

New Voices, New Visions 2011
**is dedicated to James Sherwood without whom this
collection would not be possible.**

**Special thanks to Matt Newcomb for his thoughtful
guidance and admirable work.**

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NEW VOICES, NEW VISIONS
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The Exploratory Essay

Exploratory essays do just that—explore a topic that is of personal, academic, or professional interest. They may be structured as a narrative or as a more traditional academic essay. The focus of the essay is not necessarily on the writer’s life, but it can be. Examples of exploratory essays include autobiography, ethnography, examination of visual text, cultural autobiography, and reflexive autobiography. Exploratory essays seek to gather information, share thoughts on that information with an audience, and to use writing as a means of discovery.

Remedy for a Fatal Venom

CHRISTINE RICHIN

The first time I got stung by a wasp, my heart almost stopped. I was watering my grandmother's hydrangeas by her kitchen window and the reflection of the sun pierced my eyes so viciously that I was unable to see my fatal enemy. I never thought I would be victim of another such attack; it seemed so unlikely that during my youth I would be sent into cardiac arrest more than once. However, in my four years in high school my heart stopped several times. While the remedy for a wasp's venom can easily be found in an EpiPen, the remedy for rejection and broken promises is a bit more difficult to acquire. After a series of unfortunate events, I learned that acceptance is the heart's only cure and that one must learn to accept life's pain in order to complete the transition from adolescence to the real world.

For me, learning how to accept things was like learning how to walk. An infant must learn baby steps before she can leap; such is the same with learning new values. Before I knew how to move, on I had to learn how to let go. It began like this: one night while I was sitting in a movie theater, I received a text message from my friend Brendon that said, "Please don't ever change who you are." I responded within seconds with, "You too." This is the clearest memory I have of a broken promise. As a kid, I trusted too easily that my best friend would keep such a promise close to his heart just because I did. But now, as an almost-adult, I've had to accept that a friend's word should not be so easily trusted.

I suppose one's identity changes over time and this makes promises such as Brendon's so flimsy. Nonetheless, the abundance of trust I had in Brendon sent the same heart-strangling feeling through my core when I learned he had broken our mutual pact. He became a stranger to me as he merged into a new crowd of people. His interests changed from the exploration of life and music to an exploration of drugs and alcohol. The Brendon I knew was modest and clear-headed, but the boy he was turning into was self-absorbed and intoxicated. As time passed, I began to notice that the swelling from his sting was not fading. After looking deeply within to discover why this could be, I concluded that time heals nothing without effort.

In my case, all this pain happened in high school, the broken promises, the broken heart, and for a little while, a broken mind. I “fell in love” with my best friend my sophomore year and every moment I spent together with him was complete bliss. I experienced firsthand that, in Sheryl Crow’s words, the “first cut is the deepest” after he started dating my best friend’s cousin when my feelings for him were at their peak. All bliss was lost. I spent nights walking in the biting cold of winter and grilling my mind as to how I was going to prove to him that we were “perfect for each other.” The more I did this, the worse the pain grew. It got to the point where I could not even speak to him without choking. Without communication, we lost everything. We had nothing, and I lost my best friend because I could not accept his happiness.

When I finally had the strength to reflect on my actions, I wanted to ask the next person I saw to kick me in the face. Fortunately, as I was still hiding in a cave because of this recent heartbreak, no one was around to indulge my request. However, once I accepted that I was not the only person in the world to have fallen in love and lost that love, I began to let go. Somewhere deep down, I finally became happy for him; I just had to pick up a shovel and keep digging.

Over time, I gradually attempted to fix what had been shattered to pieces. From junior year to the last moments of our Project Graduation trip, I used whatever was in my power to show him that I would always be there for him. My love for him as a soul mate faded into my love for him as a friend. No matter what happened, he was too important to throw away. This journey towards acceptance shaped me into a person strong enough to handle anything. My mother used to tell me, “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” Now, I know how true these words are.

It turns out acceptance means more than learning how to get over a high school heartbreak. Just like all other values, acceptance requires never-ending lessons and training. From my own experiences, I have learned that all the losses that require acceptance are those over which we have no power to control. Romantic loss can be equally as painful as the loss of a friend. Two days ago, I re-discovered that naïve little girl inside me who had forgotten these lessons. At the crack of dawn, my mother called to tell me that my dog, Magnum, was being put to sleep. My first puppy and my one true friend for fourteen

years was about to leave my world on a cold metal table surrounded by doctors with syringes and white lab coats while I was two hours away from home.

For whatever reason, I had been under the impression that he would never die, that he would come to his end only once I came to mine. Despite the stories I had heard about my friends' pets being put down, I never thought it would happen to my dog. When I left for college, I didn't even bother to say good-bye to him because I expected to see him exactly where he always was, lying softly on his sheepskin doggie bed. I also didn't bother to notice that he was old, that he wasn't a puppy anymore, and his time was coming to a close. He couldn't run anymore; he could barely hear, and he stopped hiding in the shower when thunderstorms would hit. When he stopped being afraid of thunder, I should have known that his ascent into heaven was drawing nearer, but I kept myself blind in hopes of preventing the loss of my friend.

I told my mother to wait for me to get home so I could say goodbye, but the doctor told her that his body was shutting down. They said that he was suffering, that he needed to go in peace while peace was still an option. I could not let myself be the reason for his pain. He had been nothing but the best dog any little girl could ask for, it was only fair of me to let him go.

Two days ago, my puppy-dog, my dearest friend was still alive. Although he could barely walk, see, or even wag his tail, I could still touch his fur and kiss the top of his head. Today, to ease my own pain, I think of how his pain was lifted. I can see him running in fields with Frisbees and tennis balls hovering in the air. I can hear his bold bark that was weakened so long ago. I can feel his happiness to finally have a spirit that is alive again, and I can say, "I love you" to him and know that he hears me, even though I can't see him.

Although this new poison has been tough to absorb, I have stopped its progress by accepting that I will not be seeing Magnum when I come home for Thanksgiving break, and I will not be slipping him food under the table during our feast. Instead, I will be scattering his ashes in the Ramapo Reservation Lake (his favorite place to go for walks), and I will be completely setting him free from his past life. As his ashes reach the bottom of the lake, he will become nothing but earth, and his physical existence will be nothing but a memory.

During Thanksgiving dinner, I will give thanks to my friend whose spirit to conquer the game of fetch and live each moment to its fullest has engraved itself within me.

Having accepted the past, I have now opened myself up to the future. Without one, I could not have the other. Such is true for most situations in life. A child cannot begin grow up without accepting the lessons from some sort of pain she or he has experienced. A woman cannot truly understand love until her heart has been broken. One cannot have friends without expecting grief along the way. And a person cannot expect to have a future before she has let go of her past.

My experiences have instilled in me the value of acceptance and have ultimately led me away from selfish sorrow. By learning how to accept events that are outside of my power, I now know what to expect when things don't go my way. I am prepared with a shielded heart, an open-mind, knowledge of an inevitable ending, and an EpiPen. The next time any type venom travels through my blood, my heart won't stop. Even if the sting lingers for days, I now know I have the power to pull out the stinger. Although I am not sure what the future holds, of this I am most certainly sure.

Welcome Back

JENNIFER MAY FEDERICO

Every time I returned home from college, I experienced the same lovely ritual. After hours on a warm bus, I received the best prize: to get off and smell the air, my air; to go into the car, my car; to hug a boy, my brother. All the sensations of being home. Everybody was waiting for me at the table, and when I arrived, I could hear the noise of the television news in the background along with my father's thousand questions. "Was it warm in the bus?" "What did you eat?" "How is the university?" And then there was my mother busy warming up the dinner, dishes made to welcome me home. On that first night home, my mother always prepared my favorite dish: meat and broccoli, the kind of broccoli that is impossible to find anywhere else except in Campania, a region in the deep south of Italy on the Tyrrhenian coast. Residents of Campania are still bound to traditional cooking, and broccoli represents one of the most traditional tastes of the region.

"My" broccoli, that kind of broccoli that has a special unmistakable taste, is commonly called "friariello" in our regional dialect. This name comes from the Castilian words "frio-grelos" (winter broccolis) and from the Neapolitan verb "frijere" (to fry) and originated as part of the simple cooking of the poor. Friariello can be found only in this part of Italy and its taste is unmistakable. Unlike other broccoli, friariello is not as compact and the part that is good to eat is its dark green leaves. And the taste—its taste, strong and a bit bitter at first, and then sweet and fleshy in the end—reminds me of the taste of good, simple things that come straight from the fields. It is perfect with sausages or red meat. The best way to cook friariello is to fry it over a really quick flame. Even if it may seem easy to put it in a pan with garlic and a drop of olive oil, it is hard to make a plate of friariellos as perfectly as it should be prepared. My mother is an expert at preparing the "green heaven." With the mastery of a magician, she cooks friariellos and ends with the final touch, which requires putting some slices of fresh bread baked in a wood stove and waiting a few minutes so that the slices of bread absorb the taste and then placing them on top of the cooked friariellos.

This taste reminds me of my childhood. I remember my Aunt Maria coming to our house and bringing freshly reaped

broccoli. My father would sit outside our door, cleaning them and speaking with friends. The taste reminds me of traditional holiday dishes, many eaten during cold and steamy winters spent in a little sea village in the south of Italy. This taste also reminds me of meals with my family. Eating, for my family, was the most important moment of the day, when we all would sit around a big wooden circular table. Circular! Isn't this a lovely memory? A family around a circular table.

When I eat friariellos, I also remember how my brother and I set the table while we were chatting, dancing, and singing but always paying attention. Anybody who thinks that setting a table is an easy thing should come to my house at least once: the large but light fork for my father, the blue plate for my brother, the nice glass for my mother and, of course, salt, pepper and chili in the right corner. This taste reminds me of my mother and her cookery noises, which included singing and music. I remember my father, who was so big and silent, so authoritarian, and so interested by the news on TV. (The dinner always starting with moments of endless silence, never-ending at least for me; I was just a child and I could never understand why we should pay so much attention to the news on TV and all those boring things.) I remember my brother, just in front of me, our knowing glances, he and I making fun of my mother and laughing so much, in a way that comes only when laughing is forbidden.

Every homecoming meal was the same lovely ritual. After hours on a warm bus, I received the best prize: to get off and smell the air, my air; to go into the car, my car; to hug a boy, my brother. Going back home has this taste for me. It has the taste of a crazy but close family, of my aunt, of my fields, of a blue plate, of my brother's laugh, and of a circular table with my family, and the news in the background. The taste of friariellos.

Camp

COLLEEN ZIMMERMAN

Of all the places I have been, my grandfather's camp is the place to which I feel the most connected. My grandfather's camp is similar to an image one might find in a magazine article about living in nature and is what society would now refer to as "eco-friendly." On the interior and exterior of the cabin there were battery-operated and sunlight-fed lamps. He used solar panels more than he did public electricity, had a gravitational toilet, and a spring-fed water source. It seems like yesterday I was a little girl, ecstatically venturing to Grandpa's camp and tripping over the old tree roots sticking up from the ground.

I still remember hiking up the rugged two-mile-long driveway while listening to the birds calling back and forth and the leaves rustling in the wind. His driveway, a steep incline up a mountain, was bordered with ferns, woods, and historical stone walls constructed by Colonial settlers. When the edge of the woods bordering the driveway transitioned to the open fields, I knew we were close to Grandpa. The fields of green had ferns, jeep trails, a pond, numerous blueberry bushes, and freshly-bloomed flowers. I would hear the sound of the buggy from the bottom of his driveway, signaling Gramps was either making new trails or mowing the grass.

My Grandfather was friendly with all the creatures at his camp, except the coyotes. Binoculars in hand, we would sit on his porch overlooking the open fields and the neighboring mountains, and spontaneously the chipmunks would come up by our feet to chew on the wood chips. They frightened me at times, but I got used to their visits. Hummingbird feeders swung on the front porch, about two feet above my head, and if I sat quietly, they would come. Sounding like a swarm of bumblebees, the hummingbirds that flew up to the feeders were absolutely breathtaking. I used to try to count the number of times their wings would move, but they went too fast for me.

Upon reaching the slate-stone steps on the porch, I could see the "walls" of firewood my grandpa had cut and stacked up. Being surrounded by the walls of firewood on the porch made me feel safe; a sense of protection only Gramps could provide. Always loaded with wood chips, the rugs on the front porch had a comforting, worn look. The interior of the cabin was simple.

The kitchen and living room were joined by the insert-stove in the middle, with stairs to the right and the bathroom straight ahead. Interestingly, the kitchen had retro black and white square tile, some brick linoleum, and an antique floral print. This mixture made camp feel more like a home, and I felt connected to my great-grandparents who had installed the various floor tiles.

The upstairs was an open space with eight beds comfortably apart. Blankets made before my mother's birth covered the beds, while dressers served as the footboards. In the morning, the four windows lit up the room instantly. The warmth of the sun on my face usually ended my slumber. During hunting season, my grandfather, a great outdoorsman, invited his buddies to stay at the camp, and covering the walls were the hunting awards and trophies my grandfather had received.

Around Valentine's Day last year, my family and I ventured up to go see Gramps in our snow gear and warm clothes. It was a moment I had never experienced before: going to camp and seeing it in the wintertime. It looked like a winter wonderland; the tree branches were covered with icicles while the sap was frozen on the bark and the deer trails stood out in the snow. That day felt different; camp was not the same. When we reached my grandfather in his "tropically-heated" cabin, we opened the door, and noticed Gramps lying on the couch sleeping. We realized he was in pain and did not look good. All fifteen of us gathered in the living room in a circle, and for the first time, we prayed. We knew we had to get him to the hospital.

Six months later, when the snow had melted and fed Grandpa's pond, he ventured out of this world and into another. Suddenly, the warmth of the sun that touched my face in the morning, the smell of freshly cut wood, and the sound of my grandfather's wind chimes hit me at once. I knew everything would be different from now on, and the same family traditions with Gramps would not be there anymore.

Everything was just how he left it; the bed still un-made from the last time he slept in it, and his chair pulled out ready for him to sit. The open fields of green were still there, the sheds he made were still standing, and the smell of freshly cut wood still lingered in the air. The deer in the fields, the visiting hummingbirds, and the sounds of leaves rustling in the wind

were all signs from Grandpa letting us know he is still there. Camp was once just a place where I had spent my childhood, venturing into nature and riding Grandpa's buggy, but now it is not just a place. It is Grandpa.

Shadow

ERI KOYANO

I am terrified. I am constantly being chased by an eerie figure that continues to haunt me wherever I go. I cannot feel it nor can I touch it, but I know it's there: right behind where I stand. This ambiguous figure is also good to me, it is what keeps me from falling back. This is the motive that lets me move forward. If I step back, I fall into the dark pit of memories that would stop me from going on. I can feel a drop of perspiration fall along the contours of my face. I am terrified. This ghastly form filled with contradiction drives me towards apprehension. My greatest fear is my own shadow: the black intangible object that has changed me through phases of my life.

My shadow, as an infant, is a formless figure. I am unaware and unaffected by the fear that lies right behind me. I am surrounded by barriers of protection, far away from the ground as my mother carries me with great precaution. With no anxiety, I feel a sense of great security. I have no decisions to make, no responsibilities to take; I am a fearless infant with resilience.

I am now older and my shadow as a child gradually becomes more conspicuous as I start to discover the world. I use my senses to see, feel, and hear what lies so spontaneously beyond my imagination. I have my feet firmly on the ground, and start to realize the small shadow that follows my footsteps. I am still too young, however, to understand the darkness of this shade.

I have not always walked in front of my shadow. There were times when I fell into the infinite pit of darkness, making the wrong choice; lost to the pressure of the shade haunting me. I stood in the unbearable silence with nothing but my own physical body. The shadow approached me deliberately without any hesitation. It not only surrounded me, but spread its shade like a toxin through the barriers of my soul. I was trapped by the apprehension that built up within. I felt so small and isolated inside an enormous barren room. The ground was so unstable, that no matter how many times I tried to get up, I kept falling over. It was like endless waves of earthquake constantly occurring inside me.

I am an adolescent, eighteen years old, and the experiences in my life have given me confidence to fight against my fear. I now walk directly under the sun where the size of my shadow is at its minimum size. My surroundings are clear and I have the freedom to discover the world and proceed without anything pulling me back. My path is free from inhibition. This impalpable darkness has continued to stand by me for eighteen years, watching every decision I have made. I am no longer afraid of my shadow, because I now know not to fall back into it. I know that if I try to walk back into my past, I will fall into my fear. This fear keeps me from turning back and gives me directions to the path that I should walk in my life. My shadow has become an inseparable companion, growing in significance over all the years.

A shadow changes its shape, size, contrast and location relentlessly. I have learned to follow the sun as guidance, towards the opposite side of my own shadow. This is my positive fear that that will continue to run after every step I take, to change and affect me through every phase in life. This shadow is what has shaped who I am today. My shadow is a part of me.

A Complicated Relationship

MARISA NAIRN

“Wild Tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (Anzaldúa 300). In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaldúa tells the story of her relationship with the Spanish language and how she was able to overcome the torment she encountered because of it. She writes about her relationship with speaking. Language also exists in different forms: reading and writing. My personal experiences with speaking and reading have always been positive; however, I am able to relate to Anzaldúa’s story when it comes to my relationship with writing. This relationship has been complex throughout my educational experience. Thankfully, my journey through education has allowed this relationship to develop and mature into something of which I can be proud.

Like Anzaldúa, my relationship with writing stigmatized me as unintelligent. In my small town elementary school, writing felt like a punishment. This negative relationship with writing resulted in some educational scarring due to my elementary school experiences. My fourth grade teacher, Ms. G., who seemed to care more about her hair than her students, gave us a writing assignment in the beginning of the year. The assignment was to write about our heritage and how we identified with it. She was posting everyone’s writing on the wall for parent night. This was especially exciting since in the small town of Cold Spring, parents would be able to recognize not only their child’s, but other student’s names up there too. I wrote about where my great-grandparents had come from and how some Italian, Irish, German, and Scottish traditions are still in my family. I was feeling very proud of my work when I handed it in. I had even done research with my parents on the subject. The teacher told me that I had not completed the assignment correctly, and I received a low grade. She did not put my work up for parent night.

I found out later that she had wanted us to pick only one nationality, the one we identify ourselves with most. I did not remember ever having read this on the assignment but everyone else, except me, seemed to infer this directive. When I tried to explain to the teacher that I identified with all of the nationalities about which I had written, she refused to listen to my explanation, scolding me to learn to write according to instruction. I was devastated and embarrassed that my parents

got to see everyone else's writing but mine. To this day, I still don't understand why she didn't see my writing as an expression of myself and how I identified with all aspects of my ethnicity. Anzaldúa writes, "Attacks on one's own form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment" (300). The teacher certainly censored my expression. Since this incident, I have had difficulty finding confidence in my writing. Like in Anzaldúa's story, my scarring occurred early in life, making it that much harder to overcome my hatred of writing. This lack of confidence continued through most of my high school years.

There is not much writing required in high school, but I did encounter a few teachers who believed writing was necessary. When it came to writing assignments, my grades were very out of character. I have always been a good student and am able to comprehend new material easily. Still, while I always did the best I could with my writing, I could never feel confident in my final product. Thankfully, I had an incredible English teacher in eleventh grade who was able to reverse the effects of that fourth grade writing assignment. Dr. Richter would actually sit down with each of us to go over our writing and point out our flaws as well as our strengths.

The very first book we read in Dr. Richter's class was Alice Sebold's memoir, *Lucky*, about her experience with rape and her battle to overcome emotional suffering. Dr. Richter asked us to write a reaction to Sebold's memoir that included how the story made us feel and how we could or could not relate to the author's emotions. I tackled this assignment just as I would have any other homework. However, this assignment seemed to flow easily considering that the subject was my own emotional reaction. Anzaldúa writes about the value of "[a] language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves" (301). Personal reflection turned out to be my language of expression. I was able to express my emotions naturally and honestly because they were a part of my true identity. Dr. Richter enjoyed my honesty and told me that my writing was the best that he had read in a long time. A few days later, he read my paper to the class as an example of what good writing looks and sounds like.

A teacher was proud of my work and insisted that I should be too. I had reached a milestone in my educational career.

According to Dr. Richter, I could write well and I should have confidence in my work; I should be proud! This realization is what has made writing much more accessible to me. Having gone from wondering if I had answered a question correctly, to knowing that I am capable of producing an excellent piece, I now enjoy this form of expression. Anzaldúa writes about how she learned to take pride in her language, even though it sometimes brings about torment from those who don't understand it. She writes, "I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (305). This is a valuable lesson that my eleventh grade English teacher taught me; having a positive opinion of my work is important to achieving what I want. I know that not every teacher or every reader will thoroughly enjoy my writing. However, if I don't have confidence in myself, why should others have confidence in me? To take pride in writing means that I take pride in myself.

Since I learned that I am capable of producing good writing, my career as a student has been a lot more manageable. Unlike high school, college requires a lot of writing. Even though I have confidence in my words, I was still nervous about taking my first college-level writing class. I had no idea what to expect from the professor, nor did I realize how much writing it would demand. Despite this uneasiness, I did very well in the class because I was confident and passionate. I was also able to learn and improve my skills in a way of which I never knew I was capable. The confidence I acquired in eleventh grade has made learning how to analyze and reflect much easier. Now writing four, five, or six page papers is no big deal, as opposed to before when it felt near impossible. Anzaldúa writes, "One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration will take place" (308). She learned to overcome her struggles with language identity and allow herself to be proud of her language of expression and communication. I have done the same. Throughout my education, I have overcome obstacles that have caused me to doubt my writing. Like Anzaldúa's journey, mine has come full circle. Now I can feel satisfied with my written identity.

Although my relationship with writing has been complicated, the most recent part of my educational journey has helped me overcome my lack of confidence. I began with a teacher who refused to accept my writing because it was different, and ended with a teacher who taught me to be proud of my writing.

I have learned the importance of confidence in achieving what I want with my writing. Anzaldúa has learned that “ethnicity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (305). She writes of her journey toward understanding that she must be proud of her language in order to be proud of herself. Writing is the language identity with which I have struggled. In order for others to enjoy my writing, I first must have confidence in myself.

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Snakes On A Train

MELISSA PACK

Kevin says they found a boa constrictor on the red line. The nasal undertone is partially due to his family-sized nose, but mostly due to January. Kevin says I have a problem with controlling space, but I think I have a problem with controlling people. I love my boyfriend. I love traveling. I hate cities. I hate the T. Something to do with the mass of strangers: a variety of clothes, bathing habits, sitting preferences, and speaking volumes, are all squeezed into a basic 30 by 6-foot train car and deemed humane. Kevin has a friend named Jack. I only know Jack as Kevin's friend. We went through middle school, high school, and extensive car rides agreeing to only acknowledge each other when necessary.

Yet, through an accidental exchange of general decency, we're stuck four and a half inches close, not sure of the proper protocol of how often we can look at each other. He motions to Kevin. Kevin grabs my waist and whispers "you'll be fine" as he leads me to drown in the pit of legs, cell phones, dirty looks, and used air. The seats are as many colors as the shoes, and filled to twice their recommended maximum due to a careful mix of lap sitting and cheek squishing.

Kevin tells me never to sit; apparently, no one told the locals. Kevin says the green line is the second worst line, but the red line should be better.

Kevin tries desperately to pull me into some idle conversation so we appear to have a functioning friendship, but the grind of wheels and axles is deafening and leaves my focus to my other senses. Thick metal poles stand vehemently, holding their ground against their horizontal counterparts—combining to become a sort of aerial map of the train car, and a reflection that intensifies the human-to-floor-space ratio.

Kevin told me that the front is the best because it's easiest to get off and that no one is here to enjoy the train ride. I can see the steps from where I stand. I can see the heavy-set train engineer staring back with exasperated gray-rimmed eyes to match his gray-rimmed uniform. I try not to stare at him, and he tries not to stare back. A sea of converse sneakers is impeding the dusty yellow stairs despite the slush above ground. Those people

don't seem too concerned about getting off the train. Maybe they are here to enjoy the train ride, Kevin.

Kevin ignores the general chorus of "excuse me's" by carefully focusing on his wrists when a Converse-clad Bostonian tries to take his place at the pole. The Conversees are gathering on the stairs. I catch the conductor staring at me, begging for help. I didn't invite them. I don't want them. It's not my problem. It's not my fault.

Kevin licks his teeth, and I smell dusty morning breath. I don't think it's his; I'm not blaming him. The air clicks against my teeth and leaves a slimy mineral aftertaste. Kevin's chest is rising and falling slowly against his thin striped frame. He's comfortable here, slithering in the dank tunnels, guided by chance and electricity. Breathing easy.



The Informative Essay

Informational essays, as the title suggests, provide information about a topic. However, in order to move beyond being merely descriptive, these essays include an interpretation of the topic under consideration. Informational essays can teach, subtly influence, give directions, or provide data for a purpose. Informative essays set a context for the information and emphasize clarity.

The Story of John Riley of the San Patricio:
Understanding the Historical Context

VALITA DURKIN

Editor's Note: This essay was written as part of a multi-essay writing project in which students were asked to create a film proposal. In the following essay, the second in a series of three, Valita Durkin is explaining her proposed film's historical context.

Thank you, Ms. Producer, for accepting my film proposal for *The Story of John Riley*. I am grateful for the opportunity of working with you and would now like to explain how the film's setting is an integral part of John Riley's character and the story itself. John Riley was very much a product of his time, and he was shaped by the events and injustices he witnessed around him. It is important, therefore, that my film adequately portrays the historical and social contexts that shaped Riley's character. Riley grew up in Ireland, a country that was oppressed by a larger imperial power. When he moved to America in the mid-19th century, immigrants were looked down upon and mistreated. In many ways, Riley lived his life as an underdog. By understanding Riley's circumstances, one can better understand Riley's motivation for deserting the army and sympathizing with the Mexican cause. Riley had a rare, rebel spirit and fought against the norm, even though the odds were stacked against him.

What Riley witnessed in Ireland would probably have influenced him later in his life, in the decisions he made and the values he held. During the early 1800s when Riley was living in Ireland, the country was oppressed. The Act of Union, which essentially deprived Ireland of its independence, had just been instated by Great Britain. The potato famine was also rampant in Ireland. One million Irish died during the famine, and two million immigrated to America. During this time, the British denied Ireland aid and would often evict farmers from their cottages. Riley survived the famine and saw how his people suffered (Stevens 12). In Galway during this time, the young John Riley would have witnessed the British army and Protestant Anglo landlords evicting families from their cottages when they were no longer able of paying their rent. In Ireland, rebels resisting the British were considered heroes (Stevens 17). It is likely these events influenced Riley's rebellious nature.

The newly emerging “science” of eugenics influenced the way in which the Irish were treated. During the 1800s, British intellectuals said that the Irish were close to being a separate race. Since Irish people were of Celtic descent, an ethnicity different than the Anglo Saxons of Britain, they were considered an inferior people. Ireland’s poverty was often blamed on its Celtic ancestry, with the British often making the argument that it was in the Irish people’s DNA to be poor. England used this logic to deny the Irish democratic freedoms, stating that they were incapable of ruling themselves (“Ireland” 1178).

When he arrived in the United States in the 1840s, Riley would have continued to face ethnic prejudice. Just before John Riley immigrated, there was an inflammation of anti-immigrant sentiment. The feeling that immigrants would ruin the American way of life was popular. Cartoons appeared in American newspapers depicting Irish characters called Paddy and Bridget, a drunken couple with ape-like features. Some political activists claimed Irish immigrants, “Reek of poverty, corruption, and whatever is dirty, whiskey loving, unruly, and improvident” (Stevens 24). One of the first scenes in my film will be of John Riley disembarking in New York and having his name changed from “Sean” to “John.” Another scene will depict other Irish immigrants being forcibly enlisted into the American army. Other scenes would show the conditions in the American army and the discrimination shown to the immigrants, emphasizing how they were not allowed to practice their religion. Many of the enlisted men held a prejudice against immigrants, especially those who were Roman Catholics. Officers often treated Irish and other recent immigrants as second-class citizens and were sometimes even abusive to them. A soldier of the time commented, “The foreign born soldier, especially if he happened to be Irish or German, automatically received harsher sentence than a native (born) American” (Stevens 52).

Riley was a man ahead of his time in some ways because he was more attached to his ideals than to a particular nationality. During the 1800s in America, there were the beginnings of the idea of manifest destiny. Americans felt they were entitled to the land that Native Americans and Mexicans had been living on for years. Many nativists of the time claimed that, “the people of this continent (the United States) had the right to decide their own destiny” and that their destiny did not include

people of other cultures (Stevens 28). These sentiments angered Riley, who, while in Ireland, witnessed the results of the same thinking and watched as Irish culture was repressed. An important scene in my film will depict John Riley's desertion of American General Taylor's army in protest against this type of nativism. In April 1846, when Taylor's army reached the Rio Grande, Riley and his compatriots crossed battle lines to join the Mexican army (Miller 87).

John Riley rose above many of the societal constraints that he faced. In many ways he was a rebel, but more importantly, he was also someone we might now regard as a "global citizen," a person whose loyalties extend beyond a country or race. As my film will illustrate, the unjust circumstances around Riley are what ignited the rebellious spark within him.

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The Modern Reality of Artificial Intelligence

DEBORAH SCHRAM

What makes us human? Is it the heart that pumps blood to every crevice of our bodies? Is it our ability to run, jump, and swim by our own free will? What about our ability to think? Although most creatures on Earth possess brains, many of these creatures do not utilize the brain the same way humans do. Logical thought process is not something unique to humans, but do insects or mice know what love is? Can bats differentiate right from wrong? The human brain is something so exceptionally complex that we often have a hard time understanding it. From neuroscientists to postal workers, humans are the most intelligent life forms on earth due to the intricacy of our brains.

Science fiction likes to push boundaries, though, and in Isaac Asimov's story "Reason," a robot is created that possesses intelligence strikingly similar to ours. The main positronic robot, QT-1 (or Cutie, as he is referred to), knows how to reason and think. He's aware of this, but he's also aware that he's a robot. Cutie carries out his programmed commands in a way that suits his liking. Essentially, Cutie has a brain, a brain developed differently than ours, but a brain nonetheless. Despite the familiarity the characters in Asimov's fictional world have with robots, Cutie is something special. He is the first robot to think logically and to reason. When we look at the world we live in today, robots are not new to us, either. For decades, robots have been programmed to do many tasks, and with the rapid growth in technology, the prospect of living in a world densely populated by the mechanical creatures is nothing extraordinary. Still, one wonders whether there could ever be a robot with the same brain capabilities as those of a human. With the increasing rate of technological advancements, it is certainly possible that Asimov's reality could become ours.

In Asimov's world of "Reason," robots are used to carry out the laborious tasks humans are too inefficient to perform. QT-1 was a specially designed type of robot that could reason and think logically, unlike the other robots aboard the space station. Although Cutie developed a peculiar and incorrect reason for his existence, he carried out his designated tasks effortlessly and flawlessly, thus demolishing the need for human-controlled space stations. It is unclear what other jobs robots are used for on Earth and/or on other planets in the "Reason" universe, but

it can be safely assumed that the robots work more efficiently than their human counterparts.

Currently we do not live in a world with poistronic robots (or androids, as they are more commonly known), but we do live in a world where robots make day-to-day life easier for humans. In Werner G. Holzbock's *Robot Technology, Principles and Practice*, Holzbock gives the following definition for "robot": "Robots are not humanoids. They are practical mechanisms designed to grasp and move objects; that is, they are manipulators" (ix). He emphasizes the difference between a robot and an android, a common mix-up people seem to make. The sewing machine is an excellent example of a robot that carries out a task better than any human could. Prior to the sewing machine, someone had to tirelessly thread needles and prick her fingertips if she wanted to wear clothes. This could take hours if not days for one article of clothing to be made, and if something had to be made in bulk it would take even longer, regardless of the amount of people working. While a sewing machine might not fall under the category of android, it is still an entity with the sole purpose of making human life easier. Sidney Perkowitz makes this point in the book *Digital People: From Bionic Humans to Androids*, stating, "Artificial beings, however, are not limited to fully manufactured creatures of plastic and metal" (3). Inventions like the sewing machine or the automobile are certainly not the cuddly, mechanical creatures we have come to know and love, but they do serve as important stepping stones for the modern-day androids and the androids present in Asimov's story.

Artificial intelligence is a concept that nearly came to life overnight. Daniel Ichbiah explains in his book *Robots: From Science Fiction to Technological Revolution* that professor Herbert Simon was the spark who lit the flame of artificial intelligence. He theorized the possibility of a computer utilizing a logical thought process, and in 1956, with the help of Alan Newell, he created the Logic Theory Machine, a program that could solve mathematical equations on its own (27). Following in his footsteps were a few other computer scientists who further explored the newly developing field of artificial intelligence, but Herbert Simon was essentially the founding father. Norbert Wiener, a mathematics professor at MIT, developed his own field: cybernetics. It is cybernetics, Ichbiah explains, that geared artificial intelligence away from automation and toward feedback and logical response. Taking

the new research on cybernetics and artificial intelligence, a team at the Artificial Intelligence Center at Stanford University created a robot (named Shakey) that could sense his environment and react accordingly. Although it took Shakey an hour to process his surroundings and react, he could move around on his own and carry an object from one room to the next (29). In essence, Shakey was the first robot with the ability to reason.

Since Shakey's creation, many other robots have been made, each one programmed with more advanced abilities than its predecessor. By the mid-1980s, according to Ichbiah, Japanese robotics and artificial intelligence expanded dramatically. During the next decades, nearly sixty percent of the world's robot output came from Japan, and by 1993, Honda had created P1, a humanoid robot with grabbing abilities as well as leg and arm coordination. Honda did not stop with P1, though; according to the Honda Worldwide website, two more humanoid robots—P2 and P3—were developed as more advanced versions of P1. In 2000, Honda created ASIMO, a smoother, more compact version of P3. With his more human-like design, ASIMO is able to interact with humans and the human environment more efficiently, thus creating a transitional gateway for Honda's future androids to step into our world and into our homes.

Thanks to the progress of companies such as Honda, artificially intelligent androids have become even more advanced as of 2011. In 2009, the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST) showcased HRP-4C, a gynoid (female android) that can sing, dance, and respond to voices via speech recognition. Although her body is metallic and her hands are humorously large, her face and hair are incredibly human-like and she stands at around five feet and two inches, the average height of a Japanese woman. HRP-4C is not the first android created by AIST; prior to her there were three other androids created, but HRP-4C was the first android to be given realistic skin and the face of a human. Her black eyelashes delicately flutter when she blinks, her lips curve whenever she smiles, and she speaks when spoken to. Now that something as advanced as HRP-4C is developed, it seems like a matter of time before every household has a HRP-4C of its own ("Successful").

Despite these rapid advancements in technology, scientists have run into two major problems in regards to further advancing the current state of humanoid robots: energy and intelligence. The two subjects go hand-in-hand. Ichbiah explains that an android must have the intelligence to repower or charge itself should science allow the domestication of these metallic beings. Regardless of the impact, ASIMO has made on the world of robotics and androids, his battery only lasted for about ten minutes. It has been suggested that robots can run on organic material, as is the case with the Slugbot that runs on decomposed slugs (152). Reliable is the key word when it comes to an energy source, though, and once that sufficient energy source is discovered, the androids must be programmed to think freely so they do not unintentionally run out of life. Programming intelligence is not as easy as it sounds. As René Descartes said in his *Discourse on Method*, “I think, hence I am” (27). In other words, “I think, therefore I am.” We are aware that humans have brains and that we can rationalize and think, but we do not yet understand how the brain produces thought and what is physically happening to our minds when we produce logic. Unless we figure this out for humans, it is nearly impossible to figure this out for an artificial mind, and until these two obstacles are overcome, android progression is unfortunately at a standstill.

This brings us back to Asimov and his positronic robots. When Japan’s creations are taken into consideration, it is certainly possible that our future will be filled with robots such as Cutie. One might even argue that our real-life robots are slightly more advanced than the robots in “Reason,” especially in regards to HRP-4C. Unlike Cutie, HRP-4C weighs only about ninety-five pounds, while Asimov’s Cutie is not “lightweight” (63). The texture of HRP-4C mimics the flesh of a human, but underneath her skin lies a body as solid as Cutie’s. The life expectancy of HRP-4C’s battery is unclear, but it is in fact a battery; the life will run out sooner or later and obviously must be recharged (“Successful”). Thus, the main differences between HRP-4C and Cutie are their brains and their means of existence. As stated earlier, in order for HRP-4C to become the same type of android as Cutie, she would need an excellent and never-failing energy source as well as a human-like brain. A positronic robot can certainly become a reality, but only when humans figure out a way to create enough energy for the android to run smoothly. Moreover, we must be able to program a brain capable of reasoning at our level.

And once we do this, what happens next? It is difficult to say. Although work-related androids seem perfectly plausible for the future, does the idea of having an android for every person, every residence, hold the same credibility? Ultra-intelligent androids would ultimately become a new species built to walk alongside man, but this is something that cannot be done overnight; humanity is not prepared to relinquish the position of being the most powerful entity on Earth; humanity is not prepared to become an anachronism of its own civilization. Many factors must be taken into consideration before “Reason” becomes a reality, but in time, we will likely discover what becomes of a world in which man and android coexist.

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Internet Relationships: Are You Flirting with a Felon?

ARENGAIL SAMARITA

Online dating is defined as using the Internet in the hopes of finding a potential romantic partner (Hughes). Many matchmaking websites, such as eHarmony.com and Match.com, allow people to interact with one another on the Internet by browsing through each other's profiles; these profiles typically include the user's picture, age, gender, location, job, hobbies, personality traits, musical preferences, etc. (Sprecher). Likewise, social networking sites also allow people to create similar profiles and converse with other web users. Thanks to the anonymity of the Internet, many people can strategically present themselves in these profiles by highlighting and exaggerating their positive traits while neglecting to mention the negative ones. As a result, users face the consequences of deception in the world of online dating.

Although there are a myriad of seemingly attractive singles on matchmaking websites, many of these people “are exaggerations and distortions of the real thing—airbrushed versions that cannot be lived-up-to offline” (Konijin 244). Since online daters are competing with millions of other individuals, they are driven to “present a self that others would feel compelled to ‘buy’ into” (Konijin 241). With the help of Photoshop, tech-savvy individuals can edit their original pictures to erase pimples, trim their bodies, and hide other imperfections in order to attract more potential partners on the Internet. Although their profiles are displaying them in the best light, they may not necessarily be the most honest representation of the people behind the computer screen. The article “The Big Lies People Tell in Online Dating,” includes self-reported characteristics of web users on OkCupid.com, comparing them to the U.S. statistical averages. The researchers determined that the reported weights of the women on this site were substantially lower than national averages while the reported heights of the male users, on the other hand, were exaggerated by at least two inches, on average. In addition, with advanced technology, researchers were able to determine the “age” of the photo; they stated that the more attractive photos on this dating website were much more likely to be outdated than average-looking ones. In fact, nearly 1/3 of the photos rated most attractive are actually more than a year old (Rudder). Additionally, 12% of the attractive photos on OkCupid were over three years old whereas only 5% of average-

looking photos were that outdated (Rudder). The researchers also concluded that 1 in 5 of the average photos was at least a year old, while 1 in 5 of the attractive photos, on the other hand, was at least two years old (Rudder). The results of this particular study demonstrate how people try to seem more physically attractive in their profiles on matchmaking sites than they actually are. And although physical appearance is not the only factor in attraction, it's quite a turn-off to find out that people have been lying to you about the way they look.

Infidelity, another form of deception, is common in real life so it is common in the virtual world as well. For example, one recent study in Canada estimated that approximately 18% of people registered with matchmaking sites are married (Whitty 83). One of these unfaithful individuals is Col. Kassem Saleh, a military officer who was caught courting and flirting with over 50 women online (Whitty 81). When he was caught, Saleh had already proposed to some of his online mistresses (Whitty 83). Another disturbing account involves Abby, a 26-year-old woman, who discovered that her online boyfriend, Tony, was involved in several other online relationships, some of which had progressed offline (Whitty 85). To make matters worse, Abby was pregnant when she later discovered that she is the seventh woman that he impregnated out of wedlock (Whitty 85). Evidently, maintaining multiple relationships online is relatively easy to do; by simply clicking "copy" and "paste," people can send the same romantic email to hundreds of online lovers. By the time these innocent lovers find out about their partner's infidelity, the damage, unfortunately, has already been done.

Furthermore, the anonymity of the Internet allows users to easily create a completely new identity, making online dating especially dangerous. Scam artists, for instance, use matchmaking websites to initially develop trust among their relationships with other online users, then con victims out of large sums of cash; basically these cunning individuals utilize these websites to commit financial fraud.

In one case, a 65-year-old man named Alan Sarnier from New York was convicted for second-degree grand larceny in 2005 after tricking an elderly widow, whom he met through an online dating service, into handing him \$100,000 (Brick). Sarnier lied to the woman about his fictitious company that was supposedly on the verge of finding a potential cure for leukemia (Brick).

The widow, whose husband had died of leukemia, gave him \$100,000 as an investment because she initially believed that Sarner had good intentions. As he was being tried by the Supreme Court, Sarner finally admitted that neither the company nor the cure existed (Brick). Another liar, Jeffrey Marsalis, also lied in his dating profile and claimed that he was a trauma surgeon and sometimes, an astronaut, when he was actually an emergency medical technician at the time (Rosenbloom). Nevertheless, sexual assault was his greatest offense. In fact, between 2001 and 2005, approximately 21 women from Philadelphia, whom he initially met on Match.com, accused him of rape; Marsalis denied all of the accusations (Rosenbloom). Moreover, one of these incidents started when Marsalis and a young woman named Jody decided to meet in person after conversing on the Internet. The two acquaintances went out for a drink at the bar and things took a surprising turn when Jody found a “strange granular matter in the bottom of her shot” and passed out for a few hours (Rosenbloom). Marsalis took advantage of Jody and raped her in his apartment while she was unconscious; she reported him to the police shortly after (Rosenbloom). Similarly, a serial sexual predator, named Clarence Dean, also used the Internet to find his victims. In January 2007, Dean was responsible for raping a college student that he met online (Buckley). Later on that year, he killed a young, blonde woman that he met through an online dating service and left her nude body in a hotel room in Times Square (Buckley). Officials have indicated that the woman was strangled, beaten, and assaulted prior to her death. Unfortunately, even though these con artists, liars, and sex offenders have been punished for their respective crimes, these convictions cannot erase the emotional, psychological, and physical scars that these monsters have imprinted on their victims.

Sadly, even children are becoming victims of sexual predators due to unsafe online practices. Although most adolescents don't have the money to become members of online dating websites, many teenagers in the United States today use MySpace and Facebook instead as “the primary tools for flirtation, relationships and day-to-day communication” (Palfrey and Gasser 27). The primary issue is that these adolescents typically misperceive these social networking sites to be more private than they really are; they often disclose too much information about themselves that can be “easily accessed by anyone, including people whom they do not know” (Palfrey and Gasser

30). One of the most infamous scandals involved Julie Doe, who was 13-years-old in 2005 when she lied about her age, claimed she was 18 and created a profile on MySpace (Palfrey and Gasser 106). The following year, Pete Solis, a 19-year-old MySpace user, initiated contact with Doe online. After flirting back and forth on the Internet, the two formed a relationship. Eventually, they agreed to meet in person, “whereupon Solis sexually assaulted Julie” (Harvard Law Review Association 930). When the officials found out about the incident, Pete Solis was imprisoned for 90 days for assaulting a minor and became a registered sex offender (Harvard Law Review Association 930). Unfortunately, when Julie Doe’s family sued MySpace for \$30 million, the appeal was dismissed because MySpace was apparently protected from liability resulting from sexual assault of a minor under the Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996 (Harvard Law Review Association 931). Therefore, even though one particular sex offender suffered the consequences of his immoral actions, there are still thousands of predators lurking around the Internet; evidently, social networking sites, such as MySpace, aren’t doing enough, in terms of adjusting and improving their security settings, to protect young web users from interacting with predators on the Internet.

With the presence of child molesters and predators online, a handful of organizations have initiated laws and programs in order to protect the youth from these ill-natured individuals. According to several members of Congress, the Internet is a very dangerous place for children and youth due to “a preponderance of child predators and pornographers seeking to take advantage of innocent and unwary minors” (Essex 37). With that in mind, in 2007, Congress passed the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA), which banned all commercial networking sites and chat rooms in libraries and schools (Essex 44). Additionally, Congress introduced the Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act in 2007, which banned social networking sites from schools that receive federal funds and required them to educate the youth about appropriate online behavior (Palfrey and Gasser 109). Furthermore, the U.S. Postal Service and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children have launched the “2 SMRT 4U” campaign featuring actress Hayden Panettiere and other young people discussing their personal stories of the Internet and sharing tips on how to stay safe online (Palfrey and Gasser 99). Similarly, the Internet safety team at Microsoft, which includes private investigators, former

prosecutors, legal experts, and technologists, has “launched a multi-city tour, called ‘Get Net Safe,’ and a website, at staysafe.org, that provides information for teenagers, parents and others about online safety” (Palfrey and Gasser 105). More specifically, the site includes a clip of the short film called “Predator,” which was created by a young junior-high-school student from Utah; this particular film raises awareness about the dangers of the Internet (Palfrey and Gasser 105). Overall, the intended goal of these laws and campaigns is to “develop and maintain a safe online environment and experience for Internet users, especially children and youth” (Essex 36).

Although the individuals implementing online safety programs and legislation have good intentions, the effectiveness of these efforts is questionable. While limiting Internet access prevents teens from potentially endangering themselves while they’re in the library or at school, such laws aren’t preventing them from accessing these networking sites when they’re at home. Additionally, banning popular networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, from minors can potentially be counterproductive. Instead of limiting and/or eliminating the use of these websites, most adolescents will probably switch to brand-new online networking services; ones with fewer protections as opposed to more. The current laws and campaigns certainly help to spread awareness about the dangers of the Internet, which is undoubtedly important, but more legislation, advertising, tours and campaigns are definitely needed in order to fully get the message of safe online practices across to the public.

As for the adults in the world of online dating, the Internet is currently attempting, more than ever, to inform users about safe online practices as these scary matchmaking stories are becoming more apparent. Hundreds of websites, including “cyberangels.org” and “sage-hearts.com,” review online matchmaking websites and inform viewers about safe online dating strategies (Whitty 151). More specifically, these sites advise online daters to avoid giving out personal information by keeping their home address, telephone number, workplace information and last name to themselves. In addition, Match.com, a popular matchmaking website, strategically placed the rules of the dating service, as well as messages regarding safety, on its homepage to make it readily accessible to all web users (Whitty 152). However, according to a recent study, roughly 35% of people who use these matchmaking sites

admitted that they didn't read the safety messages provided by these online services (Whitty 152). Therefore, even though online dating safety tips are prevalent in the virtual world, many web users don't take the time to read and utilize the resources wisely.

As an addition to online safety precautions, the government and the Internet are currently emphasizing the importance of background checks before meeting online acquaintances in person. In fact, several states considered passing laws regarding this online safety issue but as of now, only the states of New York and New Jersey have an Internet dating safety law, which requires sites to provide users with safety notices and inform users on whether they perform background checks on members (Rosenbloom). Moreover, True.com currently has a background check feature, which denies membership to convicted felons, sex offenders, and people who are already married (Rosenbloom). The site's database isn't 100% foolproof but True.com's security settings are far superior compared to other dating sites (Rosenbloom). With this in mind, the world of online dating would become substantially safer if other matchmaking sites follow True.com's steps by adopting this background check feature, as well.

While it isn't impossible to find genuine love online, it is quite difficult to do so when liars, cheaters, and murderers are lurking around cyber world. Obviously, these risks are not new, "nor are they exclusive to the online world" (Palfrey and Gasser 86). There are certainly con artists and stalkers in the real world, as well; the Internet just happens to be a new medium for deception and much worse. Even though several websites and organizations are taking action to prevent harmful incidents from occurring, their efforts aren't enough. There are still thousands of reports every year by innocent individuals who have been tricked, cheated, and victimized by others via online dating websites. The dangers of the Internet "have cost real life individuals profits, reputations and in extreme cases, their lives" (Harvard Law Review 935). It would be wise for people to adhere to the safe online dating strategies posted on the sites, keep certain personal information to themselves, and conduct background checks on other web users before agreeing to meet them in person. No one can force online daters to stop using matchmaking websites. If they choose to continue with online dating, they should be extra cautious and aware of the dangers of the Internet.

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Mind Over Body: The Power of Panic

CHRISTINA REMINE

Months in advance it clouds my mind. When the appointment finally arrives, I am nearly sick. The thought of drawing blood swirls within me as it pounds unconsciously inside of my mind. I don't want to think about it, but it's all I can think about. I sit in the padded leather chair, right arm stretched on a nearby table. When the nurse fidgets with her materials, I can only imagine what they are, for I dare not look. In several moments I feel the pinch, yet the worst is still to come. The solid minute where the syringe remains inside me stretches forever. I just don't want it to happen, anything but it! But it does, my nightmare becomes reality when the ceiling shifts and the sounds of waiting room patients mute to silence. I have fainted.

Looking back on my experience with needles, I am overwhelmed by my inability to control my thoughts. On and on my visuals grow deep and detailed; I imagine incessant stabbing and prolonged injecting. The actual pinch of the needle is bearable, for that is not the problem. The problem is the fact that I am lacking all control of the situation, and when I realize that the drawing of blood must be done I automatically shut down. My experience is not unlike the millions of people who suffer from similar situations, all under the name of panic disorder. My friend Nancy is one of these sufferers. She fights with her anxiety on a regular basis. My needle episode was a single situation that was remotely controlled by fear, while Nancy suffers more regularly from the disorder.

Sufferers from panic episodes feel overwhelmed with a specific situation or event, which triggers this attack. They feel helpless, bound down in their fears and completely unable to grasp onto any form of hope to release their high anxiety. The episode begins with a specific event, which then triggers the psychological response, also known as panic. Authors Capps and Ochs describe the next step as a sort of "communicative act" (9) which is an attempt of the sufferer to escape their panic. The sufferer strives to bring him/herself back into real life by doing ordinary tasks. Sometimes s/he even tries to carry on a conversation about a totally different subject. The final step involves avoidance for the future so that the person will never again have to relive the attack. In their book *Constructing Panic: The Discourse of Agoraphobia*, Capps and Ochs go into a raw analysis of what exactly happens to a victim

of such an attack. Although this description seemed somewhat abstract in text, when I matched up the particular steps with one of my friend's actual attacks, the cold "procedure" of the written word formed itself into an excellent visual display as described below:

My friend's legs shook beneath the table as she attempted to breathe. In and out, in and out, she calmed herself down. On a nearby plate sat an eggplant and sausage calzone. She was a vegetarian. When the waitress came by with the correct order, she looked up sheepishly, hardly making eye contact. Her feet shook faster. "I'm so sorry, I'm really sorry. It's not at all your fault, I just, I can't eat meat. I'm so sorry, thank you so much I'm sorry thank you—"

"Don't worry about it, really." The waitress interrupted.

I sat across from her, speechless. I didn't know what to make of it. I had known this girl for only a few months, without the faintest idea she had this sort of . . . problem.

This problem is in fact a panic disorder. Prior to my experience with this close friend, I had no idea how common anxiety is. Apparently, there are three to six million Americans, usually women, who have panic disorder according to Benjamin Root in his book *Understanding Panic and Other Anxiety Disorders*. This expansive number sparked my interest in the condition. I began to inform myself about the nature of panic disorders and soon found a particularly interesting idea: effects of this disorder are not only mental; but can seep into the physical make-up of the sufferer, forcing him or her to seek immediate help from emergency rooms (Root 1). The physical effects of a mental disease are hard to believe yet very real indeed. It's amazing how the mind has such a control over the body, in this case, a negative control.

Referring to Capps and Och's panic attack breakdown, Nancy's initial triggering event was the fact that she received a wrong order. Now for me and most people, the common response would be to simply tell the waitress that she misunderstood your request, and if she could so kindly get you what you originally wanted. Sounds simple, but it's not for Nancy. She immediately went into a phase of heightened paranoia. She moved from side to side, rubbed her hands together, continued to repeat that her order was wrong. Her breathing became heavy and sweat formed on her forehead. When I presented the simple solution, her response was that

it was nearly insane for me to request such a thing, like speaking to the waitress was some sort of impossible task that she could never imagine completing. I encouraged her to do so, until finally, I grabbed our server. Nancy couldn't make eye contact for she was now in the state of panic. She attempted to express the problem at hand, yet stuttered and apologized uncontrollably. This was the climax, this is when the force of panic "consumed and overwhelmed the experience, sweeping [the sufferer] up into its grip" (Capps and Ochs 50).

After a few agonizing seconds of what most likely seemed hours for Nancy, the waitress left, and I was shocked; I didn't know what to say. I had never before seen someone go through a panic attack. In such an event, all rational thoughts are useless and the individual is helpless in their whirling mind of paranoia. I had no idea how severe the situation was for her; it was as if I was viewing the scene in a different world. Even though I experienced fear from needles and felt a glimpse of what Nancy most likely feels regarding fear, the difference between my situation and hers is that mine has an obvious and generic reason: needles freak me out, to put it simply. Nancy's attack was triggered by a menial task, the simple act of "politely complaining" (4). Almost any other person would handle the situation without a second thought, but not an anxiety victim.

Then the communicative act followed, when Nancy attempted to solve her high anxiety by distracting herself by drinking small sips of water, doodling in her journal, even getting up to go to the ladies room. When asked how she was doing, she answered hesitantly, "I'm okay, I just feel really bad," and her eyes went down again. I could tell the episode was not over yet. It only ended when the waitress returned with her correct order. She apologized a few more times, and went on to enjoy her meal (although I don't imagine enjoying swallowing a full sized calzone in just under seven minutes). Rather, I imagine that to be Nancy's attempt to forget her episode, to erase it all from her mind by consuming the evidence.

After such an attack, the sufferer tries to avoid any factor that will bring the episode into mind. They will avoid the restaurant, they will avoid a freeway because of the traffic. In a severe case, subject, "Meg," had avoided driving on the freeway altogether because of one episode of panic when she

was trapped in a car in a traffic jam. After the initial attack, the individual will constantly fear the onset of another attack, whether from the same place of a past attack or in a new surrounding that reminds them of a past event (Capps and Ochs 40). They begin to fear *fear*, or panic, about getting a panic attack. They essentially lose any form of rational thought and succumb to the anxiety of the mind. French Renaissance writer of the 14th century Michele de Montaigne once said, “A man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears.” Many modern victims would agree.

Early signs of physical panic were found in the anxiety of war. In the Civil War, Dr. Jacob Mendes DaCosta identified symptoms of chest pains and increased heartbeat although the individual did not have an actual heart disease, but just a feeling of it (Root 1). This syndrome is known as neurocirculatory asthenia. Author Donald R. Goodwin explained the story of Paul Dudley White. As a Boston cardiologist, Dr. White had seen numerous patients complaining of heart attack symptoms, apprehension, skipped heartbeats, and even pain receding down the left arm. “With each succeeding attack, they worried more and more about having heart disease and were often hard to convince that it this was not the case,” said Dr. White (qtd. in Goodwin 45). This statement goes back to the idea of the mental control, and how the fear of fear is the cause of many attacks.

Those suffering from panic episodes are professionally diagnosed as having the disease of neurocirculatory asthenia, when they have three attacks within a three-week period, not having to do with any sort of life threatening event or physical exertion. Also, the patient cannot already be diagnosed with another mental disorder such as schizophrenia or agoraphobia. During these attacks, they suffer from many symptoms including chest discomfort, dizziness, even trouble breathing and actual heart palpitations. Some admit to feelings of unreality, or a fear of dying, going crazy, or doing something uncontrolled during an attack.

The feelings of unreality are usually described as a skewed view of the world. Much like how I felt a disconnect from my friend described earlier, the sufferer feels alienated. This sensation is defined as depersonalization. Here is a description from a patient in *The Anxiety Disease* by David Sheehan,

I feel I'm in another world. It's like I know I'm there, but I'm really not. I feel removed from the situation I'm in. I feel like I'm in another dimension—like a hollow or a vacuum—outside the situation I'm in. It's like watching the whole thing from a distance . . . like I was looking at everything through the wrong end of a telescope—it seemed to get more distant and smaller. Sometimes the opposite would happen and everything would feel closer and larger.

When I later questioned Nancy about the reason for her attack, she immediately told me the obvious, which was because she received the wrong order. This was the trigger of her attack, but this was not the reason for her attack. There is a key difference between the two. Triggers are distinguishable, even avoidable, but causes of panic disorder are unknown. According to Goodwin, many victims of panic attacks vary psychologically from non-sufferers. They are more responsive to pain and because the lactic acid in their blood rises to higher levels, they tire more after exercise (120). Panic disorder also runs in the family; studies show that half the amount of sufferers has a close relative who also has the disease. I wasn't surprised to find out that Nancy's mother also experiences occasional attacks.

Over the years, sufferers of such attacks attempted help from ordinary medical doctors of internal medicine, but in the mid 20th century, the treatment doctors shifted to psychiatrists. The distinction between mind and body is hard to understand because some attacks can occur without any precipitating factor. Although the particular attacks can happen randomly, most of the time spent worrying is obviously of the mind. After a visit to the emergency room or the doctor's office, the patient is usually perplexed concerning the nature of their attack. They begin to feel anxious about why they suffered so, and this anxiousness can in turn start a vicious cycle. The patient then

worries if they will get another attack, which in itself can trigger another attack. Phobias begin to take shape, whether of flying, animals, or the fear of open spaces, also known as agoraphobia (Root 7). These symptoms cause many sufferers of panic to be inadequately treated by cardiologists and gastroenterologists, most likely because their disease is not of the body but of the mind.

After visiting a therapist, individual treatments are set for the patient (Bouman 74). A general treatment would be exposure to the problem. Say someone has a fear of crossing open spaces, then the way to solve the problem is obvious: getting the person to cross an open space, yet in a gradual way until it becomes easier and easier. Other common fears and solutions would be traveling by bus or going out shopping.

The gradual way of treating panic disorder consists of setting particular goals, each increasing in small increments to the final goal of completely overcoming the problem. The patient is then questioned and rated by the psychiatrist on what their hypothetical reaction might be to each incremental goal. This is called imaginary exposure (Bouman 75). But exposure *in vivo* is a lot more effective than imaginary exposure, for this is when the patient actually goes out and attempts to face their fears in reality. In the case of one who fears bus rides, one might begin with getting on the bus and riding it for only a few moments, possibly with a loved one encouraging them along the way. The next step would be to ride the bus for an extended period of time. When that is bearable the patient would then attempt to ride alone. The progress would build up until the panic has ultimately dissolved.

A key factor of treatment is the importance of discipline. In many cases the psychiatrist will administer homework assignments that must be completed. This causes the patient to feel it a necessity to carry out their specific procedure in order to complete their assignment. Running away from the situation or avoiding it altogether are both impossible options for the patient. They are highly encouraged to expose themselves as much as possible with the hope of it getting simpler with each attempt.

Today, Nancy and I continue to enjoy eating out. Just the other day, we went for lunch at the local Starbucks and the Greek yogurt my dear friend ordered was thicker than usual. Fearing

it might be rotten, she stopped eating it and complained to me about how much of a waste of money it was. I encouraged her to tell the barista behind the counter. I assured her they have excellent customer service and would definitely give her a refund or a new yogurt. She was hesitant at first, but I continued to spur her on knowing she could handle the situation. She finally got up, quite hesitantly, but she got up nonetheless and went over to the counter. A few minutes later she came back smiling, with four dollars and seventy-five cents in hand. Nancy had accomplished her first step to recovery.

It is strange to say that a disease that affects so many is still such a mysterious disorder. The causes of panic episodes vary with each of the patients, but in general, the reason for attacks are unknown. In many, the attacks are sparked by a fear of some kind, whether of open spaces, closed spaces, fear of embarrassment or rejection, or even fear of the unknown. My friend experienced the attack from fear of “causing a scene” or drawing attention to herself. In these cases the mind sparks the reaction, and then the body complies with such extreme circumstances that lead the sufferer to seek medical help. What a strange phenomenon it is to see a disease caused by fear.

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The Vow of Chastity

LIAM WALSH

Hollywood idealism is both a major fixture of mainstream cinema as well as a staple in our cultural identity. One grandiose production after another is made with billion-dollar movie stars and a seemingly infinite amount of resources. There are massive companies specifically dedicated to one aspect of the film making process (special effects, props, editing, lighting, etc.) who work tirelessly behind the scenes, helping create a single product from the effort and proficiency of literally hundreds of people. These masses eat their hearts out in order to achieve the film's refined and pristine quality. Then there are viewers who see the films and inherently enjoy them because of all the backbreaking work that went into their conception . . . or maybe they don't. But then again, that's just a matter of preference. Regardless, these films are accepted by the mainstream, good or bad. They are the norm. So when two men, both established directors from Denmark, decided to recast everything they knew about film, what happened exactly?

On March 20, 1995, Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier took the stage at the Odeon Theatre de l'Europe in Paris. He said he would be representing the group, the Dogme 95. At this celebration, which was to mark the centennial of film, he projected a fistful of red leaflets into the audience and left the theatre promptly (van der Vliet). These red leaflets were the Dogme's manifesto . . . and the Dogme was about to get a little too real.

Earlier that year, von Trier and fellow filmmaker, Thomas Vinterberg, took forty-five minutes to formulate a ten-point manifesto dubbed "The Vow of Chastity." They had become disillusioned with what they considered minor infractions happening behind the camera. For example, music used to establish mood or editing used to improve an uninspiring scene (Farouky). The manifesto called for extreme constraints and altogether stripped cinema down to its most unembellished, stark, and modest form.

Now, they're not the first ones in film to challenge the status quo. There was the French New Wave, the No Wave Cinema of the Lower East Side, Italian Neorealism, and others. Nevertheless, von Trier and Vinterberg took it even further; they were not kidding when they said "Vow of Chastity."

All films working in accordance with the Dogme 95 follow strict regulations and are shot on location with no props or sets. They must be filmed in color without special lighting, optical work, and filters. The camera must be handheld. The film format must then be transferred to Academy 35mm, and genre films are not permitted. Over the top murders, rocket launchers, flowery highway chases, and any other superficial actions are not allowed. Everything must take place in the present. The director must not be credited. The manifesto then closes with: “Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work,” as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations” (“Dogme 95: The Vow of Chastity”).

Now it has been fifteen years and around 40 Dogme films have followed in the manifesto’s wake, beginning with Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* and von Trier’s *The Idiots*. *The Celebration* won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes and Best Foreign Film at the Independent Spirit Awards, and was adapted for the stage in more than 15 languages, while *The Idiots* stirred up some controversy over its “fictional representation of disability” and graphic sexual content (“Dogme 95”). To be more specific, there is a group sex scene where one couple actually engages in unsimulated, on-screen vaginal intercourse. This is where “von Trier strips his actors, in every sense, of their defences in his quest to “force the truth’ out of them” (van der Vliet).

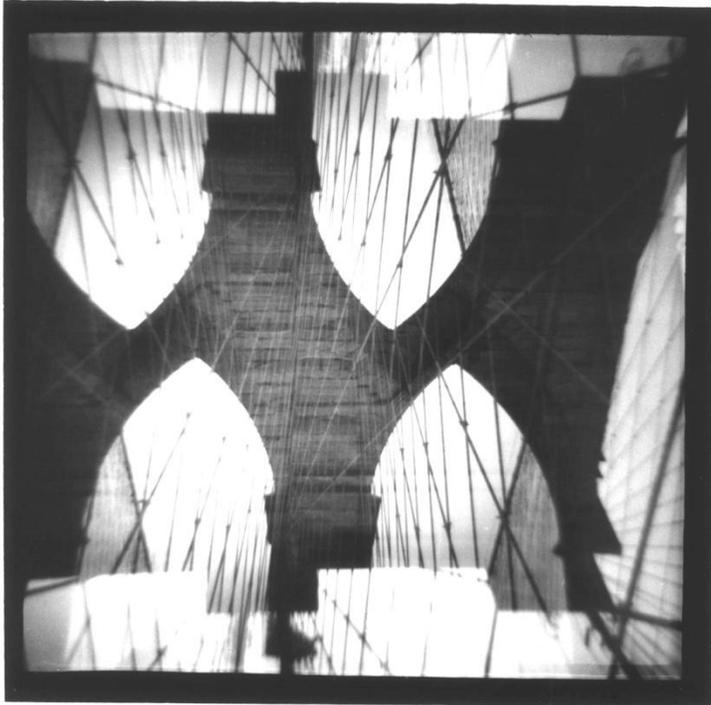
When these two films hit theaters, people began to take the Dogme 95 seriously. It had become more than an idea conceived by two weird Danish guys who threw red leaflets at everyone. The subject matter may have been controversial, and at times profane, but this wasn’t done out of bad taste or insensitivity. The Dogme’s goal was to make filmmakers and audiences alike reevaluate all they had known about cinematic art. They weren’t only trying to make a scene but achieve a form of unobstructed expression, and soon after had set in motion a movement that was steadily making its way across Europe into Asia and to the U.S. Others began adopting the style and not just the struggling, starving artist who did it solely because of a strict budget, but the established, inaugurated maestro who was looking to get his creative juices flowing again. Danny

Boyle used the Dogme as inspiration for his 2002 zombie movie, *28 Days Later*, and so did Chris Kentis and Laura Lau for their shark attack epic, *Open Water* (Farouky).

With all of the challenges and obstacles a filmmaker faces, the Dogme 95's vow inspires ingenious solutions, and ultimately makes a filmmaker better at his or her craft. You take away everything that comes between an actor, the audience, and final product, and become conscious of the fact that you are now confronted by freedom. There are no more distractions. No more smoke and mirrors. No more props masters, set dressers, or piercing Van Halen soundtracks. It is what it is. A defiant, bare-bones realism, and do with that what you will . . . as long as it's chaste.

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The Analysis Essay

In writing an analysis essay, the author examines a text in order to reach an interpretation or conclusion. Examples of analysis essays include book, music, and film reviews as well as the more traditional literary analysis paper most of us have written in English class and the rhetorical analysis in which the author evaluates the effectiveness of an author's strategies.

**Filling the Abyss with Eternal Compassion:
The Story of How a Modern Musician Fell in Love with
History's Most Beloved Dead Girl**

JOEL AUERBACH

We all have certain fascinations with people we will never meet. For many of us, this might mean an interest in anyone from a Roman conqueror to a Hollywood starlet to an enchanting sales clerk, and granted, our fixations may occasionally seem to border upon being odd or unnatural. But then there are some people who take this identification with the life and trials of others to a different level altogether, to the point of such intense infatuation that the line between the two people is no longer defined. Normally, we would call these people deranged, even possibly schizophrenic, but what if the result of their lunacy is a beautiful piece of art? One such case that has long intrigued, baffled, and unsettled me is that of Jeff Mangum, the renowned songwriter best known as the reclusive head of Neutral Milk Hotel, who has a bizarre, soul-consuming obsession with Anne Frank that surfaces as a central motif in much of his work, particularly on the album *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea*.

It took me awhile to see it. Sure, *Aeroplane* contains several references to World War II, but I had no idea that they were so specifically directed at one historical figure until one day, when I happened to look up the lyrics to the song “Holland 1945” on an online lyrics forum. I was shocked at what I found—not in the lyrics themselves, but in what people were saying about them. There was a vast thread, stemming back nearly a decade, consisting of listeners who had widely varying interpretations of the song, but who had apparently all agreed on one thing prior to my arrival: that the song is very clearly about Anne Frank. I was still skeptical at first, believing this to be an isolated reference, albeit one of the heaviest, most powerful images an artist could ever conjure. Mangum opens the song with the brightly heart-wrenching proclamation:

The only girl I've ever loved
was born with roses in her eyes
But then they buried her alive
one evening, 1945
with just her sister by her side
and only weeks before the guns
all came and rained on everyone

(“Holland, 1945”)

These lines got me every time, long before I even considered who this lost love might be; but this new-found interpretation put the song in a completely different light, one that disturbed me immensely.

Of all the taboos to break! After all, one does not exactly profess undying romantic love to a figure like Anne Frank lightly. My faith in Mangum as a brilliant songwriter forced me to examine his lyrics more closely, and I found several other passages with Anne’s influence written all over them. In “Ghost,” he chants, “She was born in a bottlerocket, 1929,” the year that Anne Frank was born. And in an earlier track, “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,” he sings, “There are lights in the clouds / Anna’s ghost all around / Hear her voice as it’s rolling and ringing through me.” Perhaps the definitive proof of Mangum’s obsession presents itself in his staggered, almost guilty introduction to “Two-Headed Boy, Part II” on the album *Live at Jittery Joe’s*, in which he explains, with rare clarity: “[the song] is about a family that lived in the 1940s, in Europe, and how I’m . . . yeah. And I have dreams about one certain member of that family at times . . . and other things as well” (Mangum). There could no longer be any mistaking it. There stood this long-haired, stringy kid, who looks more like an archaeology student than the voice of a generation, bridging through his dreams, his aching passions, across the chasm of time and turmoil, and channeling one of the most revered heroes of human history, drawing on her all at once as his muse, his lover, his ward, and himself. These were not casual, superficial references. Mangum deeply identifies with Anne’s story in a way that blurs the lines between the yearner and the yearned-for, between victim and tormentor, between life and death.

Mangum’s early story takes on the now-iconic form laid out by independent rock stars over the last few decades. After years of tape experiments and local gigs, he settled on a musical project that he named “Neutral Milk Hotel,” which, together with his high school chums’ bands, The Olivia Tremor Control and Apples in Stereo, founded the Elephant 6 Recording Company, now a household name in independent music. Neutral Milk Hotel released their first full album, *On Avery Island*, in 1996, to little commercial acclaim. But their 1998 follow-up, *In the Aeroplane Over The Sea*, would prove to be a different story entirely. Featuring a fuller band and more accessible

production than *Avery*, this second release struck a fantastic chord with old and new audiences alike. Although *Avery* remains very high on my list as well, it's not hard to see why *Aeroplane* is considered one of the most impressive works of recent years. Mangum's striking vision for the album, both musically and lyrically, encompasses the best of what is possible in modern art. Always near the pinnacle of abstraction but never losing authenticity or conviction, Mangum writes the kind of one-liners that will have your heart erupting in exaltation before your brain can even begin to decide what they mean. On *Aeroplane*, he focuses his considerable talent on weaving together a phantasmagorical yet wholly moving story of war, sex, family, and death, with the theme of boundless love—in his case, his love for Anne Frank—to connect it all.

Even among vivid descriptions of “semen stain[ed] mountaintops,” “sugary sweet machines,” and “flesh-licking ladies,” Mangum's thinly veiled cries to Anne stand out as the emotional focus. It is unclear from his lyrics whether he is fantasizing about being her lover or believes that he is a reincarnation of her spirit; in fact, it appears that Mangum himself is confused by this as there are many noted instances of gender switching or ambiguity throughout. Take, for example, the song “Two-Headed Boy”:

Two-headed boy
all floating in glass
the sun, it is passed
now it's blacker than black
I can hear as you tap on your jar
I am listening to hear where you are . . .
and in the dark, we will take off our clothes
and they'll be placing fingers through the
notches in your spine.

This passage keenly demonstrates the spiritual /emotional/ cognitive transference that Mangum believes to have received from Anne. Initially, he is reassuring a “two-headed boy” who seems to be on display in some sort of freak show, trapped like a firefly in a jar, or a little girl in an attic, in the sunless void. By the chorus, he is serenading the object of his lust, presumably female; however, he does so almost with a warning, as the removal of clothing and subsequent handling of her bones could just as easily refer to the humiliation of concentration camps as it could a delicate sexual encounter. As such, Mangum

sees himself on both sides of the equation, as both Anne Frank and this helplessly imprisoned boy, and thus a “two-headed” person.

The image of being trapped in a glass display refers first to his own loneliness and isolation, but also to the way that Anne’s thoughts and feelings have been so dissected through her diary that it almost in itself constitutes the rape later warned of. Mangum goes on to suggest that he alone is truly listening to her plight. Only he feels for her so completely because, well, their souls are interchangeable. However, he does not stop at such a possibly narcissistic (though heartbreakingly tender) conclusion. Elsewhere, he uses this idea of the transference of spirit and struggle to note the recurrence of such themes throughout history (as though time is irrelevant), as when he sings about the aforementioned girl in “Holland, 1945”: “Now she’s a little boy in Spain / playing pianos filled with flames.” He paints a larger picture of the beautiful sadness of human existence and the necessity of embracing our own mortality in lyrics such as these from “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea”:

And one day we will die
and our ashes will fly
from the aeroplane over the sea
But for now we are young
let us lay in the sun
and count every beautiful thing we can see . . .
Can’t believe
how strange it is to be anything at all.

Few artists from the underground have been lauded with as much praise and respect as Mangum received following the release of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*. Where other artists would have relished that limelight, until either destroying themselves or fading into irrelevance, Mangum, perhaps with the memory of recent musicians like Kurt Cobain all too fresh in his mind, just stopped. He completely withdrew from performing, writing, doing interviews, and communicating in general, later saying: “I went through a period, after *Aeroplane*, when a lot of the basic assumptions I held about reality started crumbling” (Fierman). He attributes this to a kind of loss of innocence that he felt at that point in his life, to a fuller awakening to the suffering of the human condition experienced by so many—pain which Mangum feels responsible to bear for everyone, just as he does with Anne Frank. Today, he still rarely

agrees to do interviews, and even his closest friends describe him as aimless and evasive (Stawniak).

Although his self-described nervous breakdown was largely brought on by the pressures of sudden fame, Mangum starts to hint at such themes already towards the end of *Aeroplane*. The album, which begins as a celebration of the fragility and perseverance of life through unbelievable agony, eventually moves into less optimistic territory, as Mangum becomes more and more desperately obsessed with saving Anne (and thus himself) from the cruelty and invasiveness of the world. In “Oh Comely” he intones: “I know they buried her body with others / Her sister and mother and 500 families / And will she remember me 50 years later? / I wish I could save her in some sort of time machine.” To close the album, on “Two-Headed Boy, Part II,” he sings with incomparable longing:

In my dreams you're alive and you're crying as
your mouth moves in mine, soft and sweet
Rings of flowers around your eyes and I'll love
you for the rest of your life . . . Two-headed boy,
she is all you could need she will feed you
tomatoes and radio wires and retire to sheets
safe and clean but don't hate her when she gets
up to leave.

The indelible sadness of it all is just too much for Mangum; all he dreams of is a safe, wonderfully mundane life hidden away with his lover, Anne Frank. But nothing lasts, and he knows it. It consumes him to the point of total incapacitation. Jeff Mangum, the now 40 year-old who inspired so many with his vision of the transcendental power of love, hasn't released new material in over twelve years.

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Grotesque Craving: The Perfect Female Body and Cultural Aesthetics

SASHA RIBOWSKY

Various artists distort bodies, particularly female bodies, within their works in order to achieve an ideal of beauty. In the contemporary world, images of bodies flow to almost everyone's television sets or laptops. In advertisements, marketers juxtapose their products with grotesquely aesthetic figures. Nevertheless, if these aren't accurate representations of the average-sized woman, why are they still portrayed in art and the media? In order to understand human beings' impulse to fashion each body unrealistically, it is essential to analyze the portrayal of the body throughout history. Dating to 22,000 BCE, humans have grotesquely distorted the image of the female body to reflect the aesthetic ideal of that period. In modern times, this is illustrated by body modifications including plastic surgery, which patients endure in order to mimic the perfect body. To expose this unrealistic longing, contemporary French performance artist Orlan directly attributes cosmetic procedures with physical distortion as opposed to enhancement. She undergoes surgical procedures as a carnal artist, critiquing the world's cultural values that shape the female body. Art and the media may influence and pressure women to harm themselves, sometimes resulting in dangerous surgeries, exercise addiction, eating disorders, and a distorted, fragmented sense of self.

In order to develop a discussion about exaggerated body image, it is essential to establish the meaning of grotesque. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, grotesque means "A work of art in this style. Figures or designs in figures or designs characterized by comic distortion or exaggeration." This is still present in today's culture, but why? What drives us toward grotesque aesthetics, especially images of youth or sexuality? Journalist Rosalind Coward points out the need for beauty that drives women: "it is no coincidence that this sexual ideal is an image which connotes powerlessness. Admittedly, the ideal is not of a demure, classically 'feminine' girl, but a vigorous and immature adolescent" (316). Why do women continue to subject themselves to this appearance? The drive for youth is demonstrated by the act of shaving, which masks the "very evidence that a girl has reached puberty." Body hair, in our society, is unsightly and must be removed in order to "restore prepubescent smoothness" (316). It is quite clear that we hold

high standards for aesthetic self-improvement, especially to maintain glowing youth; however, the origin of this obsession dates back to the beginning of our artistic creations.

The source of similarly unrealistic representations can be traced to the statue of the *Venus of Willendorf* according to the BBC documentary, *Grotesque Obsession: How Art Made the World*. The first piece of art that exaggerated the body, to our knowledge, was discovered in Austria, called the *Venus of Willendorf*. It was worshipped and was named after the Roman goddess, Venus. This 25,000-year-old relic has “grotesquely big” features, but lacks integral parts of the body. Her breasts, stomach, and thighs are laden with fat while her face and arms are almost nonexistent. The care taken by the artist is so meticulous that it is certainly deliberate. In short, certain areas of her body are exaggerated that represent either fertility or health. The breasts are extremely large and the vagina is very clearly defined. The stomach represents not only the birth of offspring but also survival, as it was desirable to be heavier in that ice-age environment. Later on in time, the same exaggerated parts were identified in similar statues in Russia, France, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Italy. These all entirely dismissed the head and arms yet retained the essentially female parts of the body.

This documentary theorizes the drive for humans to exaggerate body image. Dr. Nigel Spivey explains that a neuroscientist connects this impulse to an experiment from Oxford where a yellow stick with a red stripe was introduced to seagull chicks. The chicks see it and think of the mother’s beak, which also has one red stripe. Chicks would peck at this stripe on their mother’s beak when hungry, thus associating the stripe with desire for nourishment. When presented the yellow stick, the chicks calmly peck at it. They are then shown another stick with three red stripes that looks nothing like a beak. Strange yet mesmerizing, the stick attracts the chicks so much that they respond with vigor and chirps, later entirely ignoring the original. This happens because of a pre-programmed stimulation to the desire, which in their case is food from the mother. Our species’ equivalent was the *Venus of Willendorf*. Although a primitive part of us, the original creator of the *Venus of Willendorf* (among other nomads), also demonstrates a universal need to exaggerate those components of the body. Today we might not place excess fat on our relics, but the compulsion to distort the body is still present and has remained

a constant in art throughout time.

Every artist's depiction of the body is altered, beginning with the *Venus of Willendorf* and extending to the Greek sculptures. According to another part of the BBC Documentary on Greek sculpture, exaggerated body image originally wasn't their focus. For a time, Greek art was based on the idea of portraying such realistic qualities that their sculptures seem to precisely mirror the human physique. They strived for perfection, studying the body in nature until it could be perfectly imitated. Interestingly enough, once they achieved accuracy, they found realistic art banal because its forms were found so readily in nature. As the Greeks were preprogrammed to want more, they created altered body forms; bodies that were completely unnatural. The Greeks started distorting body image, but not as much as in the *Venus of Willendorf*. The Ancient Greeks were gazing at completely symmetrical works, such as Polykleitos' sculpture from 450 BC. His *Bronze Riace* sculpture with unrealistic proportions seems "more human than human." The body is broken into four equal parts designated horizontally at the waist and vertically aligned with the spine. There is extreme definition on the waist and "artificially long" legs to reflect the top half. The *Riace Warrior* stands in a relaxed stance, yet his muscles are all incredibly defined, almost looking tense. This stresses the balance between each side the body. The longing for a grotesquely athletic body image in the Greek culture is more clearly defined in our actions than it is defined by the sculpture's overly protruding waist.

In the contemporary world, women torture themselves to attain charm and beauty, but before discussing why women need to acquire this, beauty must be defined. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines beauty as a "quality or combination of qualities which affords keen pleasure to other senses or which charms the intellectual or moral faculties, through inherent grace, or fitness to a desired end" (OED). This is logical because women want to please the senses, which is why they wear perfume, put on makeup, and try to appear lovely. The only problem is that not every woman fits the current definition of beautiful, and because they cannot conform, they develop low self-esteem or even self-hatred. Coward proposes that this hate is fueled by "a *disgust* of fat and flesh." In turn, our language causes women to "surround body image [with emotion]" (317), thus perpetuating our addiction to beauty, which we are taught will lead to acceptance, success, and love. Advertisements will

claim that women may need to lose those ten pounds in order to go to the beach or go to a high school reunion and impress peers. Pop-ups on the internet tell the fastest method for shedding flesh by ingesting medications containing seemingly magical remedies like Açai berry. Constant reminders on the side of the computer screen bombard the viewer with seemingly harmless advertisements that may induce self-doubt. For those with emotional trauma and related body image disorders, such promises are inevitably disappointing.

Our beauty addiction causes more than emotional stress and physical harm. Author Margaret Gibson claims that age and personal trauma cause women to change their appearance. Even going back to the 60s, a study on women older than fifty showed that grief from the death of a relative has also caused facial surgeries to eliminate “the stigmata of their grief.” Even Virginia Blum, a professor at Brown University, has acknowledged these procedures “as a grief treatment” (52). The obvious reason lies within age and the circle of life. Unfortunately for aging women in our culture, surgical enhancement cannot erase age; it can only hide it from others and themselves when looking at their reflection. She states, “the cultural values of cosmetic surgery are about the effacement of inequalities and the realities of aging, which materially mark individual and group histories,” which supports the study (52). A woman’s need to alter herself superficially will inevitably take away from her individuality, as she is conforming to a societal ideal. Plastic surgery surely causes comparisons to be made of women physically because even if many get work on their faces, just as many women won’t have the money to shave down their noses or won’t feel it as fundamental in contrast to our superficial society.

While the stereotypical image of a slender woman with delicate features and large breasts is arguably considered beautiful by the masses, not everyone is in agreement. In fact, contemporary French performance artist Orlan diverts attention from the aesthetic ‘betterment’ of cosmetic surgery. Instead, she questions contemporary aesthetic ideals. She battles our culture that holds beauty so dear. Moreover, she calls herself a “carnal” artist, which OED defines to “pertain to the flesh or body.” In her own words,

Carnal Art is self-portraiture in the classical sense, but [sic] through the possibility of

technology. It swings between defiguration and refiguration. Its inscription in the flesh is a function of our age. The body has become a 'modified ready-made,' no longer seen as the ideal it once represented; the body is not anymore this ideal ready-made it was satisfying [sic] to sign. (Orlan. "Manifesto")

She manipulates her body through technology, her flesh now a changing canvas for the masses to view. In doing this, she destroys the appeal the body once had. In this definition, she explains that the body, in our culture, isn't naturally beautiful in its original form as it once was, because we have the option to alter it unnaturally.

In an interview, Orlan explains that she came across the idea once when "she collapsed as a result of an ectopic pregnancy and was rushed to hospital." She decided to record the surgery and make herself a work of art, returning to the operating table nine times within ten years. Most famous was her surgery that implanted two bumps in her forehead, which many call "demon horns," which was intended to exaggerate her brow line to look like the Mona Lisa's (Orlan "Opération"). She redefines images of the body in art to show their supreme lack of realism on a physical being or body.

Despite being a carnal artist, she doesn't just concern herself with flesh, but also with the effect technology has on beauty. She thus questions the current idea of aestheticism by distorting herself in her art. Orlan is the first to show publicly not only the repulsive nature of undergoing extreme body modifications, but also while entirely conscious. Injected with morphine, she reads from scriptures, tainting the process of the surgery by speaking of false body image, while doctors reveal the flaps of her skin. She even talks to her audience via "satellite transmission," happily sharing her opinions. While the process of the surgery installations greatly shocked the public, the changes on her body affected them alone. A large purpose of the surgeries is to see how the masses will react, and as a result many people criticize her by saying that the product and act of manipulating her body is repulsive. Many are disgusted by the surgeries due to a lack of understanding of her nature, assuming it is self-mutilation without asking why she undergoes these changes. Although she claims it isn't so, she states that it isn't performed in order to look younger or to

really better herself by society's standards but to "work on the concept of image and surgery the other way around." Indeed, through questioning the use of technology, she sheds light on our true desires. She clearly positions plastic surgery against aestheticism, especially since Gibson states that "the aesthetic goal of most facial surgery is the alteration and transformation of the composition of the flesh as a continuum of integrated features. Cosmetic facial surgery is itself flawed if it creates a bodily site that is not visually integrated" (52). Making her forehead pop out like the forehead of Mona Lisa is not what one would call integration of the face. As Gibson later claims, "the cosmetically altered face aims to erase its own trace," as if the alteration never took place (52-53). Furthermore, this "flawed" cosmetic procedure disturbs the viewer.

Orlan indeed chooses to dismiss others' ideals by representing the resistance of "the Christian Tradition," uncovering our past and current "denial of body-pleasure." Women undergo much suffering for beauty's sake, from plucking eyebrows to not accepting food. Orlan, as a feminist, reveals this flawed relationship women have with their bodies. She "exposes its weakness in the face of scientific discovery" in order to inform (Orlan "Manifesto"). Contrary to popular belief, her carnal art rejects the "tradition of suffering and martyrdom" by "enhancing rather than diminishing." She brings all who listen towards free thought by changing "rather than removing" parts of her body (Orlan "Manifesto"). She is not literally dying to make these points, but rather she "transforms the body into language, reversing the biblical idea of the word made flesh; the flesh is made word. Only the voice of Orlan remains unchanged. The artist works on representation." The word "flesh" becomes conceptualized as people see the afflicting image of the skin lifted from her body. By representing this new outlook on surgery, she simultaneously criticizes the refusal of pleasure that she implies partly stems from the church, bringing us back to where self-acceptance and sustenance is a reality.

Besides her surgical performances, Orlan creates other forms of self-representation. She frequently models herself in almost disturbing positions only wearing a mask. Her beautiful body, although contradictorily contorted, juxtaposes a face resembling a demon. She uses herself in art as a means to strike the audience. This is contrary to adverts depicting aesthetically pleasing female bodies in order to subliminally attract the viewer. It shows how rarely people view bodies with depth.

Even in art, they may just look for beauty, not considering the person underneath or even its meaning. She thinks more creatively than other artists and further demonstrates to the masses the unimportance of physical beauty.

A perfect example of a consequence of cosmetic technology, nicknamed “The bride of Wildenstein,” and “Lion Lady,” Jocelyn Wildenstein spent over four million dollars on plastic surgery, although claiming to have only done as much as “any normal woman.” She started this habit right before the end of her marriage into the royal family, seemingly trying to impress her husband as they had a ranch in Kenya and he adored lions. Even though her attempt to save the marriage backfired, she still was and is “a New York socialite,” proud of her appearance and “taut skin” (TV’s 20). She gave up her youthful beauty in order to morph her face to resemble another species, becoming alien. Ironically, she put in all of that effort for a man that left her immediately afterwards.

Clearly, women are highly affected by artificial ideals taught by the media, even on an emphatic level, to speak of their body parts each as separate entities. As Coward states, there first is a “fragmentation of the body” which is referenced as “‘problem areas,’ in the third person.” Consequently, women think “about their bodies as if these parts had some separate life of their own.” As a result, she says, women are likely to have a “fragmented sense of self,” which becomes groundwork for a “masochistic or punitive relationship” with their bodies (317-318). This highly affects these women, causing them to not only detest their natural selves but also to become more susceptible to the manipulation from the media.

Growing up, I watched my sister battle bulimia and anorexia in part because she was an overweight child in an un-accepting culture. She wasn’t the only person that I’ve known who heavily desired to be very thin. In fact, “only the mass of advertising images, glamour photographs and so on make us believe that just about all women have this figure. Yet this ideal is constructed artificially. There are only a very limited number of models who make it to the billboards and the techniques of photography are all geared towards creating the illusion of the perfect body” (Coward 319). Resulting from this will be very insecure girls that carry their self-doubt wherever they go. Many women will question their body size and perpetually “have the feeling that their fatness demonstrates weakness and

greed. Being fat is tantamount to walking around with a sandwich board saying, ‘I can’t control my appetite’” (Coward 318). The current generation of women believes that having no control over their bodies makes them weak and undeserving of happiness, while they have no choice but to face the artificially beautiful models in magazines and on their television screens.

The fashion and commercial world present more unrealistic goals for the body. Women bind their ribs in order to appear thin. Women strain their feet by wearing high heels in order to become four inches taller than they are. Shows like *Nip/Tuck* praise the impossible perfection for which we strive. We even mass-produce a doll that girls will inevitably imitate: Barbie. Even I would play with her as a child, hoping that I would mature to have her entirely unrealistic proportions. She has especially large breasts, and breast augmentation is a very popular procedure. Furthermore, the “suicide rate” has almost tripled after breast implants because of women’s high expectations of the outcome and plausible dissatisfaction (Dittmann 2).

There’s no use blaming whoever may have created this body image, especially because seeing the grotesque as beautiful is natural to all of us. Yet, we do not have to perpetuate this unhealthy obsession to an extreme level of self-harm. Luckily, the strength resides within the individual, whether the creator or the consumer of this image. Our cultural environment is ever-changing, especially considering technology’s increasing influence on our shared values. Knowing what we do now, the proceeding generation should be informed not only before they create a new grotesque look, but also before they create a new plastic body for themselves in order to have a healthy self-esteem. Let’s work towards an acceptance of natural curves, portraying realistically sized women in commercials as the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty does, telling all women that it is more than acceptable to have and love your flesh.

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Images of Cats in *The Handmaid's Tale*

MARTHA TECK

After seven years, one pregnant female cat could bring 420,000 more cats into the world—at least in theory (“Fable of”). The patriarchs of Gilead in Margaret Atwood’s novel *A Handmaid’s Tale* would have given much for human reproduction at a fraction of that rate. Instead, the fictional future society of Gilead is plagued with declining birthrates and obsessed with promoting fertility in order to safeguard the scarce and precious resource of its children. The patriarchy of Gilead seeks to manage reproduction by controlling women and eliminating their sexual independence. This objective brings a dilemma, because reproduction requires sexually active women. They seek to control women and their sexuality—control, but not extinguish, because to completely erase women’s sexuality would be to erase reproduction. Instead, they attempt to repress female sexuality and keep it tightly restricted, using it for their own purposes. Cats have long symbolized sexuality and independence; Atwood uses a cat motif in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to represent female sexuality and illustrate conflicting attitudes toward women’s autonomy.

Cats have a mixed history as symbols in the human psyche—at times sacred, at times reviled. Ancient Egyptians worshipped cats as the embodiment of the goddess Bastet, the “goddess of motherhood, fertility, childbearing and childrearing” (Lawrence 630). Symbols of maternal compassion and protectors of home and hearth, cats were thought to be lucky. They were protected by law and even mummified to accompany their people into the afterlife. The fortunes of cats declined in later years: In Europe of the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries their earlier association with pagan fertility goddesses such as Diana led them to be associated with witchcraft (Lawrence 627). As witches’ familiars, they symbolized the dangerous, powerful, uncontrolled aspect of femininity. Cats were thought to have occult powers, and their associations with sex have led to their names being used as profanities for centuries (Lawrence 627). Atwood makes use of these disparate connotations by linking various cat images to characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

The cat imagery used to call up some of these associations is found in the dialog and descriptions of Aunt Lydia, a trainer of handmaids at the Red Center. Aunt Lydia reminds the narrator, Offred, of the dead mice offered up by the pet cat she and her

husband Luke kept in the years before the rise of Gilead (Atwood 73). The killing and bringing home of prey demonstrates wanton feline power, and Aunt Lydia is there to warn the handmaids of the dangers of unrestrained female power. Aunt Lydia's collusion with the new regime in Gilead is a reaction to the worst aspects of the previous sexually-permissive society. She reminds the handmaids repeatedly of the dangers of rape, violence, and the degradation of women that occurred in the old days. In contrast, the new regime seeks to tame sexual behavior, subjugate it. Every part of the handmaids' lives at the Red Center is managed, including their afternoon rest: "A catnap, Aunt Lydia called it, in her coy way" (Atwood 94). Aunt Lydia treats them like kittens—the safe, playful, controllable, and pre-sexual aspect of a cat. She talks to the women as she would a pet, "You are spoiled girls, she twinkled, as if rebuking a kitten. Naughty puss" (Atwood 114).

While Aunt Lydia supports the restrictive new rule in Gilead, Offred's friend Moira represents rebellion. Moira is a naughty puss indeed—she shows the mischievous and uncontrollable side of female nature, defying authority and attempting escape. In Offred's memories, Moira is described as "a cat that crawls onto the page when you're trying to read" (Atwood 73). A lesbian, she is the female who doesn't need a man, especially threatening to a society that depends on making use of every available fertile woman. When she proves, in the end, untamable, she is relegated to a brothel—a "cat house." Atwood underscores this symbolism in the costumes the women wear—a cat suit is one of them (Atwood 314). When Offred visits the brothel in the company of the commander, she greets Moira with the phrase "you look like something the cat dragged in" (Atwood 314). The image is an apt one—Moira has at last been defeated by the system. Her escape thwarted, she was given the choice of prostitution or status as an unwoman and certain death in the colonies. She chooses prostitution, with her sexuality channeled and degraded, submitting to the whims of the commanders.

Offred's relationship with her commander is symbolized partly through cat images. She describes his instigation of their clandestine visits as "some cat and mouse routine" (Atwood 199). The commander views her as a possession, a pet. He looks at her as he would "a kitten in a window" (Atwood 178). He wants to play with her, take her out and put her back, using her sexuality for his own amusement. In bed in the hotel, he

touches her proprietarily: “He’s stroking my body now, from stem as they say to stern, cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg” (Atwood 330). To ensure her own survival and obtain whatever advantage she can gain from his interest, she plays to his fantasy, behaving “like an attentive pet, prick eared and eager to perform” (Atwood 238). He defies the repressive sexual rules of Gilead, but not because he feels that the restrictions are unfair to women. He seeks to use Offred’s sexuality, not free her, keeping her as his private sex kitten, compliant and controlled.

Acting the part, Offred plays a game of pretend with the commander, but the appearance of sexuality safely contained is a dangerous pretense. Sexuality is a life force as basic as hunger. Repressed desire will find a release, and becomes a powerful weapon if kept under pressure. Offred can’t help but notice Nick, the commander’s driver: “He stretches in the sun, I feel the ripple of muscles go along him, like a cat’s back arching” (Atwood 235). When Offred takes initiative one night and sneaks down to the living room, intending to steal something, her eyes are described as a cat’s or an owl’s, two animals linked with witchcraft and the spirit world (Atwood 126). In the darkness of the living room, she is surprised by Nick, who relays the commander’s request to meet; Nick and Offred exchange an illegal kiss, and Offred’s thoughts brush upon a dangerous truth, “what else comes from such denial?” (Atwood 127). The next morning, she evokes witchcraft in her desire for an animal companion: “I would like a pet: a bird, say, or a cat. A familiar” (Atwood 141). Her eventual clandestine relationship with Nick leads to her assisted escape, and might have led to the downfall of the commander, and perhaps Nick’s as well (Atwood 392).

Although most of the cat references in the novel are allusions, there is one actual cat present in the narrative. The pet cat of Offred’s memories serves as a symbol of hearth and home, with the maternal protectiveness of the Egyptian cat. The emerging society of Gilead threatens Offred’s family; her daughter is almost abducted in the cat food section of the grocery store (Atwood 83). In Offred’s dreams, the cat rubs against her leg and cries to be fed (Atwood 96). The cat symbolizes her struggle to keep her home and world safe for herself and for her daughter. After she discovers that her money has been confiscated and all women have been fired from their jobs, she wanders her house. She seeks solace in the symbol of home life:

“She picks up the cat and carries it around with her” (Atwood 229). As she waits for Luke to come home: “I held the cat against my chest so I could feel her purring against my throat” (Atwood 230). The only real cat in the novel, like the only real home life, will soon be a memory.

Too late, the narrator and Luke attempt to flee the country with their daughter. Was there any chance they could have escaped Gilead, aside from recognizing the danger earlier, and leaving when the borders were still open? As it was, their attempt at escape is an utter failure. They try to disguise their intentions, drugging their daughter to sleep and using fake identification, hoping to be allowed across the border. They pretend. To complete the ruse, they must kill their cat to keep her from giving away the charade. They offer up a sacrifice—trust, love, home life, and their true sexual nature, symbolized by their cat, in exchange for freedom. It fails. Offred laments the failed sacrifice: “I should at least have asked him about it afterwards, so he didn’t have to carry it alone; because that little sacrifice, that snuffing out of love, was done for my sake as well. That’s one of the things they do. They force you to kill, within yourself. Useless, as it turned out. I wonder who told them” (Atwood 249). Offred and Luke are exposed and trapped at the border. They were only fooling themselves—their pretense was no match for the vigilance and betrayal of the people around them.

This poignant and despairing scene holds a powerful message. If we allow ourselves, through unawareness, to become bemired in a society as controlling and repressive as Gilead, even the betrayal of our true selves will not keep us safe. Escape cannot be gained through disguise. Attempts to hide from oppression will be in vain, and lead to despair and the destruction of what we hold most dear. Denial of self and the suppression of female sexual nature—appropriately embodied in the cat image—was the goal of the patriarchy of Gilead. This trend exists in our world as well, and closing our eyes to it is as dangerous to us as it was to Offred and Luke. Illuminating the cost of denial, the cat motif weaves through *The Handmaid’s Tale* the way cats move through our collective imaginations, mysterious, sensual, and enigmatic.

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Multiple Masculine Paradigms

CARISSA ROCA

Standing in front of the refrigerator, my brother and I witnessed my mother collapse during an argument with my father. We watched my father forcibly pick her up. We watched as my mother's legs dragged across the kitchen floor along with her power and pride. This is the first time my brother became aware of the authority and strength my father had over our mother. Many young children, like my brother and me, were taught that men were superior to women. For centuries, boys were expected to take on these masculine qualities and girls were taught to become subordinate. Fast-forwarding to the 19th and 20th centuries, women have made evident progress towards social equality, but society has become so focused on helping women gain equal status that it has neglected the negative effects the social revolution has had on men.

As most people know, American women were the victims of discrimination for many years. However, my parents emigrated from Peru where sexism reached an entirely different level. Gender inequity is far greater in Peru than in America, but essentially gender ideas and values were similar in both cultures. My parents came to America to give my brother and me a better life, but they never expected to experience a radical social change that would drastically affect their lives and how my brother's ideals and values were shaped.

During the early 19th century, many political changes granted women basic human rights, and even today, women are still fighting for equality. My mother's experience during the Women's Liberation movement is one of many. As she motivated herself to become more educated, she became more confident in her own skin. This allowed her to challenge my father by becoming more assertive and standing up for herself, ending the physical and verbal abuse. She gained control over her life, and despite still fighting over power, she was determined to keep hold of the reins. Unfortunately, my mother never believed her new life would affect my brother negatively. By breaking the traditional norms and raising us in a less patriarchal environment, Chris's view on gender roles became skewed. Without a doubt, I was to become an independent and hardworking woman. On the other hand, my brother, like many boys his age was presented with a new struggle: choosing between the old male paradigm and the new liberal one.

The first thing people learn about Chris is his undeniable obstinacy and his inability to express his feelings. Our childhoods were almost the same, with the exception that he vividly remembers the violent arguments my parents had for many years. His memories caused him to feel bitter and resentful towards both my mother and father throughout his teenage years. He viewed my mother as weak for taking the abuse, and viewed my father as pathetically sexist. However, the authority my father had over my mother was known and accepted, but Chris did not understand why he would not embrace his “natural” power. He became frustrated and confused. His perception of women and men became further distorted as my parents slowly switched roles and as society concocted several masculine models.

What exactly was the old masculine paradigm? A study conducted in 1981 by Joseph Pleck, author of *The Myth of Masculinity*, revealed that most people believe the assumptions and prejudices about masculinity are true, such as what explains their insecurities and the importance of feeling secure. His “true or false” quiz about masculinity myths contained the following statements: “Developing a secure . . . masculinity [is] important...[for] personality development,” and “[M]ain sources of violence, crime and delinquency . . . need to compensate for . . . insecure . . . masculinity.” After groups of people took the quiz, it was discovered that a “masculine” boy was described as “energetic, interrupting . . . challenging,” and a non-masculine boy was a “. . . slumper, fatuous . . . worst of all, interested in flowers” (Stewart 1).

Worst of all, interested in flowers. The idea of society devaluing men, especially children, for their interest in flowers not only disturbed me, but sparked my curiosity to see if Pleck’s findings were, in fact, true. Who better to ask than young college men still trying to find themselves in this crazed world? After surveying fifty male college students at the State University of New York at New Paltz, a majority agree that masculinity is defined as being “strong” (physically and mentally), “aggressive,” and following the stereotypical traits of being a man. It appears that even today, a portion of young men believes in the black and white definition of masculinity. However, a majority of those surveyed could not make a clear definition of what masculinity means to them. It was evident the word “strong” was most often used, but about 2% of the

men were able to explain themselves. Furthermore, my curiosity did not stop there. What about the homosexual community? What about the boys that were once “interested in flowers?” This strict definition of masculinity applies to all members of the same sex, yet very few believed masculinity was, as one survey participant wrote, to be “respectable, honest, faithful, loyal and an example for others.”

Alan Stewart, a reporter for the *Globe and Mail Newspaper*, thought Pleck’s findings were predictable due to decades of research literature on sex roles that have supported such stereotypical statements. Both Stewart’s review and Pleck’s findings conclude that society is brainwashed into believing there are rules males must follow in order to be considered “real men.” Raising a hyperactive, poorly-behaved child is viewed as normal, even praised as a sign of strong masculine qualities, while children condemned as “socially awkward” raise concern, threatening the male species. However, despite the traditional male paradigm living on, society has drastically moved on to an era that added color and confusion to a new paradigm.

By the beginning of the 21st century, Americans were instantly connected across the country, via the internet, and new trends were emerging everywhere. One trend that hit mainstream media was the word “metrosexual.” A new definition of masculinity had surfaced and spread like wildfire throughout the U.S. Men were becoming interested in designer labels, their emotions, and were accepting homosexual lifestyles. It was even supported by the feminist groups. According to Kim Campbell, writer for the *Christian Science Monitor*, “metro sexuality” immediately caused a tug-of-war between traditional and modern masculine ideals. Big-name companies supported the new masculine trend, using it to sell men everything from grooming products to jewelry (12). More and more men were deviating from the traditional male role and taking on a role that made it possible to be considered “masculine” and interested in what society considers “feminine,” such as fashion and cosmetics. Consumed by this fad, society opened the door to a multi-defined masculine period that is causing gender role confusion for boys that have not yet defined their personalities.

Around the start of “metro sexuality,” my brother, at ten years old, decided he wanted to dye the tips of his hair. My liberal mother agreed, but my old-fashioned father did not accept it.

Before this new trend, my mother had taken more control over our family. She juggled work, college, housework, and childcare for several years. After watching my mother struggle day after day, Chris and I turned to my mother for questions, approval and advice, subconsciously disregarding our father's input on everything. Aware of his wife's transformation, he objected frequently with my mother's decisions, but realized times were changing and stopped fighting it. Chris was able to dye his hair without arguments.

During puberty, it became evident Chris was searching for his masculinity. He experienced teen angst and started rebelling against my parents. He would constantly tell me: "You think I care what they think? How can they tell me I can't do something if they did the same when they were young?" I constantly found myself questioning his intentions and arguing with him to stop his disrespectful behavior. However, my parents deemed his attitude normal—because he was a boy; because he fit their black and white definition. Chris's idea of his own masculinity remained clouded as he was pressured by society to fit its masculine mold, and furthermore, as he remembered our father's level of sexism.

How much pressure did he feel? The same question popped into my head as I surveyed men at SUNY New Paltz. Surprisingly, about 36% of the male students felt somewhat pressured to follow society's definition of masculinity, while only 13% did not feel pressured at all. However, 45% of male students said they felt secure with their masculinity. In other words, a majority of the men surveyed feel confined to follow a certain masculine paradigm, yet strongly agree they feel secure with their own masculinity. Based on their own definition of masculinity, most of the men were unsure how to define it. I thought to myself, how secure are they really? As confusing as this might sound, these results make perfect sense. American society has led people to believe in the powerful, superior, and aggressive male, while drastically transitioning to "metrosexuality" and increased feminist influences, therefore causing massive confusion. Despite, being able to analyze the data and assume that this transition can easily perplex anyone, we must understand that men might not even realize how it might be affecting them.

The traditional side of society fears that the emergence of "metrosexuality" will emasculate men. The feminist community

argues that “it’s not about trying to turn men into women, but allowing men to be more human” (12). Feminists believe multiple masculinities will have a positive effect on men, but are not doing anything to help ease the transition or confusion of having many options from which to choose. Rather, they help their own people. In 1971, the feminist writer, Alix Shulman published her essay called, “A Marriage Agreement.” In her essay, she creates detailed rules and guidelines she followed that purportedly granted her an egalitarian marriage. Her article about sharing housework and childcare could send any man off the edge, and it is evident that her husband’s thoughts on the agreement were ignored. She simply states: “[M]y husband and I decided that we no longer had to accept the sex roles that had turned us into a lame family” (272). Where are the articles for de-coding masculinity for men? Shulman’s article gave women a feeling of power, and since then it has become apparent that the roles are not only shifting, they are in a reverse unbalance.

It never gets old watching my mother and Chris laugh together. Their mouths open wide exposing their pearly white teeth, while their eyes are forced shut as their cheekbones rise. I look forward to these dinners when I go back home. I took one particular night as an opportunity to talk to my brother about our past. As I begin to ask questions, I noticed his eyes begin to water. I imagined he was recalling the late night arguments, doors slamming, and especially my tears. “It was hard to forgive Papi after what he put Mami through,” he began. “All my friends are able to have a typical relationship with their dads, like playing sports or going to the park, but not me. He enjoyed drinking more than being with us, and I hated him for that.”

My heart became heavy as my past memories and emotions also returned. He continued, “I took most of my anger out on Mami because I was torn between resenting her for being weak back then, but I knew she was strong and could handle whatever I said.” I asked him if he was confused about how masculine he wanted to be based on how my dad was, compared to his friends’ dads. He was more confused by my question than his masculinity. Yet he told me: “I always wanted a muscular, ‘beefed up’ body, but a lot people want what they don’t have, so I don’t think I’m less of a man because I’m really thin, but I try to make up my lack of body fat with being good at other ‘manly’ things, like putting things together or driving

really fast.” The room quickly filled with vehement laughter.

I am not sure if he answered my question, but now, I am more aware that men are very unaware of the social challenges their “masculinity” gives them—they think it is natural. Finally, I asked him if he ever felt pressured to treat women the way my dad treated my mother all those years. His eyes lit up at the thought of his girlfriend Melissa, and he said, “In some ways I have this idea that Mel should take on ‘womanly’ responsibilities, but I know she won’t do it, and I won’t let myself get angry over it. And if we ever end up arguing like [our parents] did, I’ll make sure it’s never in front of our children.”

My brother might not realize how outside influences have affected his definition of masculinity, but a majority of the young men I surveyed agree that masculinity is socially constructed, just like race and class are. However, this conjured up idea of masculinity is deeply rooted in society and will be difficult to eliminate. Although men might be aware that it is socially constructed, this does not hide the fact that their path towards finally feeling secure with themselves and finally achieving a clearer idea about what masculinity really means, is heavily clouded with winding roads.

It is hard to say whether my brother ever realized, or will ever realize, how society’s gender-role shift caused my parents to change as well. And as I previously concluded, most people go through life never thinking twice about how society impacts their lives. Even though feminists have written countless pieces of literature and have shed light to the realities of gender and society *for women*, men are left in the dark to suffer from “masculine gender-role stress” that results from excessive reliance on achieving cultural approval (Arrindell 31). I strongly believe that in order to achieve true equality, we must be open to learning about the adversities both sexes face this society. Once that is achieved, maintaining a constant balance of power will be our next challenge.

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Rough Around the Edges

JAIMIE ROGNER

Reality television shows are breeding grounds for notorious characters. The cast is never complete without the eccentric goofball, the comedian, the rebel, or the girl next door. The design competition *Project Runway*, hosted by supermodel Heidi Klum, is no exception. Season 1 brought the flamboyant Jay McCarroll to viewers' living rooms, equipped with a boisterous personality and commanding presence. Next on the line-up was Season 2's Santino Rice, he of the uncanny Tim Gunn impersonation that kept his fellow designers laughing into the wee hours of delirious garment construction. With Season 3 came Jeffrey Sebelia, who was initially typecast as the punk-rock badass, complete with an intimidating tattoo permanently inked around his neck. As the season progressed, Sebelia stumped audiences with his less outwardly apparent traits; the better fans and critics got to know him, the more of a contradiction he became. His work mirrored this quality; the twelve-piece final collection that he presented in Spring 2007 for Olympus Fashion Week is reflective of his multifaceted personality.

Sebelia introduced his collection sporting a sleeveless tee that highlighted the aforementioned tattoo, black denim capris emblazoned with a skull patch, and distressed high-tops. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of bejeweled shades and his hair was choppy, as if his barber had accidentally used a hacksaw in place of hair scissors. The overall aesthetic screamed rock star. When the first model hit the runway, however, a very different picture was painted. In an unexpected twist, the premier look was a red-and-white apple print dress that was more Minnie Mouse than heavy metal. More shocking still was the third ensemble, a baby doll gown with a lace overlay that would sooner be spotted at a girls' slumber party than behind an electric guitar (Holzman). This contrast begs the question: is there more to Sebelia than meets the eye?

A quick background check on the forty-year-old designer tells us yes. Before he was catapulted into fashion superstardom, his past was dotted with broken relationships and addiction. At the age of eight, he witnessed the divorce of his parents, from which he emerged laden with guilt. As a coping mechanism, he turned to drugs. The bad habit only grew worse until he was addicted to heroin at just sixteen years old. For the subsequent

fifteen years of his life, he struggled to get clean until he experienced a turning point at thirty-one. Having just broken up with his girlfriend, he had been experimenting heavily with LSD and ecstasy. This culminated in a suicide attempt, after which Sebelia returned to rehabilitation. (www.netglimse.com). Love re-entered his life in the form of a new girlfriend, Melanie. As it turns out, he is a big softy underneath his tough exterior: his infamous tattoo is actually a tribute to the couple's son, Harrison Detroit, who was two years old at the time of his Project Runway stint (Larocca). Sebelia proved that a former drug addict can in fact make a good family man, and furthermore, that there are always more layers to peel back in a person.

His vision for Spring 2007 was largely based on this same unpredictability. The looks ranged from soft and romantic to graphic and geometric. The color palette included vibrant reds, electric violets, and rich greens, all of which popped against bleach-white fabrics. Flowy, asymmetrical hems shared the runway with rigid, structured pleats. While the pieces each had their own distinct flavor, they collaborated to form one cohesive wardrobe, just as the various segments of Sebelia's life add up to a whole. He would not be the loving, invested father that he is today had he not withstood such a tumultuous household. Nor would the collection's final, statement-making A-line dress hold any relevance without its stripe-patterned precedents. The models' procession was set to a track entitled "Swing" which was actually recorded by Sebelia's former rock outfit, Lifter (www.college.lattc.edu). Its droning melody and apocalyptic chords, coupled with melancholy lyrics, underlined the clothing's impact. It provided a haunting, hypnotic backdrop that parallels the dark tone of Sebelia's own personal background.

In a world where reality show stars can be neatly stereotyped as prescribed by television producers, Jeffrey Sebelia is a complex, mysterious entity. Many aspects of his character are not readily perceived, yet they reveal themselves in his craft. Humankind itself is composed of similar ironies and juxtapositions. Appearances fail to do people justice. Whether superficial, such as clothing or make-up, or expressive, such as speech and behavior, externalities are often deceptive. It takes reading an entire biography and viewing a finished collection to reach an accurate interpretation.

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The Argument Essay

In an argumentative essay, the author makes a claim and supports it through the use of evidence. While the primary purpose of an argumentative essay is to convince the reader of the validity of the author's position, other purposes may be to encourage the reader to take a particular action or to help the reader simply rethink an issue in a fresh way. Examples of argumentative writing include editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces.

One Kitty Too Many?

STEPHANY GIBSON

You are walking through the local convenience store, only to find that the checkout line is being held up by a woman buying twenty cans of IAMS cat food, along with a bag of dry cat food and two boxes of Fresh Step Multiple Cat Strength Litter. Immediately, you imagine this woman in a house full of cats. You may also go as far as to infer that, despite the Multiple Cat Strength Litter, an unfortunate stench clings to her house, as well as to all the items inside it, possibly including this woman herself. Due to her unusual fragrance and her continuous need to fawn over her little ones, you imagine, the woman's social life is poor. As a result, she turns to her cats, whom she treats and talks to like human beings, instead of being an avid member of her neighborhood community. Due to her self-alienation from the rest of the local residents, the neighbors simply label her the "Crazy Cat Lady" and continue on with their lives, unable to provide any other explanation for this peculiar phenomenon. But who is to say that this woman on line in front of you is, in fact, a "crazy cat lady?" While she may be an owner of many cats, it doesn't necessarily follow that she is a lonely spinster with no acquaintances other than her dear cats; or that the state of her house resembles her jumbled state of mind. She may, in fact, be a perfectly healthy and average member of society.

It is assumed that a lady with a fair amount of cats occupying her house has no social ties with co-workers, family members or other friends, and therefore turns to the social feline to keep her company. While it may be true that she resides with no other people, for finding someone to agree with housing that many cats may prove to be difficult, it does not mean she is a complete loner. Two cats generally require the same amount of attention as six or seven. Domestic cats are very independent animals and do not require constant care. There is no reason why a cat owner can't have a social life if she has several cats. Having cats shouldn't prevent her from being a member of her community—and most cat owners don't let it. But the image of a "crazy cat lady" is so common, that it is very easy to label someone who has numerous cats as someone who has no other social interactions. And let's face it, we all talk to our pets. Just because she has more pets than you doesn't make her any weirder.

Picture for a moment the house of a woman with eight cats. Do you automatically see a tiny run-down house cluttered with knick-knacks? How stereotypical. Owners of multiple cats are not all hoarders, and they are not all messy. Having cats in one's life actually requires a large amount of organization, so any person with cats would likely keep her house clean and tidy to prevent buildup of dust and mold and keep it smelling fresh.

Do you think someone would own so many cats if she could not possibly take care of them? Those who reply "yes" to this question likely reason that it is only "because they're crazy"—that crazy people own multiple cats. However, cat owners are not crazy *because* of their cats. Those who do have mental illnesses would still be considered crazy aside from their cats. Yet the idea of having several cats is so appalling to many people that they call said cat lady "crazy," when really, the cats have nothing to do with a particular woman's degree of sanity. It should be completely acceptable to have multiple cats, especially when you are perfectly sane. And society should not be able to use this as an excuse to automatically deem a woman with cats a "crazy cat lady."

Whenever I tell people that I want to have five or six cats when I'm living on my own, they immediately respond by attempting to convince me to consider otherwise, because they don't want me to become a "crazy cat lady." While I try to tell them that surely that won't happen to me, they believe the only way to prevent this condition is by limiting me to a cat or two at most. While I know my friends and family are concerned for my well-being, I do not understand why they do not believe that I have the ability to own several cats. Even if I were to become a modern, quirky form of a crazy cat lady, is it really all that bad? If I know that this lifestyle is a little crazy, they should also be able to accept my choice.

Perhaps crazy cat ladies deliberately choose to alienate themselves because no one will accept them when they have cats in their lives. Society admires a woman with a closet full of expensive clothing or man with a garage full of fancy cars. However, the cars and shoes won't die if they don't have a home and someone to take care of them. They are merely inanimate objects, collected by self-indulgent people. But a cat lady is someone who is compassionate enough to offer her home and her aid to her cats. Is it too much of a stretch to admire, rather than mock, someone who cares so much that she would be

willing to take in as many cats as possible just to make their lives better?

Anti-Hate Legislation, Not Hate Speech Regulation

LARA RUSSO

Both the liberal and conservative communities in America have debated the constitutionality and the moral implications of the regulation of hate speech for quite some time. Both sides sway back and forth on their position depending on the example used and neither seems to have a set stance. The regulation and limitation of hate speech is difficult both to defend and to disregard completely. As a radically leaning leftist, I do believe freedom of speech is undeniably important. However, I find the often-thoughtless use of oppressive, offensive, and discriminatory language unacceptable. Language is the main tool used to unite communities and create ties among the members of a society. There is no doubt that the use of certain words and phrases help to perpetuate hateful thoughts and actions. However, this does not mean that hate speech should be regulated; in fact, legally enforced restrictions on speech are simply an ineffective measure, put in place to avoid dealing with actual issues of hatred and discrimination in our society.

It is difficult to view hate speech regulation as anything more than a distraction, or at best, a means of quelling the ever-present liberal guilty conscience. The fact is that we live in a society where the Black community has significantly less access to education, comprehensive healthcare, and sustainable, healthy food than white Americans do. Black men are less than half as likely as white men are to graduate from or even attend college in the United States (United States Census Bureau). African Americans and Latinos are much less likely to have health insurance and those who do are often underinsured and underserved (Payne). The life expectancy among black Americans is five years less than that of whites, and infant mortality rates are more than double the national average (Boston Women's 318). Furthermore, "Low income and being African American, Latino, or American Indian increases the likelihood of poor access to good food and the prevalence of chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes" (Head).

It is unreasonable to look at these issues and realistically determine that the solution is to ban the use of the "n-word." It seems utterly ridiculous to tell the one in five children living with asthma in the South Bronx that, although the asthma rate in their community is more than double the national average and asthma-related deaths are three times the national average,

nothing will be done about the factories polluting their air and poisoning their lungs (“South Bronx”). While these children may no longer have to worry about racial slurs being uttered in their underfunded and underperforming schools, systematic and structural racism along with many other forms of oppression continue to exist in our society. These are real issues with real consequences. Focusing anti-oppression efforts on speech regulation completely ignores the actual issues at hand and instead settles for a small and solvable byproduct of an oppressive society.

This is not to say that racial slurs are not harmful. Of course, they are. Nor should we assume that oppressive language should be tolerated. Even when such language is not directed towards a specific person or group, it is still a form of harassment and should be treated as such. Hate speech silences those already suffering and perpetuates longstanding inequalities. The common and casual use of the “n-word” by white males and females is offensive and reinforces their dominant, privileged position in society. The history of violence and oppression carried with the word makes it a powerful means of strengthening the status quo (Kennedy 121). However, institutionalized oppression must be confronted at its source. Hate speech legislation is equivalent to taking a Tylenol for a brain tumor. It is easy to do and may calm nerves, creating some temporary relief, but it does nothing to solve the actual problem. It simply relaxes the symptoms while the sickness, that is, oppression, continues to spread.

If we want a society without hate speech, we need to stop the cycle of injustice that allows for such vast disparities. Let us create an equitable society where all children have equal access to education, healthcare, and food; where our legislation protects and represents everyone no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation, or nation of origin. If these issues addressed from a structural standpoint, on a governmental level, then the regulation of hate speech would be a worthy topic for discussion. Until then, the debate and enforcement of such rules serves only to appease white liberals wanting to feel less burdened by their white guilt.

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Comics in the Canon & Classroom

BABALOLA AJISAFE

According to Brian K Vaughan, the Eisner Award-winning writer and co-creator of the novel *Runaways*, “. . . graphic novels are not a genre (like super-hero adventure, Western, true crime, etc.) but a medium, like painting or literature, a medium where anyone can find something to love” (qtd. in Pawuk xii). Many agree with Vaughan’s statement, but not enough to ensure that comics be introduced into the literary canon. This brings to mind the question of what is the literary canon, and who or what defines it. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to “literature” as “written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit” (“Literature”); the literary canon is a group of works that fit into this criterion. I believe that comics have the innate ability to fulfill the literary requirements of canon inclusion. As times change, it is necessary that conventional methods of education should also change. That being said, graphic novels should be considered appropriate material to be taught in middle and high school classrooms for they are also on the path towards changing education. To some it may seem a bit Machiavellian (the ends justifying the means) but in the case of graphic novels, the authors of today’s comics may use some unconventional techniques but still achieve the same goals as canonical authors. We must come to realize and accept that there are shifts in the current educational structure (Robinson). Therefore, the inclusion of comics into the canon will bring us into the new age of education, breeding creativity and taking a step away from uniformity.

Before discussing the incorporation of comics into the canon, it is necessary first to understand the canon for what it is; an imperfect authoritative list of works and authors given some form of official status (Landow). Unfortunately, not all people are offered the opportunity to benefit from the works comprised in the canon. In her review of John Guillory’s book, *Cultural Capital*, Gail McDonald states:

A syllabus is an instrument used in a specifically institutional locus, one that may be studied sociologically. Such a perspective leads inevitably to analysis of the school’s own socioeconomic context and thence to recognition of social structures that afford some people

access to the syllabus and deny it to others . . .
(McDonald)

This quote describes how education is partially political. From the forming of the syllabus/curriculum, which is not available to all people, the stage is set to incorporate into the minds of our youth materials deemed fit in the institutional locus, i.e. the social and economic elite. Students are therefore limited to experiencing only the works provided to them in class; a class in which not all people are afforded the opportunity to attend in the first place. To the select few granted the opportunity to enjoy the robust wealth of literature that is the canon, how many can relate to these works? Definitely not all of them, yet these students are taught to believe that these are great works an educated person must know and understand. Rather than explore other endless possibilities in literature, “good” students will end up conforming to this idea that the works being taught are all they will need to know. As a result, they never learn about many other pieces of art and literature. Ken Robinson believes that schools are killing creativity. The idea of the canon as a hierarchal structure in literature is one of the ways that schools are not encouraging students to expand their minds.

What is the purpose or goal of attending school? Is it not to prepare students for their prospective futures? Ken Robinson states it best at a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in 2006 where he says:

It is education that is meant to take us into this future that we can't grasp . . . Children starting school this year (2006) will be retiring in 2065. Nobody has a clue as to what the world will look like in five years' time, and yet we are meant to be educating them for it. The unpredictability of it all is extraordinary . . . (Robinson)

The current state of education is centered on perpetual control of the uncontrollable. To use the same methods, materials and styles to educate youth today as in the past is detrimental as it is not always the case that coursework taught one year may be applicable the next year. For example, the slide rule was for a time deemed the epitome of mathematic technology. Now, the calculator has rendered the slide rule obsolete. In another example, MLA (Modern Language Association) citation style has changed substantially in 2009. This proves that things

taught or generally accepted today may not be relevant or applicable tomorrow. In addition, it is safe to hypothesize that some ideas that are not taught or generally accepted today, may in the near future, be accepted and taught.

Recently graphic novels have become popular with students, the general public, and more importantly instructors. In *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, a group of librarians came to a consensus that, “Graphic novels are increasingly used as instructional resources, and they play an important role in supporting the recreational reading mission of academic libraries” (O’English 173). Here we are given proof that the use of graphic novels have begun to help stimulate students’ reading habits. Not only are students being educated by reading graphic novels, but they are becoming more inclined to read for their own leisure. Michele Gorman says it best in her book, *Getting Graphic!: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens*, when she observes that “Too often parents, administrators, teachers and even librarians forget that the act of reading, regardless of the format of the reading material, increases reading skills” (23). I have learned from experience that when one reads for leisure, one begins to read with more ease, fluidity, and interest. It is imperative to grasp this concept that graphic novels are helping our students down the road to becoming the literate and educated people that will someday make positive contributions to society. In recommending reading alternatives to the *California Task Force Report on Reading*, Stephen Krashen notes that:

The most effective bridge from low levels of reading ability and higher level is free voluntary reading. However, in order for students to reap the benefits of voluntary reading, they must be free to select material in which they have a strong interest, including magazines, comic books, and graphic novels, the same materials that are often unavailable or frowned upon in the classroom school library . . .
(qtd. in Gorman 40)

Success stories of the use of comics in the classroom already exist. In his article “The Graphic Novel in the Classroom,” Gene Yang demonstrates how his use of comics to explain mathematical concepts had a positive effect on his algebra students. He questioned his students about the comic lecture,

and he discerned two strengths of the comic medium: “Graphic novels are visual, and our students love visual media. After all they’re immersed in it. By combining image and text, comics bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read.” From Yang’s observations, we can see that using a method that appeals to students may help them to grasp the material with less difficulty.

While I am not trying to downplay the masterful works of Shakespeare, Hemingway and the rest of the canonic authors, I believe that, along with these great authors, our schools could include Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi and maybe even Masahi Kishimoto. Most educated people agree that the current canonic works may be dated but that they still wonderfully illustrate the dramatic use of imagery, syntax, diction along with a wide array of other literary techniques. They teach us the many distinct ways that the English language may be used. In no way could these works ever be replaced, but they are no longer the only means to open the eyes of students to the endless possibilities of expression in literature.

The way that educational institutions work right now is contrary to the fostering of growth and creativity in young adults. To quote my tutor, who put it so eloquently, by “thinking within the lines” (Citrin) of generally accepted principles, we tend to exclude everything else contrary, even the things that may prove to our benefit. “Introducing graphic novels that address history, politics, literature or social issues in a comic style format into the school library or classroom may begin to help bridge the gap between what students want and what schools require” (Gorman 50). By including comics into the canon we will be able to move away from a curriculum geared towards standardization and uniformity and one towards originality and creativity.

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The Diminishing Deity

MATT TAVOLACCI

The earth has existed exponentially longer than humans. This simple fact has seemed to escape the mind of a large portion of the human population. As countries of the world develop, the natural resources of the planet are drained at the expense of the health of all of its inhabitants.

The age of the consumer has created an ideal society for businesses, but at what cost? Efforts for the conservation of the environment are now being made (like the world-wide “go green” campaign), but are these movements a marketing ploy? Or are the people genuinely concerned about a safe environment for years to come? Whatever the case may be, money will make no difference when a life-sustaining environment vanishes. Increasingly, citizens of the world are rejecting the false icons of consumerism in order to invest their future in the environment.

As stated before, the term “industrialization” has gone hand in hand with pollution. The desire of nations to quickly establish economic stability comes from the destruction of the natural world. For example, recent studies show that the top two contributors to pollution are the United States and China, respectively. The United States, known for a heavy reliance on capitalism, and China, with its dense population and rapid production of goods, are not only destroying beautiful natural environments for resources, but are also producing massive amounts of industrial waste that create a harmful atmosphere for all living organisms. The by-product of the industrial output infects land, air and sea. Additionally, businesses have recently invested in “green” technology in order to build a larger customer base. The term “green” comes from the current “go green” campaign, in which the use of reusable and recyclable material is stressed in the production of consumer goods. Although this seems like a decent step towards a cleaner living environment, these actions are taken primarily for the wrong reasons. By drawing environmentally conscious consumers to products, these businesses are still being funded to produce mildly harmful goods, which, in the long run, will not help this crisis.

In human history, multiple cultures around the world respected the natural world above all else. Native Americans learned and

practiced ways of building completely from the earth, using nothing that would not decompose back into the soil. By physically living with the land, these cultures developed healthy lifestyles (despite some questionable human sacrificing) and acknowledged that they were just one creation of the natural world, like every other living organism. With the development of technology, this respect has diminished; however it is not non-existent. The “green movement” is a positive step towards a cleaner planet, ulterior motives aside. Furthermore, the construction and popularity of earth ships are growing throughout the world. Earth ships are homes that are planned out and erected entirely from natural and recyclable materials like glass, plastic bottles, aluminum cans, and rubber tires. “We’re trying to use the products that we don’t know what to do with rather than the products that we really desperately need for life on this planet,” says professional architect Mike Reynolds. “To cut down trees is ridiculous when you can build with tires.” Reynolds has devoted much of his life and career to the development of hospitable earth ships. After battles with legislation, Reynolds and other architects have built earth ships that fully meet the needs for human inhabitation. Solar and wind energy is harnessed to power these habitats, while rainwater is collected to accommodate bathing, drinking and cleaning. Along with composting toilets, earth ships create a completely harmless establishment in which one can live *with* nature, instead of against it (Bearden).

Advocates such as John Muir and Rachel Carson have become figureheads of the environmentalist movement. Although these two individuals came from different generations, they each successfully drew attention to the negative effects of deforestation and the use of pesticides in agriculture. Muir, born in Dunbar, Scotland in 1838, saw the beauty of nature since his childhood. After coming to the United States with his family in 1849, Muir saw natural land formations being threatened by the expansion of industry (Marquis). For the rest of his life, Muir was an environmental activist, advocating for natural conservation and convincing the government to establish a natural park in the Yosemite Valley, among other locations in California (Muir). Similarly, Rachael Carson’s life affected the relationship the United States currently has with its surrounding habitat. After the powerful pesticide DDT was employed in American agriculture, it was discovered to be harmful to human and animal reproductive cycles. In response, Carson wrote about the dangers of the chemical. Carson firmly

believed that humans “came from nature, despite how they have already disfigured it.” She firmly believed that mankind would be wise to be conscious of the environment, and respect where it came from. Following the publication of her popular *Silent Spring* in 1962, the United States government eventually banned DDT from use nationwide. If the passion of only two individuals can change environmental protection laws on such a large scale, imagine the regulations that could be enacted when each individual citizen takes action.

In summary, the earth is an amazing vessel, but is not appreciated as of late. The irresponsibility of the human race has disfigured the beauty of the world. As the pollution of the atmosphere increases, more communities may begin to realize the importance of a cleaner environment, as well as the importance of respect for the land. The time to act is now, especially at the expense of luxury.

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To Play or To Study

TREVOR POLASEK

Over the last several years, the primary education system in America has changed to allot much more time to instruction and studying and less time to play. This has sparked a debate among parents and educators as to whether this shift is for better or for worse. Many agree that this shift is for the worse; there have been many studies that point to play as a major factor in a child's development. These studies generally show that children learn the best during a critical learning period around age four. During this stage, it is important for children to use their imaginations so they can develop the skills needed later on in school and in life. The current educational system in America does not take into account how play affects a child's development, how the role of a teacher influences a child's ability to learn, and how too much direct instruction negatively affects both teachers and students.

In this sort of context, "play" takes on two forms as detailed by psychologist, Steffen Saifer. According to Saifer, there are two kinds of play during early stages of development: higher-order play and skill-based play (Saifer 42). Both of these are essential for proper development in children, each having its own role in said development. Higher-order play consists of abstract and reflective thinking in combination with the imagination. Higher-order play essentially is make-believe play and using the imagination to play around with ideas. This form of play is a major factor for the development of self-regulation, which is an important part of the development of higher-order thinking. Higher-order thinking involves a person's abstract and critical thinking skill, which is very important from the secondary education level on. Saifer points out that higher-order play never really goes away with age; it just changes on the surface (Saifer 42-43). He argues that "As children get older the 'play' is internalized and they mentally play with thoughts, ideas, concepts, visualizations—their own and those of writers, teachers, and peers" (Saifer 43). This shows that learning higher-order play not only helps develop higher-order thinking, but is also a type of play that is used throughout a person's life.

Skill-based play involves the development of both motor and social skills. While Saifer does not place as much importance in skill-based play as he does on higher-order play, he does agree that skill-based play is essential so that a child learns to interact

socially and learns how to follow rules. Skill-based play will eventually develop into a more sophisticated form, such as playing organized sports and other sorts of games (Saifer 42-43). Both of these forms of play are essential for proper development, and these kinds of play are most effective when children are supervised and taught by a well-trained teacher.

A good teacher is supportive of a child's development and creativity, allowing a child to develop fully his or her essential skills. Many educators believe that a supportive environment in the classroom can be best achieved through creative and interactive play, where a child can be taught and, at the same time, have fun (Hakkarainen 61). However, many classrooms today do not promote interactive play; rather, direct instruction is often used as the primary form of teaching. Direct instruction, which can be simply described as a teacher telling students how to perform a task, is not as interactive as make-believe play. In fact, direct instruction does not allow a child to use his or her imagination too creatively, which contradicts Saifer's findings about the connection between the use of imagination and the development of higher-order thinking.

Finnish professors of early education, Pentti Hakkarainen and Milda Bredikyte, have done studies that further support the importance of creative and interactive play as a method of teaching. Hakkarainen and Bredikyte state that "The most effective educational methods often are indirect like inviting children to imaginative play worlds. Children's creativity is not possible without environments, which stimulate creative activity. Teacher's creativity is the best living example for children" (Hakkarainen 61). Hakkarainen and Bredikyte emphasize the role of teachers as catalysts for developing the creativity and imagination of young children, allowing them to explore their-own play-worlds. They do this by giving the children an example of what it is like to play and pretend.

The focus on direct instruction rather than play has created a stressful environment for both students and teachers alike. This stressful environment is created by the emphasis many politicians, school administrators, and even parents put on test scores and learning as much as one can during this critical period. In addition, they have put off play as an obsolete way of educating children. By emphasizing the importance of test scores, teachers are not really teaching children important school and life skills, but are teaching them to be good test

takers (Nicolopoulou 1-2). Psychologist Ageliki Nicolopoulou believes that “there is increasing concern that an exclusive regime of instruction, drill, and testing leaves many preschoolers overstressed, underexercised, and more likely to become anxious and overweight” (Nicolopoulou 3). Children are likely not learning as much as their test scores may show and some of the information they learn may not be retained. In fact, by teaching children to be good test-takers, our schools are creating false-positive results about how much children are learning. Rather than truly learning material, children may just be learning how to eliminate incorrect answers effectively and acquiring other ways to perform well.

Still, there are some who argue that teachers should be teaching as many skills as possible during this critical period to create well-prepared and intelligent students. On the contrary, this may in fact hurt the preparedness of some students for later levels of school as they would not have the proper development socially or mentally for these later levels of schooling. In addition, such an environment created by this belief might lead to children becoming unmotivated towards school and learning (Nicolopoulou 2-3). This would inevitably lead to children not doing well in school or even not going beyond the high school level.

Another point that the opposite side could make is that direct instruction is better than social play as that is what is more effective in the upper grades. However, this is not so, as what most of these people do not realize is how young children learn. Young children, as stated earlier, learn through interaction and using their imaginations. They do not learn as well from being lectured at for long periods, which is what direct instruction is. Additionally, direct instruction does not provide what the two types of social play do, which is self- and external regulation. Direct instruction, while good for older children and adults, does not provide some of the essential steps children need to take in order to develop fully.

Over the last decade, there has been a lot of debate over whether or not young children should be educated academically just like higher grades. As several recent studies have shown, America’s current education system needs to be revised to allow more interactive, imaginative play and less direct instruction. Several studies have proven that the methods of direct instruction are not effective for children this young, and a new

approach is needed in order for children to develop properly. That new approach needs to put emphasis on the role of teachers, who could be used as a catalyst for children to use their imagination to learn social and mental skills. Along with this, a shift to higher-order play and more imaginative, interactive instruction would better help motivate young children into a successful career in school. The only way anything will truly change is by changing the standardized way all teachers teach young children. By taking the information gained from these studies, school boards can start revising the education system in America for the better.

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Let the Punishment Fit the Crime

KRISTIN HACKETT

Hate crimes are offenses that have more severe and detrimental effects than non-bias crimes. They terrorize victims and other members of the targeted group and cause a level of fear and intimidation that surpasses that of non-bias crimes. Individuals who commit hate crimes do not target their victims based on personal encounters, but rather as the result of a general characteristic that the victim cannot control. Their goal is to instill fear and send a message of intolerance to the targeted group in order to suggest that they are not accepted members of society. The detrimental characteristics of crimes that are motivated by bias and hate justify the need for these crimes to receive a harsher legal punishment than non-bias offenses. Crimes committed based on these motives deserve a level of punishment that reflects the severity and brutality associated with these acts.

A hate crime is a crime in which the offender purposely selects their victim based on “race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability” (“Hate Crimes Based” 170). Individuals who commit these vicious acts often do not know their victims, targeting them solely because they possess one of these characteristics. This distinguishes these crimes from non-bias crimes because the motives are not personal, but are based on a pre-conceived notion about the victim as a member of the targeted group. Hate crimes are generally much more violent than non-bias crimes, which results in victims feeling “traumatized and terrified” (Altschiller 108). Since the victims are often randomly targeted based on a characteristic they cannot control, the crime committed against them is especially damaging, causing them to fear that this will be a recurring issue. Hate crimes are often committed by “multiple offenders,” making it more difficult for the victim to act in his or her own defense (Bantley 556). Each of these elements combines to form violent acts in which the victim is essentially helpless, attacked for reasons he or she is unable to change.

Another typical characteristic of hate crimes is the effect that they have on all members of the targeted group. If a victim is attacked and beaten as the result of their ethnicity, other members of that ethnic group will also fear for their safety, afraid that they may be a potential victim. In this way, hate

crimes are “message crimes,” committed with the intent of intimidating all members of the targeted group (Lieberman 81). The people committing the crime are using the act to express a message of intolerance, intending to threaten and terrorize a group of people, rather than only the individual victim. This point is described clearly by President Obama, who in a speech in October 2009 referred to hate crimes as “crimes that are meant not only to break bones, but to break spirits, not only to inflict harm, but to instill fear” (Oct. 2009). This is an excellent explanation of how hate crimes affect all members of the targeted group, causing them to fear that they are in danger of becoming victims.

There have been many hate crimes committed in recent years that have involved a level of cruelty and brutality that shocked and mortified Americans. Two cases that received national attention in 1998 were the deaths of Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Matthew Shepard was a college student in Wyoming, who at the age of twenty one was severely beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die because he was homosexual. He died in the hospital several days after the attack. Two young men from his hometown intentionally targeted Shepard based on his sexual orientation, committing an act of violence so incredibly vicious that it sparked a national outcry regarding the need for hate crime legislation. Later that year, in Jasper, Texas, a group of white supremacists violently attacked James Byrd, Jr. because he was African American. After beating him, the attackers tied Byrd to the back of their truck and dragged him for miles, eventually decapitating him. Kathleen A. Bantley describes these two crimes as “so brutal, so heinous, and so repugnant that the hate crime legislation movement was energized and would receive the attention it deserved” (555). Both of these men were targeted and attacked as the result of a general characteristic, not an individual relationship with their assailants.

In July of 2008, in Pennsylvania, a twenty-five-year-old Mexican father of two was brutally beaten and murdered because of his ethnicity. His attackers beat him until he lay unconscious and convulsing as they yelled discriminatory remarks (“Confronting the New Faces” par. 9). In October of 2010, members of the Latin Kings gang engaged in two separate incidents in one night during which they kidnapped, beat, and tortured three men because they were homosexual (Campbell Oct. 2010). Each of these examples shows the

extensive violence associated with hate crimes, or victims being selected and attacked based on a general characteristic rather than personal attributes. These cases are only a few of the overwhelming number of hate crimes that are committed each year.

Considering the unique characteristics that hate crimes possess, it is imperative that there be legislation that imposes stricter punishment for crimes that are committed as a result of these biases. Hate crimes alienate entire groups of people based on characteristics such as race and sexual orientation. The individuals who are targeted are selected based on these personal characteristics, without which the crimes would not occur. These cases have an increased emotional and psychological impact on their victims, as well as on their surrounding community (Lieberman 81). Since hate crimes are especially brutal and heinous, it is appropriate that the punishment be more severe. They cause greater individual and societal harm than non-bias offenses, and, as a result, are much more likely to result in crimes of retaliation (Altschiller 108). In this way, hate crimes create a much more tense and hostile environment that is more prone to violence. Having legislation that requires more severe punishment and strict enforcement would deter individuals from committing these acts, conveying the message that crimes based on prejudices will be dealt with more severely.

One extremely important issue with hate crime legislation in the United States is the lack of a consistent definition of what constitutes a hate crime. Although the federal government has recently updated their definition to include crimes committed based on sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and disability in addition to race, religion, and ethnicity, many state governments have not made this change (“Hate Crimes Based” 170). This causes an inconsistency with hate crime provisions, and causes individuals in the excluded groups who are victims of hate crimes to receive less protection if their case does not have federal jurisdiction. State governments that lack the mention of these groups in their hate crime legislation are sending the message that violence against these individuals is a less serious offense than those committed against members of other groups. Since in either situation the crimes are based on distinct personal characteristics that caused the crime to occur, the difference in how they are handled creates an inconsistency with the law. This sends mixed messages about the severity of

hate crimes and the importance in having legislation that punishes these acts more strictly.

The result of these inconsistencies is that some crimes are not prosecuted as seriously as they would be in other states, or if the Federal Government was involved. This is one reason why some individuals believe that the Federal Government's jurisdiction should be expanded when dealing with hate crimes. Another reason this would be helpful is that the Federal Government has a larger amount of resources available to aid them in investigating and prosecuting these crimes, which makes it much more effective in getting results than state governments alone. One example of this is the murder investigation of James Byrd, Jr. In this case, the Federal Government was able to intervene because the crime violated federal civil rights law. Its contributions to investigating the case were significant, and the "resources, forensic expertise, and civil rights experience of the FBI and Department of Justice provided assistance of great value to local law enforcement officials" ("Background and Rationale" 168). The ability of the Federal Government to intervene was crucial in bringing these criminals to justice. Given that the Federal Government has a clear definition of hate crimes and the resources to prosecute them effectively, it should be necessary that it is always allowed jurisdiction to intervene in these cases. This would increase the number of hate crimes that are solved and brought to justice, promoting safety in areas where these crimes threaten the wellbeing of the community. It would also ensure that there is consistent legislation that can protect all victims on an equal level throughout the country.

One major argument against hate crime legislation is that creating a harsher level of punishment as the result of the offenders' biases is a violation of the First Amendment. Critics argue that this is essentially punishing the thoughts and beliefs of the person committing the crime, and should therefore not be taken into account when considering punishment. They argue that increasing punishment based on these guidelines criminalizes beliefs and speech, as the crime would often not be able to be distinguished as a hate crime without these elements. They conclude that based on this information, hate crimes should be reprimanded in the same way they would be if there were no bias involved. To oppose this argument, in his article, "Hate Crime Laws: Punishment to Fit the Crime," Michael Lieberman states that hate crime laws "do not punish speech or

thoughts . . . It is only when an individual commits a crime based on those biased beliefs and intentionally targets another for violence or vandalism that a hate crime statute can be triggered” (83). If an individual is exercising their right to free speech without committing a criminal act, they are not going to receive legal punishment.

Hate crime legislation does not violate the First Amendment because it only takes beliefs and biases into account when they are directly related to the crime that was committed. These laws do not prohibit individuals from exercising their First Amendment rights; they do not punish verbal abuse or non-criminal acts, including hate speech. Hate crime legislation punishes criminal offenses, only allowing biases to be considered when they are directly related to the crime committed (Hate Crimes Based 172). These prejudices affect the motive and severity of the offense, instill fear in members of the targeted group, and promote a sense of intolerance and alienation. This makes it necessary that specific legislation exists to help deter potential criminals and protect the groups that are targeted and terrorized.

Currently, the Federal Government does have laws in place that deal specifically with the issue of hate crimes, offering assistance to law enforcement dealing with these types of cases. In 1990, the Hate Crimes Statistics Act was passed, making it a requirement of the Justice Department to collect data on crimes that are based on prejudices as a result of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or religion. They are required to publish an annual report that summarizes the results of this data, which is collected from law enforcement agencies across the country (“Background and Rationale” 169). This allows the Federal Government to gain a clearer understanding of the number of hate crimes taking place across states, as well as the nature of these crimes. Unfortunately, the numbers are not completely accurate, as the crime has to be reported to be included in the data collected. Due to the violent and intimidating nature of hate crimes, some victims do not report these incidents for fear of additional tormenting.

Another important piece of hate crime legislation that was passed in 1994 is the Violence Against Women Act. This law asserts that crimes motivated by the victim’s gender will receive a harsher punishment, giving victims the right to obtain monetary compensation and receive punitive damages. It

“provides authority for domestic violence and rape crisis centers and for education and training programs for law enforcement and prosecutors” (“Background and Rationale” 169). This law recognizes the justification for additional resources to be made available to victims of gender-based crimes because of the nature of the offenses. This is another example of the Federal Government creating a law that acknowledges that hate crimes are unique and require specific attention.

It is clear that hate crimes are extreme instances of prejudice and violence that traumatize victims and terrorize communities. The detrimental effects that these crimes have are much more extreme and damaging than that of non-bias crimes. When prosecuting hate crimes it is important and necessary to consider the motives behind the act because this has a large impact on the severity of the crime. Just as there is a difference in the severity of punishment for first and second degree murder based on intent, it is crucial that hate crimes be punished more harshly. It is the responsibility of the government to express that these acts will not be tolerated, and will be handled appropriately based on their violent nature and harmful effects. Recent legislation is a step in the right direction, and hopefully there will continue to be improvements made to combat the issues associated with hate crimes.

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The Value of Technical Skill in Art

NICOLE FIEGER

During the mid-1960s there was a rise in art that “markedly de-emphasized or entirely eliminated a perceptual encounter with unique objects in favour [sic] of an engagement with ideas” (Craven). This art style was known as conceptual art. Conceptual art raised the question among art critics as to whether or not a piece could be successful without exhibiting strong technical skills. Would an intellectually stimulating message be able to carry a piece devoid of skill and could a technically sound but otherwise intellectually shallow piece still be considered successful? Using several artists and their works as examples, it can be determined that the technical side of art is, in fact, crucial. Successful images can be created without underlying social commentary, yet the reverse does not hold true.

When discussing the question “What is art?” many will point to the answer that art is anything that elicits some sort of response from its viewer. For some, this means that the piece must contain some sort of deeper meaning. They argue that questions should be raised by the piece and a strong reaction produced in the viewer. However, an intellectual subtext is not the only thing that can cause a reaction amongst the viewers. Sometimes just a sheer beauty of the piece is enough to cause an emotional response. The French impressionistic painter Claude Monet is known for his breathtaking landscapes of nature that play with color and visible brush strokes (“Claude Monet”). His pieces are fairly straightforward, yet they still manage to inspire profound feelings of calmness and unity with nature. These emotional responses to Monet’s work are just as valid as any intellectual ones to abstract works by artists such as Picasso.

Technically proficient art pieces like Monet’s paintings do not need underlying social commentary to be successful, yet conceptual art does need technical skill to succeed. As noted by the art critic Orly Nezer, most art students seek out schools that emphasize skill over concept (76). This is because they understand that having a strong technical foundation is required in every piece of true art. How can an artist hope to make a successful statement without knowing how to manipulate an image artistically? Take, for example, the hyper-realistic sculptures of Ron Mueck. His work explores the taboo

topics of society such as death, age, and insecurity, by creating life-like depictions of people, usually with some sort of manipulation to the proportion of the piece. For example, one such piece called “Ghost” is, “a gigantic representation of an awkward teenage girl wearing a bathing suit and averting her gaze from the viewer,” which forces the viewer to confront the idea of vulnerability (Aureli). His images manage to provoke such a reaction because of how realistic they are, which allows the viewer to empathize with the sculpture and be repulsed by the parts that don’t fit in with that realism. Without the ability to create such realism and also without a solid understanding of how scale and proportion play such important roles in how art is perceived, it is unlikely that Mueck would have created such powerful sculptures.

However, some conceptual art proponents will sometimes point to the cubist artist Pablo Picasso to demonstrate their point that the ability to produce realistically-rendered paintings or drawings is not required to create stimulating pieces. Picasso’s work appears to be very simple, grounded mostly in geometric and abstract shapes. Why would someone who works in such simple terms need to know how to paint a realistic bust? What they don’t mention is that Picasso painted still lifes and portraits that rivaled the skill of the Renaissance masters. Because he had such an extensive knowledge of human anatomy to pull from was he able to successfully manipulate and distort the human figure. Picasso’s messages would have suffered without this ability because they would have become muddled in his own incompetence. It is impossible to know what body parts to exaggerate to get a certain point across without studying anatomy intensely. And how can an artist know what colors can be used to create a certain mood without studying color theory or where to place certain elements to emphasize one of them without understanding positive and negative space?

This idea holds true for three-dimensional forms of art as well. According to Rena Leinberger, a professor in metalworking and sculpture at SUNY New Paltz, “You can’t make poorly crafted pieces and still be successful.” When referring to her own work, Leinberger mentioned using cardboard and contact paper to create a two-by-four in an incorrect manner. It was only because she had learned the proper way of constructing a two-by-four first that she could then play with the concept of “wrongness” in art. Sloppy craft would have detracted from her

message because the abnormal nature of the resulting piece would have been attributed to her lack of skill rather than a clever use of material. Regardless of whether an artist is working with abstract versus concrete subjects, or if the medium is two-dimensional versus three-dimensional, a basic understanding of the fundamental aspects of art is required to create any type of art piece.

Concepts alone do not result in a successful piece but a strong conceptual message alongside technical skill will reliably produce outstanding results. Most critics agree that art is a valuable medium by which to express grievances with or praise of society. For example, the Polish artist Pawel Kuczynsk, who is technically proficient, is famous for his satirical drawings of modern life. These images draw attention to problems that are normally swept under the rug, such as corruption in politics, racism, and global warming. These messages serve to strengthen the pieces, making them much more noteworthy than if they had simply just been visually appealing paintings.

Still, it should be acknowledged that while art that contains an intellectual message certainly should be praised, even those pieces that exist solely to be beautiful can create just as moving of an experience for the viewer. Fledgling artists should focus on developing a solid understanding of the basic principles and elements of art. These fundamentals will not only allow them to create pieces that are visually pleasing but also to create pieces that are intellectually stimulating as well.

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Abandon Your Children in the Woods

KATIE GROVE

The world is deteriorating into madness. It is an unavoidable fact that modern times are just not like the old days. Have you seen that college girl partying, saturated with laziness when she should be learning? What about the boy working his first job who consistently shows up late and puts in the smallest amount of effort possible? How many of you have a grown son or daughter living with you right now? Eating all your food and wasting your money on impractical things? It is unacceptable for these lazy punks to drift through life leeching off of us respectable members of society. I remember the days when we contributed to the household, helped our communities and had admiration for our parents. The verdict is in: the youth of today are not growing up. They are remaining children mentally and emotionally late into their 20s and some of them never mature. This generation of kids occupying adults' bodies lack mental fortitude, respect for their elders, and the emotional strength to get through life and make the world a better place. Coddling your offspring by giving them everything they want, paying their way through college and being there for their every beck and call will not help them become independent. No. What they need is an experience that will allow them to develop skills of self-sufficiency. What they need is a push to get them to use those brains of theirs for once. What your children need is to be abandoned in the woods.

That's right. Abandon them in the woods. Take your little angels, the younger the better, out to the furthest reaches of the darkest forest and leave them there. The experience they will have on their journey home will help them grow into the independent adults that they should be. Sociologists traditionally define the "transition into adulthood as marked by five stages: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying, and having a child of their own" (Marantz). Ask yourself how many of these stages your own children have passed? Don't worry if the answer makes your stomach drop; we're all in the same boat here. If you never give them the opportunity to become mature and capable, then they never will. The best way to encourage this transition into adulthood is to put your kids in a situation where they are on their own. Leaving them in the woods is the best way to do this. No matter what they encounter they'll develop cognitive reasoning, problem solving skills, and

creativity that will cure them of the laziness instilled by sitting in front of the TV all day. If they are lucky they'll stumble upon something that wants to eat them, like a witch, or a wolf and they'll exercise their problem solving skills in figuring out a way to escape. The human brain keeps maturing well into the 20s, so the earlier you get started on helping your children mature the better off they (and you) will be.

How do you get started? As a stepmother of two young brats I am a strong proponent for giving them this life-affirming experience early on. My stepchildren are rude, greedy, and disrespectful to both my husband and me. We give them everything and there is never so much as a "thank you." In the past, when I brought up the idea of taking a trip to a nearby National Forest, my husband didn't seem so taken with the suggestion. However, fear not, parents of America. With a little persistence, and by presenting the simple facts of the matter, you can open anyone's eyes to the brilliance of abandoning your children in the woods. Did you know that "40% of kids in their 20s move back in with their parents at least once?" (Marantz) I don't know about you, but I sure wouldn't want my kids breathing down my neck when they are pushing 25.

It is also important to note that "the median age for marriage has risen drastically in barely a generation, from 21 for women and 23 for men in the 1970s, to 26 for women and 28 for men in 1990"(Marantz). This younger generation just isn't maturing and it is our job to help them along. After sharing these facts with my husband, we unanimously agreed to take a family trip to the most wild and scenic forest around and when those unruly urchins got back from gathering firewood my husband and I were halfway home.

Your children or stepchildren may encounter many things in the forest of your choice. Communion with nature is a very valuable experience that allows your offspring to get to know their natural surroundings as well as learning to respect and cherish it. By paying attention to wildlife, especially birds, they will learn many lessons and maybe even be able to follow these lessons to secure a way home. Simply traveling through a harsh environment will serve to strengthen their willpower. Enduring cold and hunger teaches them to be thankful for what they have when they get home. If your sons and daughters are able to learn self-sufficiency from the forest itself, this is a good sign, but if they encounter someone like a witch, intent on doing

them harm or even eating them, it is better. They will gain confidence, ingenuity, and imagination in escaping. Human beings, even young ones, are inherently resourceful, and when given the opportunity, they will rise to beat the odds.

Surviving a river crossing is an important experience for maturing youngsters; they will feel more pure and ready for adulthood after they have made it past difficulties posed by natural boundaries. The opportunities for bonding between siblings are endless as well. Putting them in the middle of the wilderness together is a good way to stop their incessant bickering. They will find that when depending on each other for survival it isn't in either one's best interest to fight all the time. Opportunities to help one bridge the difficult gap between youth and adulthood abound in the experience of being left in the woods with nothing but a few breadcrumbs and ingenuity to help one find one's way home.

In modern times, we have contrasting views on what makes an adult. At age 18, the youth of America are allowed to vote and to join the military, but it is not until 21 that it is legal for them to buy alcohol. Isn't it a little strange that adolescents who aren't mature enough to take anything seriously are allowed to drive at age 16? If we concentrate too much on numbers and ages we'll miss the fact that the next generation absolutely needs to be taught life skills at a young age so that we can usher them into maturity at least by the time that they finish college. Creativity, ingenuity, confidence, respect, kindness, and maturity are all attributes that can't be learned by watching TV and playing video games. Parents, if you want your children to cease being immature and dependent on you and to finally realize the gift of adulthood, then you must take drastic measures. Don't think of it as cruel or neglectful to leave your sons and daughters in a dark and scary forest. They will thank you in the end. What if they don't make it back? Well, then ask yourself: do you really want kids that aren't able to muster up what it takes to navigate their way home past raging rivers and evil old ladies? I didn't think so.

Dear Allen Ginsberg

ALEXANDER GIATRAKIS

Dear Allen Ginsberg,

Even though you died in 1997 and are still considered to be “a renowned poet who defied simple classification,” I believe that just like your biggest website (which happens to be a “.org” and everyone knows to trust a “.org” over any “.com”) is riddled with mistakes (i.e.: saying “or at ease,” when we all know it should be “or at least”), you “simply” don’t know what you’re talking about (Schumacher). I realize that you will never read this essay/letter because you are dead, but there really is no better way to write this “argument essay” than to write you a mock letter. So I continue (and for the purposes of this letter, I shall keep to the present tense). You, my dear Ginsie, have absolutely no clue as to what it actually means to be an American. You write poems like “America,” and yet you write purely about the pop culture of your time. This poem isn’t America, and the line, “It occurs to me that I am America” should have never occurred to you (Ginsberg 1052). You view America as simply, pure bleached flour. What didn’t you see? Did you not see millions of families struggling to raise their social class in a way that they simply couldn’t in any of their “mother countries?” What about the woman who takes two buses and a subway just to make it to her job on time? These same hardships still happen in my generation, circa 2010. Somehow, you seem to have blinded yourself from these realities. They are inconsequential to your writing because you don’t see this as actual America; what you do see are TV dinners. To you, common American values are “inauthentic,” and there should be a revolution in which we adopt Communism, which seems to be the major focal point of your poem “America.”

An “inauthentic life” has been the subject of many a story. Although Chuck Palahniuk’s book, *Fight Club*, wasn’t published until the year you died, it, like “America,” focuses on the concept of the “inauthentic life.” Palahniuk states, “You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life, then the perfect bed. The perfect drapes, the things you used to own, now own you” (Palahniuk 44). In order for one to be an “authentic self,” one shouldn’t follow into a predetermined mainstream mentality of buying things because so-and-so magazine makes it look like the “ideal” home. Ginsie, what is it that

you consider to be authentic? Does it happen to be “feeling sentimental about the Wobblies” (Ginsberg 1051)? Or, is it something so completely different that no one is able to comprehend? If so, then where would human interactions be on this scale of originality? Obviously, if we all wanted to be so different that no one could understand us, then no one would want to be our mate (for lack of a better term). Therefore, with whom would we procreate? The human species would have died out in its first years had you been around at the dawn of humanity and convinced everyone to try to be the most original meta-human s/he could be.

In your poem, “America,” what is the cure for unoriginality? Doing the opposite of whatever happened in American history. You state nearly every mainstream occurrence of your time and that you’d do the opposite. So, going by this logic, you’re just a series of opposites. In much of your writing, you never use any commas (when there most definitely should be), as your own personal way of rebelling against correct conventional English. You state things like, “I won’t say the Lord’s Prayer,” as one of your ways to rebel against America. Instead of reading *Time* magazine in open spaces, you’re ashamed of your obsession. “Its cover stares at me every time I slink by the corner candy store.” The hard “c” sounds in succession create the feeling that you’re choking on your words perhaps because you’re ashamed to be in front of such a common place: a candy store. Therefore, you “read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public library,” where no one can see you (Ginsberg 1051-52). What happened to not falling for the classic American stereotypes? You tried to be the opposite of mainstream America, yet you say, “I refuse to give up my obsession,” a trait most clearly linked to the American ideologies you so despise (Ginsberg 1051).

There is a “clique” that follows the dream of finding an authentic life. Do you know who they are? They’re called hipsters. Hipsters are false originalists or “faux-hernians” (Greif). They claim to be completely enlightened because they happen to wear their grandpa’s sweater and 50s glasses—even when they don’t need glasses. Stating the obvious is their game, and ruining nice things by mentioning them (to make it seem as though they were the only ones who had ever thought of them) is their game. Their view of originality means listening to indie rock and doing drugs,

kind of like how you, “smoke marijuana every chance (you) get,” almost like they are paying homage to your “great” legacy (Ginsberg 1051). Hipsters, in all of their irony, become offended when their originality is too inimitable. One conversation between me and a hipster involved their God: music. Hipster: “Do you know who this band is?” Me: “No.” Hipster: “Oh, yeah. I forgot you don’t like music.” Well, what if everyone were just like them? Would they still be original? Authentic even?

Revolution is a fantastic idea. Countless people have rebelled against unjust governments for the good of the people. So, I ask, is rebelling against TV dinners worth the upheaval of an entire government? You ask America, “When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?” or essentially, when will America be ready to adopt a Communist revolution? Yet, in your ideals about revolution, you take no action, for you have no passion for it and take lazy ways out. To quote you: “My mind is made up there’s going to be trouble. You should have seen me reading Marx” (1051); does that accomplish any goals? Just reading? What do you intend to do with that? Will a whole people rise with you after just *you* reading *Das Kapital*? No, they won’t, but you take no action. Instead, you write this poem.

Ginsie, I’m starting to think that you’re not interested in any of your “original” values. A quote comes to mind, “Had you been around two million years ago, I’m starting to suspect you people would have been ganging up with the primates against the dawn of humanity” (Millar 124). In the *Ultimate X-men* comics, Magneto said this to the X-men when they were foiling one of his many plots to usurp the human race. Now granted, you’re not trying to overthrow an entire species, but you’re trying to abolish a way of life you deem incorrect. If you had lived in Russia (or even visited there at all) you’d probably be the key proponent of capitalism (Shumacher). Thus, you just start a fight because you feel that your life is devoid of something, so you feel the need to rebel. A lot of people rebel, mostly teenagers, and as of right now, all I see you as, is a rebellious teenager, who simply hasn’t figured out his life. When you come up with a sensible solution to all of this “inauthenticity,” I will gladly be the first to read it.

Communism seems to be the answer to this question in which you propose: What does this revolution bring? Well, you didn't propose a way to rebel, so you're pretty much missing a step (just a small one). Even your version of Communism is flawed. You state, "America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic" (Ginsberg 1052). In this section of "America," some more of your logical fallacies appear. Under pure Communism there is no such thing as money, so, you've already mixed some of the diversity-enhancing capitalism that allows for creativity and unconformity with your cookie-cutter Communism, which doesn't have any use for money or religion.

Ginsie, I'm writing you this letter, because even though you're dead and will never read this, I've decided to make this exactly like I would, if I were debating you on my high school debate team (and trust me, we were good). I've decided to make this personal, and attack all of your poor points and bring into focus your "Logical Fallacies." You ask the question, "When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks," yet if everyone were the same under your Communism (which is an absurdity because you're trying to suggest that Communism will encourage more originality) then everyone would be on the same attractiveness level, thus not being able to buy anything with looks at all (Ginsberg 1051).

If I didn't write this essay, I would be disregarding every single "value" that I hold dear. You've clearly overestimated your writing and have made inconsistent points that lead to a false conclusion, if any conclusion at all. You've been vague throughout your main points and don't logically explain how it is that one can reach this enlightened stage of near-Communism. Had you not been a successful writer, and just one of the many hangers-on who value your work like Christians value The Bible, you would have turned out just like the SNL "I, Hippie" video. A burnout. You would have been someone who didn't do anything with his life and is currently working at Burger King, because you have been waiting for someone with actual passion to get things done ("I, Hippie").

Sincerely (Right-wing nut job),
Alexander Giatrakis

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Word / Image / Creative

Creative work encompasses multiple genres: poetry and verse, fiction, and visual media, such as graphic narrative. As with formal and informal essays, the style and the substance are related—but creative work often foregrounds this relationship—or uses the form to *add* meaning to the content—that would not be possible to do using other means.