.in Bell 77). Peter Elbow, in *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, asserts that real voice is often defined as authentic and sincere, for it “captures the sound of an individual on the page” (287). Moreover, “real voice” has the power to make readers sit up and pay attention because the words of the storyteller “go deep” (Elbow 300). To illustrate his point, Elbow includes the words of Stanford University Professor Ellen Nodd, who asserts that an effective voice is loud because it speaks directly to the reader’s ear. In other words, an authentic narrator has the power to reach out and grab their reader, pulling them out of the passive sidelines and into the action of the story.

To create an authentic literary voice, the fundamentals of sentence composition should not be underestimated. After all, it is the writer’s choice of words, syntax, and overall style that enable readers to experience a story first-hand, by eliciting powerful emotions within them. As fiction editor Beth Hill asserts, word choice, verb tense, and sentence structure can greatly influence reader emotions. According to Hill, some words are “triggers in themselves and can be used to set off the reader (emotionally)” (par. 23).

To illustrate her point, Hill includes two examples of fictional narration. In the first example, the word choice and verb tense “tell” the reader what is happening in the scene. For example, “Delores was afraid to open the door to the basement steps. She stood at the far side of the kitchen, debating what to do” (Hill par.6).

The fear experienced by Delores is described with three verb phrases: “Delores was afraid,” “she stood,” and “debating what to do.” Hill narrates what is happening in the scene, but that is all. Any sensory details that might be taking place are left to the reader to imagine.

In contrast, the second example inspires the reader to experience fear, along with Delores. Virginia Tufte would identify these sentences as “artful sentences,” for they inject movement into the sentence, triggering the reader’s emotions.

For example,

Delores’s hand trembled as she reached for the locked doorknob. Tom had warned her not to open the basement door when he wasn’t around. She bit her lip and tightened her fingers around the cold knob. (Hill par.6)

In Hill’s revised example, a feeling of anxiety, hesitation, and overall movement is created with the vivid verbs “trembled” and “reached.” Like adjectives, verbs have the ability to create rich descriptions, alive with motion. As Tufte explains, the verb phrase is the part of the sentence, that “does much of the saying” (63).

To illustrate how a verb can serve many different functions within a sentence, like Hill, Tufte includes an example that contains the verb “trembles,” written by William Keats. He writes, “The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass.” (qtd. in Tufte 64). Keat’s use of the verb “trembling” to add a feeling of movement to the description. Like Hill’s example of Delores, Keat’s hare trembles to life with the help of strong, expressive verbs,

Although the essence of what is communicated in a sentence is dependent on the verb phrase, what is “said” must also be clear and cohesive to be effective. The arrangement (syntax) of verbs, nouns, adverbs, and other intricacies of form, such as punctuation and sentence length, must blend into a cohesive whole in order to create a logical, authentic story. For example, in the sentence, “Delores’s hand trembled as she

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reached for the locked doorknob,” the writer (Hill) establishes a cohesiveness of time and order with the use of the adverbial connector “as”. By connecting the two verb phrases with an adverb, the reader knows the action is taking place simultaneously. In this way, the adverbial connector gives the sentence a sense of logical relation and temporal order, contributing to the cohesiveness of the passage (Tufte 241). The reader is placed in a moment in time, amidst action that feels very real. In other words, the reader experiences the feeling of “trembling” and the motion of “reaching”, and even after the sentence is over, the feeling of movement lingers.

## THE ADOLESCENT NARRATOR

Still, not every story can be authentically narrated by merging sophisticated nouns, verbs, and adverbial connectors. For example, an adolescent storyteller narrating an event might not use Keats’ description (“The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass”). In fact, an authentic teenage narrator would probably do the opposite by explaining events using verb phrases that are simple, if not ordinary. More believable would be sentences such as “The rabbit went over there” or “The bunny took off”. In order to analyze whether Tufte’s syntax strategies can be applied to an adolescent narrator, it is helpful to return to Ellen Nodd, who posits that “voice” in prose should speak to the ear of the reader (qtd. in Elbow 286).

Without a doubt, this strategy also applies when the reader is an adolescent. Katie McCoach, in “5 Key Ingredients All Young Adult Novels Must Have” posits that a well-crafted fictional voice, especially that of an adolescent, should be “strong and unique” (par 4). She asserts that “voice” in a young adult novel should be so well-defined that readers feel as if they immediately know the character (par.6). In “Know Your Young Audience: How to Write for Middle Grade and Young Adult Readers”, Mary Kole agrees, explaining that adolescents are often self-absorbed and possess an un-fixed identity. Distinct from adult narrators, the “real” voice of an adolescent storyteller should expose the angst and intensity of puberty. To illustrate the intensity of adolescence, Kole includes an example from her personal past: the experience of driving around as a teenager in her wizard-purple Ford Taurus, when the perfect song came on the radio and all parts of the universe finally clicked into place. To recreate the feeling of the universe “clicking” into place, and the emotional intensity of puberty, word choice and syntax should be carefully constructed to breathe life and experience into the written words.

Consider, once more, Beth Hill’s second sentence, “Delores’s hand trembled as she reached for the locked doorknob.” Imagine how the word choice and arrangement might change if Delores was a first-person adolescent narrator. Would she really describe her hand – in a moment of intense fear – as “trembling”? The answer is complicated, if not story-specific. Depending on the adolescent storyteller’s education, upbringing, story circumstances, and even the novel’s setting and time period, an adolescent narrator *might* use the verb “tremble”. Yet if Delores was a first-person adolescent narrator in a novel set in 2018, a simpler approach might be more effective; for example, her hand might “shake,” or she might “grab” the doorknob. After all, an effective first-person literary “voice” does not require complicated, lengthy sentences. The end-goal of creating real characters still applies, and the task of the writer remains the same: to “capture the sound of an individual on the page” (Elbow 287).

## A FICTIONAL ADOLESCENT NARRATOR: MATILDA IN LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON’S *FEVER 1793*

Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Fever 1793* is a coming-of-age, young adult novel that accurately recounts a time in American history when a yellow fever epidemic broke out in Philadelphia. The story is told through the narration of fourteen-year-old Matilda Cook, and the syntax strategies explained by Tufte — particularly those of cohesiveness, fragments, and active verbs — help to create the first-person voice of Matilda, effectively bringing her story to life.

From the very first sentence, Anderson's choice of verbs and cohesive strategies help to establish the tone and setting of the story, as well as Matilda's relationship with her mother. An undertone of immediacy is also established. It is a tension that will continue to build as the story progresses, and the yellow fever epidemic becomes more rampant. In the opening paragraph of the novel, Matilda explains,

I woke to the sound of a mosquito whining in my left ear and my mother screeching  
in the night

"Rouse yourself this instant!"

Mother snapped open the shutters and heat poured into our bedchamber. (Anderson 1)

Vivid verbs create a sense of movement in Matilda's narration. The back-to-back verb phrases, "whining in my left ear" and "screeching in the right," allow the reader to experience Matilda's morning first hand. The reader can almost hear the buzz of the mosquito, followed by her mother's yelling. The choice of verbs — "whining" and "screeching" — also evoke a pressing tone, establishing an immediacy that will build as the plot unfolds.

Word choice and syntax also help to establish Matilda's eighteenth-century story. The verbal command of Matilda's mother, "Rouse", provides a distinct taste of early American speech in 1793, for this is her mother's way of waking Matilda up to get her chores done. The use of "rouse" reveals that Matilda's story takes place when spoken language was more formal. Furthermore, the finite verbs that follow — "snapped" and "poured" — advance the feeling of time, action, and movement that Matilda introduced in the sentence before, when readers first heard the "whine" of the mosquito and the "screech" of Matilda's mother.

Laurie Halse Anderson also creates a sense of cohesiveness by linking the verb phrases with a conjunction connector. A subtle rhythmic tension is created when the two phrases, "I woke to the sound of a mosquito whining in my left ear" and "my mother screeching in the right", are joined with "and". Left to stand alone, without the conjunction, the narrated events would lose the sense of urgency that results from the strong, repeating gerunds (the "ing" verbals, "whining" and "screeching").

As Matilda continues her narration, she uses a second sequence of verb phrases connected by another conjunction to move her story forward. For example, "Mother snapped open the shutters *and* heat poured into our bedchamber" (Anderson 1). In this way, active verbs and conjunction connectors create a cohesion that establishes an underlying rhythm in the story. And because tension is the source of fourteen-year-old Matilda's inner and outer conflict, the feeling of rhythm is critical, for it helps to establish the mood, setting, and conflict in *Fever 1793*.

Just as Virginia Tufte demonstrates with Keat's trembling hare that limped, verbs bring a sense of movement to a description. Anderson also uses this technique to describe a poignant moment when Matilda is about to collapse with exhaustion. After the yellow fever has claimed many victims, Matilda assists with three small children who are on the brink of death. Here, Halse Anderson uses a verb-turned-noun — "whisper —" together with a predicate-verb — "passed" — and two short sentences that rely on strong, past-tense verbs — "lifted," "rattled," and "shivered" — to create the important moment in the story when Matilda realizes the children would probably be dead when she returned from the well. In Matilda's words, "A whisper of wind passed by from the north. It lifted the hair off my face and rattled the squash vines. I shivered." (Anderson 208)

Although she is only fourteen, Matilda's description evokes real and sensual feelings. There is nothing child-like about her observation. Instead, the reader can "hear" the wind, "feel" the lift of the air, and "see" the rattling of the vines. A cohesiveness in time and sequence is also established through the use of the conjunction "and". Regardless of her youth, Matilda's first-person voice is authentic and effective, particularly the last paragraph of the chapter which possesses a duality in meaning. Her last sentence, "I shivered", not only

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explains her actions and inner feelings, for she is both cold and worried, her two word subject-verb statement leaves her reader with a strong sense of dread and foreboding. It is obvious that the young children she has cared for might very well be the next victims tossed into the wagon of cadavers. It is also obvious that Matilda might be next.

### **A FICTIONAL ADOLESCENT NARRATOR: SABA IN MOIRA YOUNG'S *BLOOD RED ROAD***

*Blood Red Road* is a young adult novel written by Moira Young. It is the story of Saba, who lives in an alternate post-apocalyptic society and discovers, on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, that her home has been destroyed and her twin brother has been kidnapped. The story is told through the grammatically unpredictable first-person narration of Saba. Like Laurie Halse Anderson, Young uses a variety of syntax strategies and verbs to create the first-person "voice" of Saba, particularly strategies that promote cohesiveness.

To establish the tone of the story, as well as the authentic adolescent voice for Saba, Moira Young uses a stylistic, syntactic arrangement of simple words, particularly verbs, crafted into small, fragmented chunks. These convey a sense of energy and pulse which, like other verbs, invigorates other parts of the sentence by creating "sustained patterns and levels of activity" (Tufte 64). As Saba explains in the opening paragraph,

Lugh got born first. On Midwinter Day when the Sun hangs low in the sky.

Then me. Two hours later.

That pretty much says it all. (Young 1)

In an interview discussing *Blood Red Road*, Young explains her choice of first-person perspective and voice for Saba as a "bricolage." Because Saba's fictional dystopian world is "cobbled-together", it is only appropriate her speech "is cobbled together from words and phrases and expressions of different eras and cultures" (Young par.3). Furthermore, this bricolage is dependent on the syntax strategies explained by Tufte, particularly those of verbs and fragments.

Saba's lack of concern with verb-tense and sentence structure establishes her rough, illiterate character, as well as the dry, dystopian setting. Her first sentences, "Lugh got born" and "On Midwinter Day when the Sun hangs low in the sky," generates curiosity and excitement. This continues with the back-to-back fragments: "Then me" and "Two hours later." The change in verb tense, from past-tense to present-tense, also generates clues to Saba's character while at the same time foreshadows her upcoming quest to follow her brother's kidnappers.

Because Saba's verb tenses are always a little "off", the reader is all too aware of Saba's lack of education and her harsh childhood on post-apocalyptic Earth. The arrangement of the verb phrases "got born" followed by "hangs low" reminds her reader that literacy was probably not a priority in her life. After all, Saba is a product of a dying world. Young's choice of words and syntax help create an authentic "real" voice for an adolescent just struggling to make the most of her circumstances.

Saba narrates her story using a unique combination of contractions, mismatching verbs, and fragments. The end result is a curious combination of almost-southern, old English, and uneducated prairie — a patchwork of "says", "ain't's", "yer's" and "fer's," to name a few. Young also uses a laconic no-nonsense combination of sensual verbs, adjectives, and nouns. This is best illustrated half-way through the novel when Saba explains her nightmare.

For example:

I wake, mutterin to myself. I'm soaked with sweat, my blanket twisted around my legs,  
my heart poundin in my chest. That was a new one. I ain't dreamed of fire before. An it

warn't Lugh I was searchin fer so frantic. I dunno who it was. (Young 194)

In Saba's description, the experience of waking up from a nightmare is vividly created through the use of strong effective verbs, such as "mutterin", "twisted", and "poundin'". These reveal Saba's unique speech, which also happens to be grammatically incorrect. In the words that follow, Saba explains the feeling of her heart pounding in her chest, being soaked with sweat, and twisting in her blankets. Saba's verbs allow her readers to experience the emotions as she does, creating a sense of "being there."

In contrast to Saba's "just woke up" narration ("I wake," and "mutterin to myself") Saba's dream narration is even more fragmented. Through a successive pattern of short sentences and numerous fragments, the reader experiences the nightmare along with Saba. For example,

Where are you? I shout. Where are you?

Another voice now. Whisperin. Mercy's voice.

The heartstone lets you know... the heartstone... heartstone... hurry, Sada...

Bright sun. Excerisize yard. Epona smiles. We're gonna burn Hopetown to the ground, she says.

I gotta find him. Before it's too late.

Too late... too late... too late... (Young 194)

Typical of her direct bare-bones approach to life, Saba uses back-to-back fragments and effective verbs sprinkled throughout the passage to explain what she is experiencing in her dream. In the passage, "Another voice now. Whisperin", the effect is a dream-image that feels real to the reader through Saba's choice of verbs, fragments, and syntax. Likewise, Saba's simple statement, "We're gonna burn Hopetown to the ground, she says," provides her reader with just enough details to foreshadow Saba's future. Like Anderson, Young makes use of back-to-back short sentences which builds tension in the story, for example, "I gotta find him. Before it's too late. Too late.... Too late...." It is also important to note that Saba's short sentences stand alone, without a connecting conjunction or adverb. In this manner, Saba's narration (and "voice") reflects her personality: she is a tough, no-nonsense little sister who does not waste time with details.

## DISCUSSION: UNCOVERING FIRST-PERSON ADOLESCENT NARRATORS

Although Matilda, in *Fever 1793*, and Saba, in *Blood Red Road*, are both first-person adolescent narrators, they are quite different from one another. In fact, in many ways, they are completely contrastive in education, background, and life experiences. Still, both are adolescent protagonists in novels written for young adults, and both share similarities that promote their appeal to their respective readers. Foremost is the adolescent voice, which Katie McCoach explains is so "clearly defined" that "a reader immediately feels like they know the character" (par.4). To achieve the effect of a real voice in the narration of Saba and Matilda, both authors utilize the grammar and syntax strategies explained by Virginia Tufte.

Moir Young uses short sentences and sentence fragments to create Saba's voice. The narration is not fancy, for this is not Saba's style. Saba does not bother with proper, predictable grammar, or the interjection of well-placed commas or semicolons in her speech like Matilda does. Instead, Young's heroine stays true to her determined, surviving nature. She has neither the temperament, nor education, nor the time. She recounts the bare facts of her story, in a first-person "call-it-like-you-see-it approach", but she manages to capture her reader's imagination through the use of causal verbs and contractions, such as "says", "mutterin", and "aint".

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Her narration is fragmented and clipped. It possesses a running-out-of-breath quality, almost as if she is holding back details. For example,

Lugh goes first, always first, an I follow on behind.

An that's fine.

That's right.

That's how it's meant to be. (Young 1)

Young uses three back-to-back clauses, "An that's fine", "That's right", and "That's how it's meant to be" to introduce Saba's story and also frame her inner reflections about her life. Although Saba ends her triplet with an affirmative ("That's how it's meant to be"), the reader can sense the uncertainty of the statement, especially since it rests at the end of a repetitive sequence ("That's fine," "That's right,") The end effect is actually the opposite: Maybe her world is *not* meant to be this way.

Saba's word choice and syntax also add a dose of authentic casualness to her narration; for example, "Lugh goes first" and "I follow on behind". Even though Saba is a fictional teenager in a post-apocalyptic society, her narration feels real and believable, similar to Matilda's page one waking up moment in *Fever 1793*. For example:

"Get out of bed, Matilda," she continued. "You're sleeping the day away." She shook my shoulder. "Polly's late and there's work to be done." The noisy mosquito darted between us. I started to sweat under the thin blanket. It was going to be another hot August day. Another long, hot August day. Another long, hot, boring, wretched August day. (Anderson 1).

Like Young, Laurie Halse Anderson uses simple sentences to mirror the language of a real teenager. However, Matilda's voice is very different from Saba's, for she is an educated fourteen-year-old living in Philadelphia in 1793. In contrast to Saba's voice, Matilda's narration is usually set aside in complete sentences, following the conventions of grammatical style and form. Yet both fictional teenagers make effective use of syntax strategies, including the use of active verbs that establish the essence of the sentence. For example, Matilda's statement, "She shook my shoulder", not only breaks up the dialogue (and words) of her mother but also evokes an urgency through the use of Matilda's past-tense verb, "shook."

The next sentences, "The noisy mosquito darted between us" and "I started to sweat under the thin blanket" also contain expressive verbs that provide a rich sensual description of Matilda's morning. Both sentences move the events of the morning forward and culminate in a final climax of two back-to-back fragments, "It was going to be another hot August day. Another long, hot August day. Another long, hot, boring, wretched August day" (Anderson 1).

Saba also makes use of sentence fragments, and her fragments, like her verb phrases, do more than just narrate. They reveal Saba's inner workings and her "cobbled-together world" (Young). Similar to Matilda's consecutive fragments ("Another long, hot, boring, wretched day"), Saba uses fragments to impart the sensory feeling of emotion. For example, "The sound of a heartbeat. My heartbeat. Over an Over. So loud. It fills my brain, my head. I cover my ears with my hands. Panic grips me. I turn in circles, blind" (Young 194).

After the consecutive fragments, Saba incorporates active verbs to effectively narrate her nightmare. In fact, Saba's description of her heart beating places the reader right there alongside her, in that moment, "It fills my brain, my head." The description inspires readers to imagine a sound so loud it overtakes all other sounds in the surrounding environment. The sentences that follow include more vivid verb phrases that describe the



panic Saba experiences, for example, “covering” Saba’s ears and “turning in circles.” Like Matilda, who is forced to deal with a mosquito that “darts”, the reader is not just *reading* about Saba’s story, they are experiencing the sequence of events as they unfold, and hearing and dreaming and spinning and panicking.

## CONCLUSION: ARTFUL SENTENCES AND FIRST-PERSON NARRATORS

At first glance, it may appear doubtful that the strategies explained by Virginia Tufte, in *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style* can be used to craft an authentic first-person adolescent voice. Adolescent narrators typically lack the sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure of adult narrators, and if the writer were to sprinkle in a more colorful adjective or verb here or there, the authenticity of the adolescent voice could be compromised. Still, the difference between an effective and an ineffective voice often comes down to the author’s textual decisions. As Virginia Tufte illustrates, well-constructed fragments, phrases, and sentences provide the perfect arrangement of words and punctuation to re-create a real first-person voice, even an adolescent one. Moreover, word choice and syntax have the power to elicit emotions, transporting readers into a world of imagination constructed out of intriguing infinitives, languid adjectives, and a finite verb or two.

Two contrasting adolescent protagonists, Matilda Cook, in *Fever 1793*, and Saba, in *Blood Red Road*, offer proof that Tufte’s syntax strategies can also apply to first-person adolescent narrators. After all, Tufte’s strategies enable writers to craft real stories narrated by storytellers who speak to each reader’s ear. In other words, as Breena Clarke explained so well, the strategies in Virginia Tufte’s *Artful Sentences: Structures as Style* help to generate the perfect juxtaposition of words and punctuation that make each sentence pop (Clarke). And for the conscientious writer that seeks to create an effective, “real” adolescent storyteller, this is good.

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## Finding the Sacred in the Profane: The Mardi Gras in Basile, Louisiana

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### ABSTRACT

In Basile, a small community in Southwest Louisiana, there would not be any Mardi Gras without Ash Wednesday and vice-versa. Most of the people in Basile speak of Ash Wednesday when defining the Mardi Gras as there is a reciprocal spiritual relationship between Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday. The people from Basile, therefore, in giving equal spiritual value to these two feasts, assign a liturgical value to Mardi Gras because they need, and will admit this freely, to have a good Mardi Gras in order to enter into the sacred season of Lent.

Mardi Gras performs a function that is similar to the other religious feasts which have been established to break the monotony of the liturgical cycle. Folklorists who have studied Mardi Gras in Basile support the idea that it is the same people dancing, singing, eating and drinking that one finds at Mardi Gras who will kneel before the priest to receive their ashes (Ware 1994, Lindhal 1996a, Mire). The Church tolerates and/or accepts the Carnival as a necessity. By accepting the carnival within its liturgical time, the Church exerts better control over that time of the year.

**Keywords:** folklore, Mardi Gras, Southern, sacred, profane

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Every year, in the small town of Basile, a small town community of officially 1,811 inhabitants (City-Data.com 2017), located in Southwest Louisiana and known for its rice fields and its Mardi Gras celebration, Mardi Gras (fat Tuesday) is practiced as a well-kept tradition brought over from Europe. During the yearly Advent season (the four weeks preceding Christmas), Basile community officials meet to prepare their version of the Mardi Gras celebration, which will consist of disguised men and women – called the Mardi Gras - parading in the city, asking for food and donations and kept in line by a ‘Capitaine’ as they perform for the growing American and international crowds. Unlike the famous carnivals in Rio, Venice, New Orleans or Nice, the Basile Mardi Gras is run by a group of beggars, and not givers (as throwing beads to the crowd for example) like in urban carnivals, performing for food and donations to prepare the Gumbo – a meal of chicken with smoked sausage stew eaten with rice- that will be shared with everyone in the evening. This celebration is directly linked to the Catholic faith and, thus, includes the presence of the local priest to bless the beggars in the morning Ash Wednesday Mass that follows Mardi Gras and formally opens the season of Lent. Hence, Mardi Gras would not exist without Ash Wednesday.

One of the most profound documentations of religion and God was put forth by Rudolf Otto. In his 1917 publication titled *Das Heilige* (The Sacred), Otto sought to explore the modalities of the religious experience (Eliade 8). This goes beyond a mere study of ideas about God and religion. Subsequently, the theologian was able to determine the specific characteristics as well as the content of religious experience. Otto acknowledged the existence of both the rational and irrational aspects of religion (Eliade 8; Otto 1). However, in *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto focused on the irrational and ignored the speculative and rational side. In *Das Heilige* Otto believed that the irrational religious experience is frightening. In this regard, he postulated that the irrational experience is characterized by a feeling of terror owing to its “awe-inspiring mystery,” “overwhelming superiority of power,” and “fascinating mystery” (Eliade 9). Since these experiences were occasioned by a revelation of aspects of divine power, Otto characterized them as being “numinous” (Eliade 9; Otto 5). These numinous experiences are far from being human or cosmic. Thus, it is only when confronted with them that human beings are likely to recognize their “nothingness.” It is also only then that human beings realize that they are mere creatures (Eliade 10).

Building upon Otto’s work, in his 1959 publication, Eliade (10) presented the notion of the sacred in all its complexity as opposed to solely highlighting the irrational side. In this pursuit, the scholar redefined the sacred postulating that “it is the opposite of the profane” (Eliade 10). This view is in agreement with the works of other scholars, key among them, Émile Durkheim, a renowned French sociologist, and Bronislaw Malinowski, the Polish anthropologist. Informed by this context, this article will explore the sacred-profane dichotomy in the context of Mardi Gras in Basile, Louisiana.

## THE SACRED-PROFANE DICHOTOMY

According to Durkheim, religion is comprised of rites and beliefs representing certain behavioral manners and states of mind respectively (Bachika). Thus, relative to sacred things, religion should be interpreted as a unified system of practices and beliefs. In this regard, religion can only exist when the sacred is distinguishable from the profane. This notion is corroborated by Eliade who observes that “man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifest itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane (11).” This entails the manifestation of a phenomenon of a different order, or a reality that is foreign to the world through objects that are central parts of the natural or ‘profane’ world. Therefore, Durkheim posits that a key distinctive trait of religious thought is the fact that the world can be divided into two domains, one that contains the sacred, and the other that contains the profane. On the one hand, the sacred is a representation of such core group interests as unity. On the other hand, the profane entails mundane personal concerns.

Further, the sacred-profane dichotomy does not represent good and evil. This is because both the sacred and the profane can be either. In Basile, this translates into the Mardi Gras (the participants) who, while begging for food and donations, also perform mischievous actions, not only to entertain the crowd, but also to play out this dichotomy of their sacred and profane functions within their community. Mardi Gras will climb on top of trees, steal yard items, scare people in the crowd, all of which is part of their performance.

The sacred is not only ideal but also transcends everyday existence. It entails the things that are set apart by man and includes the religious rites, beliefs or duties as well as anything else that requires special religious attention and treatment (Davis). When appreciated from this perspective, almost anything can be sacred, including a tree, a rock, a god, the earth, the moon, a bird, a king, the cross, and an animal amongst other objects. Bachika feels that beliefs play a vital role in determining the things that are ultimately considered as being sacred. Further, beliefs determine the characteristics, nature, as well as the virtues of the chosen objects. Once established and recognized as sacred these objects become 'totems' or symbols of religious practices, sentiments, and beliefs. Totems are not only sacred but are also believed to bear divine properties. In this regard, eating a totemic plant or animal is often forbidden. The profane, on the other hand, pertains to the realm of routine experience. Thus, the profane also denotes the unholy or the ordinary and comprises the practices, ideas, as well as other items that are appreciated with an everyday attitude of familiarity, utility, and commonness. The profane refers to that which should not take precedence over or come into contact with the sacred. This is because the profane or the unholy is believed to 'contaminate' the sacred or the holy. Undeniably, the behavior and attitudes toward the profane are associated with strong taboos and charged with negative emotions. All things that are considered sacred are assumed to be superior and opposed to those that are profane. Bachika cites that the most sacred are the totemic plants and animals as well as the objects made from stone or wood into which figures are engraved or carved to represent the totemic plant or animal.

Halligan suggests that when bound together and used as a figure of speech, the term 'sacred and profane' highlights the defining variations between several oppositions (1). Notable among these include the godly and the diabolical or godless good and evil, the civilized and the savage or uncivilized, the black and white, and the worthwhile and the worthless, amongst others. It is the absolute definition of these differences relative to each other that ultimately divides the world into two. As a result, the sacred and the profane can be appreciated as the means through which the world, as it is experienced, is processed and interpreted. For instance, whatever is worthwhile is worthy of God's creation, and thus, considered a sacred endeavor, which is often viewed as healthy, ethically just, or moral. Conversely, that whatever profanes God's command is morally bankrupt, counter to the best intentions of all, and is a corrupting influence or enterprise. Overall, a dialectical relationship exists between the sacred and the profane, which can be described as the antithesis to each other.

The sacred, in some instances, is characterized by ambiguity. Bachika highlights public expiatory ceremonies and funeral rites in this case. Inherent in this argument is the assumption that religious forces are double in nature, comprising of both the pure and the impure. On the one hand, the forces may be beneficial. On the other hand, they may be harmful and dangerous. However, although the sacred and the profane are antagonistic to each other, in some way, they are related. In some cases, they are reversible. For instance, a totemic animal may be the most sacred being, but when eaten, it is likely to cause death. The only exception, in this case, is if the animal is consumed as part of a religious ceremony (Bachika). Likewise, while human corpses induce fear and are highly avoided, they later become objects of veneration and respect. The ambiguity of the sacred can be exemplified by numerous examples, which imply that both the pure and impure are of the same nature. One notable exemplification of the ambiguity of the sacred and the profane in the postmodern era is the carnival celebration that characterizes the Mardi Gras.

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## THE CASE OF THE MARDI GRAS

Based on the sacred-profane dichotomy, scholars have defined numerous types of festivals. In the social sciences, festivals cover a wide range of events, both sacred and profane. Falassi notes that evidently, religious festivals have secular implications. On the other hand, secular festivals often resort to metaphysics in a bid to gain sanction and solemnity for their events or their sponsors. Ultimately, four cardinal features characterize festive behavior. These are intensification, abstinence, reversal, and trespassing (Falassi). This is because, during festivals, participants are likely to partake in activities that they do not partake in during normal times; abstain from doing things that they usually do; invert the patterns of their daily social life; take to the behaviors that are often regulated by measure to the extreme. Notable festivals in this regard are those that feature conspicuous consumption. These festivals involve drinks and food, which are not only prepared in abundance but also in excess. These foods and drinks are also made generously available and are consumed solemnly in different forms of feasts. One of the most typical and frequent features of festivals is blessed food or traditional meals. This is because they offer an eloquent way of representing and enjoying abundance, prosperity, and fertility. Moreover, ritual food offers an avenue for communicating with the ancestors and the gods. This is exemplified by the presence of Christ in the sacred meal of communion in the Christian belief. Also bearing carnivalesque aspects, the Mardi Gras is characterized by this conspicuous type of consumption (Sexton).

According to Etzioni and Bloom holidays fulfill different societal roles. Based on their argument, the scholars distinguish between the holidays that use ceremonies, drama or narratives to enforce commitments to shared beliefs and those that are aimed at fulfilling the same role by releasing the tension that is a result of the close adherence to these beliefs. Etzioni and Bloom group the two kinds of holidays into recommitment holidays and tension management holidays, respectively. Holidays of recommitment are aimed at directly fostering societal integration and socialization. The holidays of tension management, on the other hand, indirectly foster societal integration. Subsequently, these holidays have a higher risk of going awry. During the holidays of tension management, the mores that are strictly upheld during the remainder of the year are put on hold so as to give room for indulgence. For instance, some forms of behavior that are normally considered disintegrative and asocial may be accepted temporarily. The Mardi Gras falls in this last category (Lindhal 1996a). During this festival, thousands of individuals are likely to expose themselves by showing their genitals (Benotsch). The Mardi Gras and other tension management holidays are aimed at indirectly contributing to the reinforcement of shared institutions and beliefs through the release of the tension that is caused by conformity to societal beliefs as well as the behavioral prescriptions that these beliefs entail. These holidays are bound by 'time limits' after which the participants are required to return to the conformist behaviors that reflect their shared societal beliefs. For example, the Mardi Gras is succeeded by a recommitment on Ash Wednesday.

The Mardi Gras is also referred to as 'Fat Tuesday' (Sexton 29). It is often considered a hedonistic celebration in which case 'more than usual' is the central theme. The Mardi Gras tradition is based on the need for individuals to get rid of all their fleshly desires so as to be fully present during the start of the Lenten season which takes place on the Ash Wednesday. Based on the sacred-profane dichotomy, the festival is, thus, an attempt to satiate the profane elements of peoples' lives so as to ensure that they do not miss the mystery that is associated with the Lenten season. Further, the Lenten season is aimed at preparing Christians pull through the Holy Week, which marks the death and resurrection of Christ, by helping them achieve the correct frame of mind to do so. During the Mardi Gras, participants take their secular desires to the extreme in a bid to obtain satisfaction. This is done through such experiences as drinking, music, dancing as well as various carnal activities.

## FINDING THE SACRED IN THE PROFANE: MARDI GRAS IN BASILE, LOUISIANA

One of the locations where Mardi Gras is celebrated in the United States (U.S.) is Basile, a small community in Southwest Louisiana (Gaudet & McDonald; Kinser; Lindhal 1996b). Just like in other areas, there would not be any Mardi Gras in Basile without Ash Wednesday. In defining the Mardi Gras, residents of Basile associate the festival with Ash Wednesday. One of the overarching arguments is that the condition in which the residents begin the Lenten season is dependent on how well they celebrate Mardi Gras. One of the most common sayings, in this case, is that "If you run a good Mardi Gras, you will be ready for Lent." There is a reciprocal spiritual relationship between Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday. Therefore, the residents of Basile, in giving an equal spiritual value to the two feasts, describe a liturgical value to the Mardi Gras. This is because they believe that for them to be fully ready for the Lenten season, a good Mardi Gras is requisite.

### The Existence of Mardi Gras

The Mardi Gras performs a function similar to that of other religious feasts which have been established to break the monotony of the liturgical cycle. According to Pierre Delooz, a Belgian sociologist, the carnival provides an opportunity to escape from the insignificant. He further argues that the charm of the feast is that it is a parenthesis or a pause from the monotony of life. Further, the Mardi Gras can be considered a treasure that is transmitted from generation to generation, repeated each year, every fifty years, and every thousand years. The most important feature of the carnival is this aspect of continuity and the transmission between people in order for meaning to exist (Delooz).

All the folklorists that have studied the Mardi Gras in Basile support the idea that, often, it is the same people that are found dancing, singing, eating and drinking at Mardi Gras that will kneel before the priest to receive their ashes during Ash Wednesday (Ware 1995, Lindhal 1996b, Mire). For instance, according to Father Ted Broussard, a priest in the parish of Eunice, in the past, surviving the hardships of the Lenten season for forty days was only made possible by the debauchery of the Mardi Gras. This is because the festival gave a green light to what was utterly prohibited during Lent, as well as during the regular liturgical year. In support of Father Broussard, Le Roy Ladurie reckons that a Christian's life during the Mardi Gras entails "Burying his pagan life, delivering himself to the ultimate pagan debauchery, before entering the forty days of the asceticism of Lent, through which the Christian will ultimately acknowledge at Easter his baptismal and spiritual rebirth" (159).

### Mardi Gras and the Litergy

As used by Ladurie, 'burial,' refers to the custom of burying pagan rites so that those rites can be Christianized. The Church tolerates and accepts the carnival as a necessity. In this regard, Michel Feuillet highlights the "integration and rejection" (17) of the carnival by the Church. The argument, in this case, is that by accepting the carnival in its liturgical time, the Church is likely to have better control over that time of the year. Nevertheless, Feuillet notes that:

This integration has some limits. The folly of the Saturnales<sup>1</sup>, its inversions, its transgressions, the dissipations of the *Calendae janariae* and of the *lupercalia*<sup>2</sup> cannot be included in the practice of an authentic Christianity directed towards the salvation of the Soul through an ascetic existence of both the body and the soul (44).

Based on these sentiments, Feuillet is a believer of trying to group all of the Mardi Gras signs under the Christian signs. Thus, the Basile Mardi Gras celebration is not, as in Europe, as torn by the dichotomy of the body and the soul. For instance, "On any given Sunday, people are invited to go to mass. The church, being

1 Saturnales is a prechristian celebration (mainly celebrated by the Romans) between December 17 and 23 venerating Saturn (Larousse online).

2 Another roman feast between February 13 to 15 celebrating Faunus, god of the forest (Larousse online)

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a place where everyone is welcome, and no matter his religion, is invited to come” (Feuillet 132). The Mardi Gras offers a similar invitation. Notably, the Mardi Gras offers two invitations. The first is an invitation to run the Mardi Gras. In this case, all community members can join the Mardi Gras group. The second is offered by the Mardi Gras group to the local population and to the owners of the houses who have agreed to participate in the Mardi Gras.

Sharing is yet another attribute that is common in both the Mardi Gras and the Catholic liturgy. Ladurie notes this same characteristic in the carnival of the Romans in France. In this regard, he asserts that:

The fraternity of the Holy Ghost is responsible for the distribution of food and money to the poor. On the other hand, as a remarkable phenomenon, it regroups the living and the dead. They came to eat at the confraternal feast: around the table laden with food for the community, where they were represented, one by one ... by the poor. And so, it is thanks to the Confraternity of the Holy Ghost that the artisans, the poor ... and the dead find a way to step into the street, fraternally joined (175).

The same observation is present in Basile. The Christians are invited to share their faith, their financial, as well as spiritual resources with the underprivileged. The notion of sharing is one of the bases of the Mardi Gras celebration (Sexton). For instance, besides sharing the knowledge of how to run the Mardi Gras between the more experienced participants and the novices, the group shares its belief and faith in the importance of keeping this tradition alive for both the present and future generations.

## **MARDI GRAS AND THE GUMBO**

The Mardi Gras also offers another level of sharing; that of a meal, notably the gumbo, at night, after a full day's work. This is open not only to the group but also to the local community and their guests. The association uses the money gathered during the day to pay for expenses such as gas and musicians. Like the Church which shares its faith at several levels such as the parish, the diocese, and the world, the Mardi Gras shares at multiple levels. This is from the Mardi Gras group, members of the community to all the guests. This notion of sharing calls to mind the idea of the sacred meal. This sacred meal is the Eucharistic bread and wine served at Sunday mass, and the gumbo and beer served during the night of Mardi Gras. While there is no comparison between the consecration of the host and that of the gumbo, it is important to note that the gumbo of the Tuesday night before Ash Wednesday entails much more than a roux, some sausages, chicken, and rice. Rather, it should be viewed as a symbolic meal offered by the community, prepared by the community, and gathered by the community for everyone, irrespective of whether they are from the community or not (Sexton). The Mardi Gras can be viewed as a cultural, social and historical communion. This is because the majority of the participants are keen on celebrating the Mardi Gras festival in the same way that their fathers and grandfathers did.

Another external sign that is present in the two celebrations is the procession. Today, the Sunday mass begins and ends with a procession of the priest and his acolytes, preceded by the Bible which is read during mass. Performances of the medieval liturgy were much more active because the priest stopped to speak before the altar as well as in other sections of the church (Sexton). The Mardi Gras, on the other hand, is a day-long procession with a specific order. The priest is the captain as well as the shepherd of the tradition. He, thus, must lead by following the ancestral traditions. This captain is never alone. The only difference between the two celebrations is that in the Mardi Gras, the priests are a part of the procession and it is through them that all the ancestral traditions are perpetuated. The Captain, just like the priest, is necessary but not sufficient (Lindhal 1996a; Sexton). He is the leader of a symbolic as well as a religious event since the participants of the Mardi Gras consider their “courir,” or their Mardi Gras run, a necessity that is part of their religious life. No



one dares to miss the Mardi Gras, and some people have even quit their jobs in order to be there.

In each of these processions, the presence of songs is obligatory (Savoy). This is because in both cases, songs offer the necessary and obligatory ambiance for the feast. The songs provide an atmosphere in which the assembly is engulfed in the celebration. The mass presents its dogma through its songs just like the participants of the Mardi Gras represent who they are in their songs. The songs sung in the Mardi Gras do not talk about God directly, neither do they exclude Him. The songs characterize and represent the festival's participants. It is important for everyone to sing several times during the day because the songs are sung before a different audience each time. Many Christian values can be found in the Mardi Gras songs. For instance, the followers of Mardi Gras are not violent. Rather, "They are not evildoers; they are good people, who ask for charity" (Savoy 61). This charity is not for individual persons but rather is solely for collective profit. The goal of the songs in both cases is to unify the groups and put them on the path that is desired by their leaders as we can see in the Mardi Gras song:

Les Mardi Gras s'en vient de tout partout (Mardi Gras come from everywhere)  
 Tout le tour autour du moyeu (from the neighborhood)  
 Ça passe eine fois par an (once a year)  
 Demander la charité (ask for charity)  
 Quand même si c'est eine patate (even if it is just for a potato)  
 Eine patate et des grattons (a potato and some meat)  
 Les Mardi Gras sont d'sus un grand voyage (Mardi Gras travel from far)  
 Tout le tour autour du moyeu (from the neighborhood)  
 Ça passe eine fois par an (once a year)  
 Demander la charité (to ask for charity)  
 Quand même si c'est eine poule maigre (even if it is just for a small chicken)  
 Et trois ou quatre cotons d'maï (and three or four corn cobs)  
 Capitaine, Capitaine voyage ton flag (Captain, wave your flag)  
 Allons chez l'aut' voisin (let's go next door)  
 D'mander la charité (to ask for charity)  
 Pour les'autres v'nez nous joindre (everyone, come with us)  
 Pour les'autres vous v'nez nous joindre (everyone come with us)  
 Ouais au gumbo ce soir (to the gumbo tonight) (Mamalisa, 2020)

Donations are inseparable from the two celebrations. Believers in the Catholic Church give a tithe (one-tenth of their income) to the Church. A similar approach exists in the Mardi Gras. In participating in the festivities, the residents of Basile give their money, goods and time in support of something that returns nothing to the individuals, but much to the community as a whole. Ladurie noted that the Romans also collected money and goods and redistributed these items to the poor. In this regard, he posits that "The craftsman's claim, which desires that riches be restored, is indicative of the phenomenon of class struggle. It also notes the carnivalesque theme of the collection, of the redistribution of goods from the adults to the young, and of goods from the rich to the needy" (Ladurie 127). Just like the Romans, the residents of Basile come together to celebrate the Mardi Gras and to help each other.

In response to the question I pose during my fieldwork of the reason for allowing the Mardi Gras to take place within his property, one Mardi Gras host argued that "I must, how else will they make the gumbo tonight" (participant, 2001)? It is not possible for a good man in the Basile community to turn his back on this tradition. Potic Russel, the president of the Mardi Gras Association, says that Basile is nothing without its Mardi Gras. Everyone in the community gives something. If there are givers, then there must also be

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those who take what is given. In the Church, this function is taken care of by the priest and his congregation. Neither the participants nor the Church collect for themselves. With the money received, the needy can pay their necessary fees and give the rest back to the community. Just like the Mardi Gras Association, the local churches give what they collect back to the community. This is done in the form of small donations to charity organizations. In both the Church and the Mardi Gras Association, a small proportion of what is collected is kept for the functions of the organization. Potic Russel, the Mardi Gras President Association shares: "We (participants) all share what we get from the locals, it is part of doing this (the run) and when people give us money, we don't keep it for us but share at the end of the day."

Ritual clothing is another important aspect of the two celebrations (Ware 2001:). In the Church, the priest wears an alb as opposed to the costume and capuchon of the Mardi Gras. In both cases, the clothes designate the special status of the person that wears them. The priest and his acolytes must be present for the Eucharist, just as the local community must be present for the Mardi Gras. Just as the mass cannot take place without a priest, a Mardi Gras cannot exist without its captain. In both cases, a leader is needed by the groups. The colors of the costumes are also important. The priest's alb changes color according to the seasons. White is reserved for Easter, red for Holy Week, blue for the Assumption and the month of May and green for ordinary time. The Mardi Gras has specific, vivid colors. According to Ancelet, the poor, during Mardi Gras, strive to look like the rich and this is achieved by wearing clothes with such bright colors such as red, green, violet and yellow. Just as the Church has clothes for the different ranks of officians, with the bishop wearing a miter, the Mardi Gras varies its costumes according the rank or the role of the participant. The participants generally wear a cone-shaped hat called a capuchon, fringed costumes and a mask (Roshto; Ware 1994). The captains are in regular working clothes but must wear a red cape and carry a whip as a symbol of their authority. The chief captain also possesses a red flag, which signals to the participants that the owner has given permission for them to access the property.

The liturgical signs present during mass allow individuals to speak directly to the spirit and the soul of the individual. The most important signs are those of the light, which are represented by the candle on the altar, which is a symbol of the presence of God and the guide of life. Others are the flowers, which are symbols of the feast taking place in the form of the Sunday celebration. In the Mardi Gras celebration, signs that provide a message that speaks to the soul and to the faith of those who still believe in the Mardi Gras and its carnival celebration are also present. Just as the sign of the flowers in a Church is not directly related to a divine symbol such as the candle, the signs present in the Mardi Gras celebration can be considered in the same light.

The first sign is that of the chicken that is chased during the Mardi Gras. Le Roy Ladurie highlights the symbolic elements of the chicken. He posits that

The Kingdom of Jacuemart, at the beginning, was the kingdom of the rooster. This animal was slaughtered during mutual combat with another rooster, or decapitated by the young in a contest of skill, or killed by a sling shot or by rocks thrown by children. The rooster is the most popular animal of the carnival in Europe. The rooster belongs to the carnival like the bull belongs to the Spanish culture. Filled with meaning to the top of his comb, the rooster proclaims virility, courage and male sexuality (Ladurie 72).

The Romans carnival presents many signs that were already in use in 1580. They are still in use today in Basile. The rooster or the chicken is a significant symbol in Basile. It is a symbol of a game and is also the trophy of the participant who caught it. The rooster also plays other roles. For instance, during the Mardi Gras, everyone becomes someone or something else.

Another sign is the bells that some participants wear at the end of the noses on their masks or the

fringes of their costumes. The Romans already used bells during the 16th century. It has been claimed that:

The bells on the feet evoke the bells of the medieval fool; and also the Rabelaisian theme, that of a gargantuan carnival and the wild ringing of the bells. Bells gave the time at the bell tower in the main square and at the Church; bells on the back in the Spanish festival; it is the bell turned upside down, bells on the feet of crazy Romans (Ladurie 126).

A certain level of continuity of these signs can be seen today. In many cases, one can relate the Roman practices to those in Basile. This is because the cultural tradition was not created at one time, but rather is an idea in evolution, changing from region to region, century to century, but still always remains part of the Mardi Gras. Thus, it is a genre of a traditional transmission (Ancelet).

The Mardi Gras is also a rite of purification and fecundity. In this case, "The carnival as a whole, at the level of myth, also implies an operation of fecundity for months to come" (Lindhal 22). The residents of Basile mark the importance of the Mardi Gras in relation to Lent. They argue that if the entry to Lent is not done properly, Lent will not be a success. The rituals and signs of fecundity are also seen in the Mardi Gras in Basile. Masks and costumes are external signs of sexuality in waiting. For instance, in a past Mardi Gras some participants were seen wearing false breasts on top of their costumes. Several masques had long noses with two bells attached underneath clearly representing the external male genitalia.

## CONCLUSION

Religion should be appreciated as a unified system of practices and beliefs, in which case, it can only exist when the sacred is distinguishable from the profane. In reality, religion falls into the realm of the sacred while everyday life falls under the profane. The conceptual separation of the sacred and the profane can be explained by the continuity of the history of Christianity. For instance, in the 19th Century and first half of the 20th Century, minimal reforms were carried out. This indicates that the church is strongly embedded in tradition. To understand this connection, it is important to understand what society and religion are, as well as the relations between individuals in the society. Likewise, an understanding of the development and maintenance of institutions and how they change is necessary. Further, the socialization of individuals into the societal behavior and ways of behavior has to be considered. Numerous combinations of the sacred and the profane are possible within the religious frame of reference. These may range from cases of total sacredness to the coexistence and continuity of the two aspects or their opposition, or to the intensified awareness of the profane and decline in the sacred. The Mardi Gras is aimed at helping individuals to cater their fleshly desires in order to be fully ready for the Lenten season at the beginning of Ash Wednesday. However, viewed from the sacred-profane dichotomy, the event is an attempt at satiating the profane in individuals' lives so as to ensure that they fully encounter the mystery that defines the Lent season. This also allows Christians to overcome the Lent season with the aim of ensuring that they achieve the right frame of mind so as to successfully make it through the Holy Week. In this regard, in the postmodern era, it is indisputable that the Mardi Gras and the Sunday celebration share numerous characteristics. Thus, their complementing each other in the liturgical year cannot be overemphasized.

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# DIALOGUE

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## Renegade or Paragon?: Categorizing Narrative Choice in Video Game Storylines

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### ABSTRACT

Choices made during video game gameplay set the stories told in that media apart from other media. Narrative-affecting choices have existed since the earliest games, from character creation in role-playing games to performance-based narrative changes in *Metroid* to morality-based choices in *Ogre Battle*. In the contemporary gaming landscape, some games derive a significant portion of their gameplay from character decisions: exploration, dialogue options, quick-time event reactions, etc. In this article, I give a history and breakdown of how choices have existed and evolved in gaming narratives since their inception. I then propose three categories for significant narrative choices: aesthetic, social, and reflective.

The aesthetic choice is one influencing surface-level elements of the game. An example is *Kentucky Route Zero*, wherein dialogue choices largely serve to fill in the motivation and background of the characters while not actually influencing the narrative trajectory of the game. The social choice is one which impacts the characters' relationship with one another. Perhaps the most well-known social choices are *Dungeons and Dragons* character alignments, *Fallout*'s Karma system, or *Mass Effect*'s renegade versus paragon. The reflective choice is one that asks the player to consider the gameplay or the ramifications of the decision. *Spec Ops: The Line*, to widespread acclaim and criticism, centered its story on calling into question the typical structure of kill-everything-that-moves first-person shooters.

While these categories do not account for every possible decision in a game, they work toward a structure that will allow for a more nuanced dissection of gaming narratives. By focusing on choice, it highlights an area of storytelling that gaming is constantly pushing the boundaries of.

**Keywords:** game studies, narrative studies, player studies

## INTRODUCTION

In Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," the characters discuss a novel in which all possibilities are laid out and explored:

Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. (Borges 26)

The work Borges is describing has come to pass in some form in multiple media. There's the entire genre of choose-your-own-adventure books, as well as more experimental literature like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in which the author offers more than one possible ending. Movies have played with the same concept, although rarely: *Run Lola Run* and *Sliding Doors* feature multiple plotlines originating from a forking moment of departure, while *Drift* and, more humorously, *Clue* offer the viewer multiple possible endings. By using diverging plotlines and endings, they allow the audience to choose a particular story to hold above the others as the "true" one. More recently, Netflix released a *Black Mirror* film entitled *Bandersnatch* which allowed a choose-your-own-adventure cinematic experience with choices from the audience, and its technology promises more in the same vein.

Video games differ from these media in that the spectator, the player, being a part of the text is not an exception but a requirement. It is the player's performance and actions that propel the game forward, filling in large swaths of the narrative. If a video game was not directly interactive in some way, it would no longer belong to the medium at all. Just how interactive a game has to be to still be considered a game has been debated heavily with the recent explosion in independently developed story-based games<sup>1</sup>, but for the purpose of this article, I begin with the assumption that all video games are interactive to varying degrees. Gaming's direct interactivity is one of the things that sets it apart from other media. I offer three classifications of the narrative-affecting choices offered to video game players, with the categories broken down by what the choice accomplishes rhetorically for both the narrative and the audience. Due to the lack of literature focused on narrative choices in video games, I provide accompanying history and context that extend beyond the scope of the typology.

Previous game studies scholarship has firmly established video games' ability to create a narrative for their audience. "One may conclude," writes Marie-Laure Ryan, "that the unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework" (182). Ryan goes on to criticize ludologists, theorists who argue against applying the analytical narratological methodologies of literature or cinema toward video games. Her arguments, especially countering claims that games lack the ability to rearrange events, have only grown more resounding in the dozen years since publication given the innovations found in modern story-driven games, especially in light of large-scale multiplayer games that allow the players to create their own narratives, such as *Minecraft* or *EVE Online*.

Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister continue Ryan's lines of thinking in their chapter from the book *Media Authorship*. They compare large multiplayer narrative experiences like those found in sandbox games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games with the "mass collaboration" of Wikipedia, YouTube, and Flickr (139). They position the player as a "vital authorial force": "players activate, modify, and create games through their play" (138; 141). In order to create a cohesive narrative, developers must collaborate with and predict the actions of the players. When the actions of the players grow beyond what is predicted by the

1 One of the most commonly debated titles was 2013's *Gone Home*. For further reading on its status as a game, see Crecente's "When is a game not a game?" (along with the 77 comments in response).

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creators, it becomes emergent gameplay. Celia Pearce and Artemesia synthesize much of the writing about emergent gameplay in their book *Communities of Play*, which focuses primarily on online gameplay, though their explanation of how emergence happens applies to all sorts of games: “complex, often decentralized systems self-organize in ways that cannot be predicted by their underlying structures or rule sets, nor by the individual behavior of agents within the system” (42).

Other scholarship has already established and elaborated on the similarities and differences between the reader of a literary text and the player of a video game. In the introduction to *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth outlines both the problems and the benefits of the frequent use of literary theory to discuss cybertexts (under which he includes both hypertexts and adventure games), noting that “They produce verbal structures, for aesthetic effect [...] But they are also something more [...] when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard” (3). The forking paths of video game narratives offer their audience a level of choice that is simply not feasible in the traditional forms of other media, specifically television, film, and literature. While Ruggill and McAllister have presented the relationship between audience and text in video games as a co-authorship, Aarseth argues that the types of storytelling found in cybertexts “operate well within the standard paradigm of authors, readers, and texts” (78). I follow Aarseth’s assertion and present the choices a player makes during gameplay as being between existing storylines implemented in the creation of the game, not original narratives fully devised by the audience.

Not that such original narratives can’t exist within the reader’s consciousness. In Iser’s *The Act of Reading*, he notes that readers must work to overcome a text’s indeterminacy, to privately fill in the gaps that a text inherently has while attempting to communicate a reality’s existence (24). This occurs in every media, including video games, and is part of the reason that individual readings of a text are unique. With a book, when a character is not fully described, the reader makes assumptions about what that character might look like based on their own experiences and biases as well as context clues within the text. A recent film example is the ending of *Inception*, when the screen goes black before the audience knows what is going to happen, leaving the conclusion up to the watcher.

J. Cameron Moore compares the way the narrative gaps can be filled differently between media in his article “Making Moral Choices in Video Games”: “When we read ‘tree’ in a fantasy story, we must imaginatively construct a tree in our minds [...] In a video game, on the other hand, we encounter a fully imagined tree on the screen. We do not co-imagine the tree, but we must choose whether to cut it down” (72-3). Moore contemplates how Tolkien would have rated video games’ ability to portray the fantastic, given the latter’s argument “that literature as opposed to visual art or drama is the best form for fantasy” (72). Certainly, there’s an argument to be made that Tolkien’s description of fantasy literature as a “secondary world” where “both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside” has more potential for application in video games than in drama or visual art (as qtd. in Moore 72).

Moore’s description of the player’s interaction with a tree in a game’s world might be apt for visual details, but narrative gaps in video games can exist and be similar to those found in film or literature<sup>3</sup>. Events can still take place off-page/off-screen; thoughts and details can still be hidden from the audience. The player is left to fill in the gaps left by the game in their mind, choosing what to believe and how to construct the narrative. In her book *Godwired*, Rachel Wagner compares the process of filling in narrative gaps within

2 Bogost reminds us that the game must first allow the tree to be cut down at all. In describing the unique relationship between a video game as text (with its own limitations) and the player’s agency in controlling that, he refers to “the gap between rule-based representation and player subjectivity; I called this space the ‘simulation gap’” (43).

3 Aarseth makes a very similar analogy when analyzing the difference in work done between consumers of literature and video games, comparing a reader to a sports spectator and a player to an athlete (4).



the rules of the game's system with the process of interpreting the significance of religious texts and rituals: "To approach a religious text from the perspective of rules rather than from that of received authoritative tradition (and fixed literal text) allows interpretation to become more like gameplay than story-reading" (50). The demarcation noted here by Wagner—rules versus received authority—could also be applied to drawing a distinction between games that allow narrative choices and those that do not.

While the decisions made by the audience in the process of filling in narrative gaps impact their experience of the narrative, because of the individuality and infinite number of variations of the interpretations, it seems more useful to focus on choices made specifically through the player's actions in-game using the text as created by the game's developers. For a similar reason, player-driven narratives, such as those collaboratively created by the players of sandbox games (like *Minecraft*) or massive multiplayer online role-playing games, are also not considered. Games that allow for player-driven stories to be created come the closest to narrative "freedom"—as Wagner notes, video game programmers have "the ability to see all possibilities that will inhere in the game, and also to control the ultimate outcome," which is true when it comes to the choices I'm categorizing in this article. For these choices to exist, the programmer has to create them. With player-driven narratives, though, the game's developer loses control over the story experience. Henry Jenkins describes the "threat" that player participation levels against the developer's authorial intentions (125). The choices players make to create player-driven narratives, to fill in narrative gaps, or are made outside of the actual playing of the game (in menus, etc.) might be an area of exploration for future scholarship.

Further narrowing is needed for the purposes of analyzing narrative choices in video games: some limits have to be placed on what is considered a narrative choice. A broad interpretation could result in every single action the player takes, regardless of the game, to be a narrative choice. If Mario fails to jump across a pit and instead falls to his death, that storyline ends there due to the actions of the player, despite the fact that there is no accompanying narration from the text beyond a "GAME OVER" screen. Within the majority of the iterations of the Super Mario game series, the only possible narrative path is to defeat Bowser and save the princess or fail and then retry. Using a definition of narrative choice that includes failing gameplay mechanics would make a typology needlessly complex. Thus, in selecting examples to form the categorization, I have used the following criteria: a) the choice must happen while playing the game, not before the game begins or in a menu; b) the choice must have some impact on what the overall story of the text is, as it would not be useful to discuss choices like whether the player wields a shotgun or a pistol if it doesn't alter the narrative; and c) the player must be making a conscious choice between options, not just failing or succeeding to perform a task, as described with the Mario example above. These criteria still leave room for interpretation (What, exactly, constitutes an impact or a conscious choice?). Using these criteria, the three categories I have devised are the aesthetic choice, which provides depth to the storyline without altering events or the overall narrative significantly; the social choice, which revolves around the relationships between the protagonist(s) and other characters or factions within the game; and the reflective choice, which calls attention to the act of choosing and the ramifications of the player's decision.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMING'S NARRATIVE CHOICES

Player choice in video game narratives has been present since the beginning of the medium, but implemented gradually. Early role-playing games (RPGs) carried over the character creation process from their tabletop inspiration, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Players might choose a character's sex, race, class, and physical or mental abilities. Because character creation typically occurs before the actual game begins, I am not including it in the typology. However, it still deserves some discussion as it can have an immense impact. In the MMORPG genre, for example, character creation often affects the entire playing experience

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from beginning to end. *World of Warcraft*, which at its peak in 2010 held the record for most subscribers to an MMORPG, is perhaps the most iconic example (Blizzard Entertainment). When creating a character, the player must choose between races (e.g. orcs, gnomes, dwarves) that make up two opposing factions: Alliance and Horde. Players on the Alliance side are never able to meaningfully communicate with the Horde side and vice versa. The storylines between the two sides differ significantly. The choices the player makes upon creation have other consequences as well. The character's race and class (e.g. paladin, warrior, priest) can determine where the character begins their narrative, the relationship between the character and various groups of non-player characters (NPCs) within the game, or what armor or weapons are available for use. Other games follow similar narrative divergences based on character creation. Many games, including the *Mass Effect* series, place limitations on romantic plotlines based on the sex of the main character. The medieval role-playing strategy game, *Mount and Blade*, effectively makes the game more difficult for female characters, requiring those characters to do more work in order to obtain approval of other nobles.

Some games have also given the player's performance the ability to shape the storyline. A common example found mostly in RPGs is whether or not the player protects a character and prevents their death. These types of narrative shifts might not be conscious choices, as their existence is not commonly made known to the player. One of the earlier and simpler examples of this game feature appeared in Nintendo's 1986 game *Metroid*. At the end of the game, the faster the player completed it the less clothing the protagonist, Samus, has on. Different endings show her in full armor, armor minus helmet, a single-piece bathing suit, and finally in a two-piece bathing suit. The offensiveness of having the female body be the player's reward aside, the impact on the storyline was meaningful, given that without attaining one of the endings where Samus removes her armor there is no indication that she is female.

Possibly the first in the amorphous genre known as the visual novel, *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, released in 1983, was also one of the earliest games to feature nonlinearity driven by choices made by the player. The story is told through text and unmoving pictures. The player investigates a murder and travels between locations to find clues and interrogate suspects, and the range of possible options is wide. For example, the player can find a matchbook in a living room with a phone number written on it, then pick up the phone and dial that number. While the murderer is the same person regardless of the choices made, the decisions the player makes can change the order of events in the narrative.

Early examples of games that meet the criteria I laid out for this typology appeared on the Super Nintendo console system. *Ogre Battle: The March of the Black Queen*, released in 1993, was the first game to include multiple endings with meaningful differences. *Ogre Battle* would primarily be considered a strategy game and as the protagonist, the player is in command of an army rebelling against an evil empire. Based on who the player recruits to join their army, how the player's army performs, and other factors, there are twelve different possible endings. In some, the main character is seen as a hero and in others as a villain.

*Chrono Trigger*, a 1995 RPG, put heavy emphasis on its forking paths and multiple possible endings. The storyline revolves around time travel, so the player is able to choose not only *how* to defeat the final boss but also *when*. These endings include different fates for the protagonists and even an ending for what happens if the player loses to the boss. *Chrono Trigger* was the first game to implement a "New Game+" mode, a feature reused in many, many later games that allows players to restart the game's story while retaining progress and items they have accumulated in a previous playthrough. *Chrono Trigger* is set apart from *Ogre Battle* in that there are vast swaths of the story that are skippable depending on the decisions made by the player and the ending obtained, whereas *Ogre Battle* follows basically the same progression up until the ending.

The fact that having multiple possible endings was one of the earliest examples of diverging narratives within video games is probably no accident. In order for a choice to be meaningful, the developers of a video game must create an additional set of content for each possible variation of the storyline. Thus, having the

significant choice occur at the ending of the narrative requires the least amount of resources on the developer's part. This motivation can be seen at play in other ways—for example, two dialogue options in a game might be similar enough to elicit the same response.

## THE TYPOLOGY OF FORKING PATHS

It is difficult to provide an overarching categorization for choices within video games based on their effect on the narrative for many reasons. The first is that the choices come in such myriad forms: there are dialogue choices, decisions about who to kill and who to be friends with, literal forks in the available path to move forward, and countless more—future research into the impact of the method of delivering the choice to the player has significant potential. The effects of the choices might be subtle, like changing a visual detail or making a combat encounter more difficult, or obvious, like an immediate text indicator that someone likes a character less. The overwhelming majority of these choices are deterministic, meaning another player performing the same actions will experience the same narrative, but not all of them are. Further, sometimes it's not obvious when the player has *made* a choice, because he or she might not realize there was an alternative action available without playing through the game multiple times or reading about the game elsewhere.

Take, for example, a scene in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. The protagonist is traveling in an aircraft which is fired upon and crash lands. The player, as the main character, jumps out of the aircraft beforehand and lands a short distance away. Enemies close in on the aircraft and the pilot, opening fire. The pilot tells the main character to not worry about her and to use the distraction to escape. Shortly after, she dies to enemy fire. However, if the player acts quickly enough, they can save the pilot by eliminating the large group of enemies. This might not be apparent at first, due to the fast acting that is required to save her, but if the player investigates the achievements associated with the game, one of them is for saving the pilot, thus informing the player of the possibility.

Choices might serve to provide character backstory, fill in dialogue, determine the next objective, or serve as the main source of gameplay. They might take place during combat, while exploring the world, or after a climactic final encounter. To divide up the choices based on what effect they have on the narrative of the games, though, I have devised the following three categories: aesthetic, social, and reflective. Please note that the categories are not in any way exclusive. Choices can, and often do, fit into more than one category.

The aesthetic choice is one which alters surface level details without significantly changing the narrative arc. A simple set of examples is found in the game *Saint's Row: The Third*. Often, after completing an important mission, the player is faced with two options. One set of options involves deciding whether to blow up a building belonging to the enemy or to refit it as a base for the protagonist's gang. Blowing up the building awards more respect for the player (respect functions as an experience progression system) while taking it over gives a bonus in the amount of money the player earns and allows the player to use the building as a safe house. Neither option is important to the main storyline, but the change is permanent in the world, and the decision alters the perceived motivations of the protagonist.

A prime example of a game laden with aesthetic choices is the episodic series *Kentucky Route Zero*. The game falls into the "point-and-click adventure" genre, where the main gameplay element is moving the main character around to examine objects, explore locations, and talk to other characters. The story is minimalistic: the protagonist is a truck driver who delivers for an antique store. He is assigned a delivery at an address that turns out to be connected with The Zero, a mythical underground highway in western Kentucky. There's a main storyline, one which happens no matter what choices are made, but the game encourages exploration and detours, allowing the player to visit numerous locations that are disconnected from the protagonist's delivery. The choices the player makes determines what happens to the protagonist as he works toward his

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objective, they establish what kind of person the protagonist is through his responses to questions, and they even fill in details of the world, like the name of the protagonist's dog.

Surface level changes should not be dismissed as contributing little to the narrative experience. Game designer Raph Koster suggests a thought experiment reimagining *Tetris* as a Holocaust simulator: the pieces dropping become bodies being dumped into a mass grave, and the player's goal is to fit them in as efficiently as possible (Bogost 242-3). By only changing the graphical representation of the game and nothing else, the game has transformed "from a harmless puzzle into a morally debatable cultural object" (Bogost 243). Koster describes this phenomenon well, saying "The bare mechanics of the game do not determine its semantic freight" (qtd. in Bogost 243). Reshaping a character's backstory or the appearance of an object in the game has the potential to significantly alter the player's interaction with the game's texture and story.

A social choice is one which primarily changes the relationship of the main character(s) with other characters in the game. These types of choices are frequently tied to games with dialogue choice systems. The player might respond positively to something another character said, thus making them like them and the other characters associated with them like the protagonist more, which might lead to that character joining the player's team, or to a romantic relationship between the characters, or to a reward. The opposite is also possible: the character's actions upset someone which causes them to not want to help or to actively impede the player's progress. In some games, the effects of choices are clear when made, while others mask the effects<sup>4</sup>.

Social choices are often aligned with a system of morality in games and fall in the scale of good versus evil. The title of this article comes from one such system: the renegade or paragon dichotomy found in the *Mass Effect* series. In it, many decisions immediately reward paragon or renegade points. Once players accumulate enough of either, characters in the game treat them differently, and new abilities and dialogue choices are made available. As an example, the player might discover that a merchant is selling illegal goods. The player has the option to turn in the merchant to authorities, resulting in paragon points and a better reputation, or they might take a bribe from the merchant, resulting in renegade points and a monetary reward. The player is always aware of where they stand via a graphical indication in the status menu which shows exactly how much of a paragon or a renegade the character is considered. Similar systems were used in the *Fallout* series (referred to as Karma) and in an overwhelming number of games based on *Dungeons and Dragons*, where characters might start off neutral but are pushed to good or evil through their actions.

The morality system of some games has been criticized for not having enough of an impact on the narrative. In "Making Moral Choices in Video Games," Moore argues that because the eucatastrophe, "the good ending drawn out of the midst of evil," often occurs regardless of the individual moral choices made along the way by the player, that there are ultimately no consequences for those decisions (70). While this might be true in some games, including *Fable 2* which Moore focuses his analysis on, there are games in which the endings are soured by the decisions made along the way (including, among the examples already given, *Ogre Battle*). Like the focus on multiple variations of endings, the fact that moral decisions barely affect the final conflict of the game could be attributed to the amount of work it would entail for the developers. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II* is one such example. In it, the player takes the role of a Jedi. Each choice made pushes the protagonist towards the light or dark side of the force. These choices alter how other people in the game treat the protagonist and can lead to significantly different experiences in the playthrough. However, in the end, the final confrontation is the same, no matter what choices are made.

Ian Bogost also uses *Knights of the Old Republic* as an example in his survey of scholarship on morality in video games: "Each decision the player makes—whom to help, fight, ignore—affects the player's moral attribute [...] the 'dark' or 'light' side of 'the force'" (284). Other examples he looks at are *Fable*, *Black and*

4 For a write-up of one of the few choices in the *Mass Effect* series where the consequences are not apparent, see Patrick Lee's "[Mass Effect Universe Gets Ugly When a Paragon Decision Finally Backfires](#)."

*White, Shadow the Hedgehog, Deus Ex, and America's Army*. Of particular interest, beyond the broad review of literature he offers, is the comparison he makes between morality in the decisions made in *Deus Ex*, where "right is never definitively clear," versus *Knights of the Old Republic*, in which "player gestures [...] always map directly to moral values" (287). It's this separation of the implications of the decisions of the games that places the choices made in *Knights* as being more in the category of social choice, whereas *Deus Ex's* player choices fall more often in the next category: reflective.

Reflective choices are ones in which the choice itself is the focus. These call attention to the act of choosing between different possibilities by requiring the player to think about why they made the choice they did. Often, games remind players of these decisions, having other characters voice disgust or approval at what choice was made. While this means reflective choices often have overlap with social choices, with reflective choices the emphasis is on the decision, not on the consequences to a relationship as a result of the decision.

In the 2012 first-person shooter game *Spec Ops: The Line*, reflective choices are used to comment on the genre of shooters in general. Based on *Heart of Darkness*, players take the role of the leader of a three-man Delta Force team that is sent into Dubai for reconnaissance after a massive dust storm has inflicted catastrophic damage on the city and stranded an army battalion that was attempting an evacuation. The team finds the city in chaos, with insurgent elements, the CIA, and the army all fighting for control. As the story progresses, the player finds evidence that the army has committed atrocities to maintain order. There are situations where the player has to choose between saving civilians or comrades, whether or not to put dying men out of their misery, and how to deal with a mob of hostile civilians. Although the majority of the decisions do not alter the game's overall plotline, the player is constantly asked to reexamine the choices they make by both their team members and the antagonist, thus setting the decisions apart from aesthetic ones. A superficial examination of the game suggests that it is a commentary on the horrors of war in general. However, in the context of other games within the same genre, it's clearly playing with established tropes in shooter games and is criticizing the player for taking part in them. *Spec Ops* is not just seeking to have the player examine their choices in the situations of this one text, but the choices players make in every game that involves shooting mass amounts of people with no thought as to what that sort of slaughter would mean for both the fallen and the perpetrator<sup>5</sup>.

The choice I found to be the most powerful in the game was also one of the most criticized. At one point, the player is on a rooftop and has to decide whether or not to use a white phosphorus-based weapon against an enemy encampment between the player and their objective. If the player doesn't use the weapon, the game effectively ends: it is impossible to proceed due to an unending number of enemies that emerge from the encampment. After using the weapon, the player descends to the encampment to see soldiers rolling on the ground in pain, crying out to be killed. Even more disturbing, inside the encampment the player discovers an alley full of corpses of civilians who were being held. The burns on the corpses are depicted in full detail; one woman is holding a child. Many players criticized the design of this scenario, as they were upset that the game tries to make a statement out of this moment but doesn't allow an alternate choice (see, among other places, the comments section in Pitts). In an interview, though, the developers knew what their reactions might be. Focus group play testers would actually leave the room after the scene, and while the producer was worried if the game was crossing a line, the developer argued that "if the player is thinking about seriously putting down the controller at this point, then that's exactly where we want them emotionally" (Pitts). Moments in the rest of the game call back to that scene, asking again and again for the player to remember what they had done. Despite there not being another choice beyond letting the enemy kill you or quitting play, this moment fits in with other diverging points in stories where you *do* have a real choice to construct a narrative. The game is intent on being a catalyst for self-examination within the player, and this particular example asks you to think about the decision in the context of the shooter genre as a whole.

5 For a thorough examination of the rhetorical storytelling found in *Spec Ops*, see Russ Pitts' article "[Don't Be a Hero](#)."

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In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost examines the rhetorical power of games in general, often by looking at what options are given to the player during gameplay. One example he analyzes, *Antiwargame*, stands out by making a significant and specific argument with the decisions it allows the players to make, decisions that fit firmly within my reflective choice category (82-5). In *Antiwargame*, the player is given the role of a U.S. president fighting a war on terrorism. The player can make choices regarding the deployment of military and foreign aid, domestic spending, and the messaging put out by the media. All the factors are linked, and a decision in one area can cause unintended consequences in another. Bogost writes:

*Antiwargame's* procedural rhetoric works because it forces the player to make and enact decisions that might not otherwise seem logical or obvious. By connecting the causal ties between business, war, and civil unrest, the game deploys procedural enthymeme. Once the player completes these rule-based syllogisms, *Antiwargame* offers a procedural representation of how its authors perceive U.S. foreign policy to be broken. (84-5)

Thus, a set of decisions might lead to the best outcome in terms of the player's popularity as president, ultimately the choices exist to communicate a message about the subject matter of the game from the author to the audience. While Bogost's book focuses primarily on games with a political or corporate message (e.g. *The McDonald's Game*), the methodology he describes often overlaps with more mainstream games.

## THE RISE OF STORY-CENTRIC GAMES

As previously stated, games focused primarily on player's choices have been around for quite a while, but I will argue that they are experiencing explosive growth in recent years. One of the leaders of this growth, Telltale Games, is a developer of story-based adventure games using existing intellectual property. While Telltale Games has been around for more than ten years, having gotten its start with *Sam & Max* games, its biggest success came in 2012 with their game adaptation of the comic and TV series *The Walking Dead*. Since then, Telltale has developed *The Wolf Among Us* based on DC Comics' *Fables* series, *Tales from the Borderlands* based on the *Borderlands* game franchise, as well as games in the *Game of Thrones* and *Minecraft* universes. All of these titles follow a similar format. They're episodic and sell for a lower price than typical big releases. The games are primarily vehicles for narratives, with part of them being a point-and-click exploration similar to *Kentucky Route Zero* and other moments requiring the player to react quickly to an event with a button push or decision (known as quick time events).

Similar titles, some with more interaction and some with less, include *Gone Home*, *Dear Esther*, *Life is Strange*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *Firewatch*, and *To the Moon*. Sometimes referred to as visual novels, sometimes as interactive fiction (though this has traditionally referred to text-only games), and sometimes in jest as "walking simulators," all of these games put the focus on the narrative experience. The gameplay exists primarily in service of the story. Because the bulk of the games revolve around making decisions relevant to the story, they typically include decisions that hit all of the categories I've laid out.

These games have flourished so extensively that there's a new wave of games that serve as a sort of meta-discussion of the genre. *The Stanley Parable* in particular picks apart what it means to give a player decisions to make within a game. Reminiscent of the cartoons where Bugs and Daffy would argue with the animator, *The Stanley Parable* has a narrator instructing the player of what choices to make, while the game gives the player the option to ignore those instructions. Ultimately, the game asks how much choice the player is actually allowed in any game, and it breaks the fourth wall by having the narrator speak directly to the player behind Stanley. One of the possible endings of the game involves exploring a museum dedicated to the making of *The Stanley Parable*, allowing the creators of the game to make commentary about their decisions in the making of

the game and presenting that commentary directly to the player as part of the experience.

Virtual reality's continued development will bring additional complications to this discussion, especially with regards to the line between a game and other, possibly yet unnamed, types of media. For example, Cardboard Computer, the makers of *Kentucky Route Zero*, released a short game entitled *The Entertainment*. In it, the player has the first-person vantage point of an extra on the set of a play. The only way to interact with the game, as a player, is to look around the theater, read information presented about objects in the room, and listen to the dialogue of the other characters in the play. That's it. The game was developed with the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset in mind, meaning it could be experienced as a virtual reality theatrical play. I'm sure it will be hotly debated whether experiences like this, which will undoubtedly grow in number, are games. In *The Entertainment's* case it was developed by a gaming company with a narrative tie-in to the *Kentucky Route Zero* series, but it will be interesting to see how a similar experience created by, say, a university's theatre or digital media department would be viewed. Where is the line between a cinematic, choose-your-own-adventure experience like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and a game with significant live-action elements and similar choices like *Her Story*? In any case, the decisions of such an interactive experience might be subject to different analysis based on what medium it is considered by its audience.

## CONCLUSION

In his chapter, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins attempts to bridge the gap between scholars seeking to shoehorn video games' narrative experiences into the existing frameworks of literary theory and the ludologists by stating "The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. Many other factors that have little or nothing to do with storytelling per se contribute to the development of great games and we need to significantly broaden our critical vocabulary for talking about games" (120). In order to have meaningful discussions on video game narratives, we need to have a working vocabulary for the aspect that makes video game narratives different from those narratives found in other media. I have argued that a significant difference is the level of choice available to the audience and offered three types of choices found in video game narratives based on what rhetorical effect they have on the storyline and the player. Aesthetic choices shift superficial details, providing small alternatives to the overall picture. Social choices alter the relationship between the protagonist(s) and the rest of the cast of characters within the game world. Reflective choices ask the player to examine the decisions themselves for meaning. The relationship between the way these categories function and other aspects of individual games such as genre, player response, and various critical interpretations offers a host of potential conversations.

Future research in this area might divide or subdivide these categories differently, or add new categories entirely. It might also be useful to consider how these types of choices manifested themselves across different eras of video game development. Additional frameworks might be built dividing the other facets of these choices. Possibilities include when they occur, how the player selects their choice, or how choices are rewarded or punished. Finally, this analysis has focused on players' interactions directly with the game, but much more could be done to look at similar choices made in the narratives created by multiple players coming together in a single gaming experience, specifically in choices about how to interact with one another, as well as with emergent gameplay.

My hope is that this typology allows for a more nuanced discussion of the medium and gives a scaffolding on which to build future discussion. Setting up a structure for categorizing and understanding these choices will facilitate an easier avenue into a more nuanced and substantial conversation. Narrative choices impact much of a game's narrative: plot points, characterization, world-building, and even gameplay. Given their importance and their uniqueness in gaming compared to other media, by exploring these choices we explore what sets gaming's storytelling capabilities apart.

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