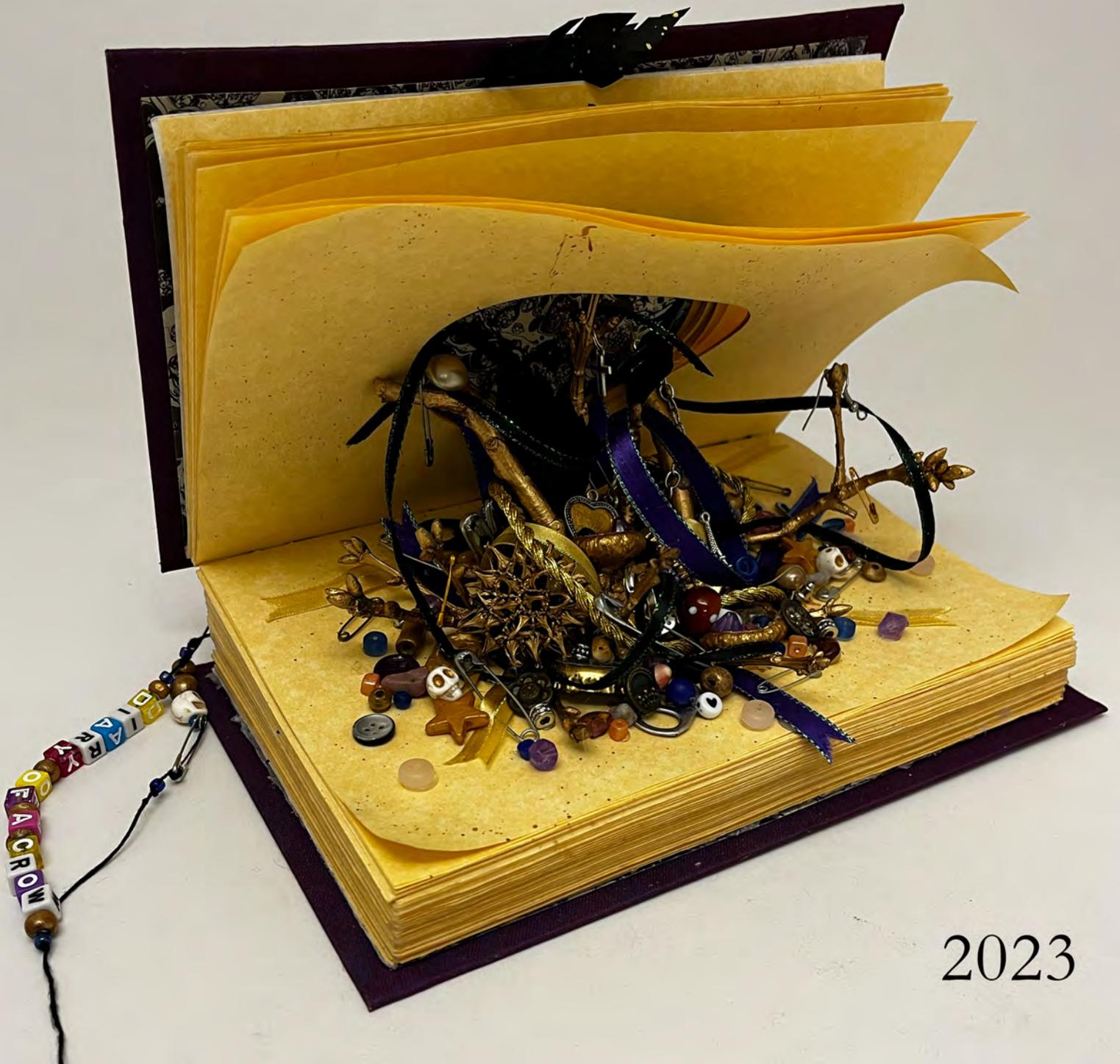


Synapt!c



2023

Synaptic

Synaptic is a digital and print publication celebrating the creative and intellectual work of Central students regardless of major or discipline. Work we are seeking may include creative writing, scholarly writing, artwork, set or costume design, photography, transcripts of podcasts and the like. Central faculty will nominate students for inclusion in this publication, citing the reasons why the student's work is notable. An editorial team of students and faculty advisors will review all submissions, selecting a limited number to be published.

Synaptic is expanding upon the success of *The Writing Anthology*, which Central has published for 42 years. We think of *Synaptic* as a modern reboot of *The Writing Anthology* that seeks to build on the best parts of this earlier publication while taking into account the ways in which print, visual, and audio media have changed across the first two decades of the twenty-first century. We seek to showcase outstanding student writing as well as outstanding multimedia and multimodal student work that doesn't fit easily under the heading of "writing," such as audio projects, video projects, and visual projects of any kind. *Synaptic* will both showcase the outstanding work of our students and more accurately reflect all that Central's liberal arts experience has to offer students.

Why the title *Synaptic*?

"Synaptic" is a descriptive word that evokes "synapse," or "the junction...between two neurons or nerve-cells." Etymologically, the word comes from the Greek for "to join," and, for us at *Synaptic*, the term evokes the spark that comes from intellectual and/or creative connection. It is also connected to the word "synapsis," which, in the 17th century, meant "connection" broadly speaking and, in a more modern scientific definition, signifies "chromosomal pairing during the zygotene stage of meiosis." *Synaptic* brings together analytical writing and creative work from across the college and features work that is making the kinds of connections we so much value here at our liberal arts college. The biological definition foregrounds our commitment to featuring writing across the college, and it relates to the early stages of reproduction; we invite you, our authors, artists, and readers, to think of this publication as an origin point for the students featured here. At *Synaptic*, Central students come into being as published writers, artists, designers, podcasters, and filmmakers.

Edited by Emma Carlson, Mattie Francis, and Sydney Lowe

Advisors: Dr. Valerie Billing and Dr. Katherine Nesbit

Art selected in part by Fynn Wadsworth and Amelia Brown

Cover Art by Fynn Wadsworth was selected by Dr. Valerie Billing and Mathew Kelly as the image embodied the diverse eclectic range of creative and scholarly work across the Central College campus.

A Publication of the Department of Language, Literature and Communication and the
Department of Visual and Performing Arts

Visit Central.edu/Anthology to view the digital version of *Synaptic*.

Central College Pella, Iowa
2023

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 43rd edition of *The Writing Anthology* – now known as *Synaptic*. Founded in 1981 by now-retired Central College professor Dr. Walter Cannon, *Synaptic* provides an annual assemblage of remarkable student work that covers a wide array of academic disciplines. This year was the most competitive cycle yet. Following a review and conference about dozens of outstanding student submissions, our editorial team has selected the following pieces for publication. It is never easy to make the necessary cuts. However, we are happy to shoulder the burden. It serves as testimony to the incredible and plentiful talents of Central College students. As both editors and fellow students, we are proud to amplify their exceptional efforts.

The standard definition of a synapse involves neuroscientific knowledge, microscopic details about the inner workings of a human brain. Beyond biology, synapses fundamentally pertain to connection, to junctures and boundaries and bridges between ideas. As *Synaptic* marks the integration of the Arts and English departments to form a more cohesive publication, we are proud to feature works that honor academic and creative relationships. Take Carter Piagentini’s “Remedial Poetry,” for instance – a work that combines powerful reflection on the American educational system with incredible lyricism, or Cade Boucher’s “My Dear Wormwood” which melds philosophy and comedy into an effective analysis of C.S. Lewis. Writing is not the only way to break boundaries either. Madilyn Peitzmen’s intricate depiction of a lively forest scene blurs the line between illustration and three-dimensional storytelling, and Sara Sienkiewicz’s gorgeous still-life painting of flowers and strawberries demands an opinion on what is real and what is merely an imitation.

Each year, the John Allen Award is awarded to a piece of student writing that the selection panel deems to have superior rhetorical competence, high levels of readability, originality, and insight. This year, we are pleased to announce that Fynn Wadsworth has received this honor for his work “Robert Henri and the Ideal Woman: An Analysis of *Ballet Girl in White*.” Masterfully, Wadsworth supplies insightful analysis into the context from which this painting was born; arguing that, considering the early 20th-century time period, the artwork is exceptional in both its visual beauty and its unusual compassion for women. The thesis is flawlessly demonstrated through Wadsworth’s close and clear examination of both primary and secondary sources – leaving his audience with a rare and delicious sense of optimistic certainty. It is no exaggeration to claim that Wadsworth’s combination of words and artwork embodies the true connective spirit of *Synaptic*.

We would like to extend our formal congratulations to all the students whose work is featured in this year’s pages. Additionally, we would like to sincerely thank the professors who recognized the brilliance of these pieces and submitted them for our judgment. Furthermore, we must thank Mat Kelly, Associate Professor of Art, and Brian Roberts, Professor of Art, for presenting us with excellent student artwork. We would also like to thank Professor Kelly for spearheading many of the changes that accompany our transition into *Synaptic*, and for designing the cover using artwork by Fynn Wadsworth. Also, we would like to thank Jordan Bohr and the student workers of the Central College Communications Office for their efforts in bringing The Writing Anthology’s website to life. We also express our thanks to Steffanie Bonnstetter for her advice. Of course, our biggest thanks are owed to our faculty advisor Dr. Valerie Billing for not only providing her usual guidance but also facilitating the recent expansion of the anthology into *Synaptic*. We would also like to thank our guest editor Dr. Kate Nesbit for bringing her expertise to this new edition. Thank you both for your commitment, attention to detail, hard work, patience, flexibility, and advice. Again, we must extend our sincerest gratitude to everyone who made this publication possible. We hope you enjoy the 2023 anthology!

Emma Alex Carlson ‘23
Mattie Francis ‘23
Sydney Lowe ‘24

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Remedial Poetry

Carter Piagentini

Writing Tutor Practicum

As part of the Writing Tutor Practicum, I ask students to explore memorable moments in their literacy history in a literacy autobiography to help them learn about themselves as writers and readers and to prepare them to work with their peers on their writing. In this essay, Carter explores the negative and haunting impact of remedial reading teaching on him and his writing, and he describes his first foray into the realm of poetry. In the end, he declares his independence from prescriptive literacy practices, a reminder we all need from time to time.

Dr. Sue Pagnac

I'm often haunted by the feeling of being called out of my 2nd-grade class during the middle of a lesson to go practice my reading skills every week. An old lady would quietly peek her head through the door, whisper something to the teacher, and then I would find myself being led down the hall to a different room. Eventually, this became an unspoken contract. She peeked her head into the classroom and I reluctantly got up and shamefully walked down to that same room to find myself a seat at the elbow-shaped table among some of my classmates. They also had to withstand this same weekly misfortune.

We would watch as the reading teacher would reach behind her and pull out papers from a red folder and then slide one to each of us from across the table—a new story we would have to decipher. My eyes would immediately begin to panic at the sight of all the words and the length of the paragraphs and in their silent trepidation, an overwhelming signal of distress would be sent to my brain, effectively dazing it. With alarm, I waited reluctantly for my turn to read the next paragraph out loud. A classmate finished their paragraph and as a wave of relief revitalized them, my heart would stop in a worried anticipation. Would she call my name next? “Carter!” She would say, beckoning me to start reading.

I would slowly begin reading with audible agitation. With every word I pitifully uttered, my heart pumped more and more apprehension through my body. The reading teacher's glare was withering, and I would no longer be able to contain my anxiety. The words I was reading would start to trip over my tongue and my perturbation would start to pour out of my skin. My face would turn hot under the scorching gaze of the teacher as I started fumbling. A mistake! The teacher would sternly correct my pronunciation and I would quickly continue. Maybe if I finished swiftly then all the attention would divert onto the next person. It always did.

This dreaded event would continue until fourth grade, when I was finally withdrawn from this extra service. Instead, I was now given a third of a sheet of paper that contained 3 unpunctuated sentences and was expected to correctly place squiggles and dots—that I later would learn were called commas and periods. These ‘mini-tests’ would be handed back to me with a new, large red marking that would bleed heavily to the other side of the paper that typically read “C.” This letter deterred me from reading and writing and I often felt that the subjects had a special contempt for someone of my ineptitude.

These are the first literacy experiences I can recall. Well, these and the crying that would ensue immediately after. I think that this ‘reading and grammar performance’ fear has subconsciously festered inside my mind and, even now, has resulted in an inconclusive habit I've created. For the hour after finishing an essay, I will read and reread it until my eyes are completely fried. Then, under the guise of telling myself I'm done,

I'll finally submit the finished essay, walk away from my computer to pace about what I just did, and then find myself exasperatedly rereading my already submitted essay. Sometimes this agitation even continues into me creating hypothetical responses in preparation to defend my work. After all, fourth grade me wasn't capable of refuting a C that was written in permanent red Sharpie, but maybe college sophomore me would be able to justify my rhetoric and comma usage.

This is the barrage I face when assigned a writing assignment: an endeavor of constantly plugging sentences into Grammarly and paragraphs into PaperRater to make sure they are refined to an unequivocal paragon of correct punctuation. And as I reflect on these memories and habits, I feel a scared thought of incompetence that has been perpetuated in my writing career. This idea that controls my writing process and decrees for a linear, cut and dry path in an expansive, creative craft. I want to say that this intimidating resource room teacher and these abrasive, red C's have caused me to not only fixate on perfection in my writing but also on my writing's cohesion.

I write my essays from top to bottom. I start with my introductory paragraph, trudge through my body paragraphs, and then regurgitate a synopsis for my conclusion paragraph. I don't dare to mess up this order. Part of me might say that this is the method that works best for me, but another part, one that might be less bitter towards revealing these sensibilities, would probably relate this method to the feeling of ineptitude I felt while decrypting new stories and decoding the secret usages of commas. I understand and grew up with that feeling of not being able to just 'get it.' I find my direct method to have resulted from these feelings of incompetence because if I don't write as linearly as my train of thought, I fear my work will suffer from a loss of intelligibility. I desperately want my works to be clear and reasonable, unlike those stories I couldn't grasp.

Eventually sapped by these step-by-step laid out directions of how to write an essay, I started dabbling in poetry. I was enamored with being able to cut a line in half at whim or even end and start a new stanza with the reasoning being "because I felt like it." This isn't an aspect I've found to be true for academic essays. And with academic essays, I must support my ideas. I must cite a myriad of sources to analyze an experience, even if it is my own experience. But poetry wasn't like that. Poetry could just be a thought that existed for the sole purpose of existence. Poetry can not languish from a lack of sources nor must it be burdened by constant formality.

Typically, I started these explorations near midnight. Although my eyes would ache to sleep, my mind would often refuse them the indulgence of rest. Instead, it would remain a hardwired machine that would jump from thought to thought, vigilantly analyzing each one as not to miss a single infinitesimal detail. Eventually, it would stumble upon a phrase or idea that it enjoyed:

It was easier to lie and say what I'm not,/Instead of explaining everything I thought.

When this happened, my arm would surge towards my phone to quickly write down that phrase before my brain forgot it in its volatility. If that sentence was lucky, my mind would fixate on it causing me to repeat this action of adding a few more lines:

I lived a prevarication,/Because the words we lost in simple translation.//I deluded my friends, and those who surround me./All simply because my thoughts would flee. After another sentence or two, I would turn back

over and try to rest. But my mind is still discontent with not having explored this topic completely. Again, I'm reaching for my phone, but this time, it's to finish the poem:

It was easier to lie and say what I'm not,
Instead of explaining everything I thought.
I lived a prevarication,
Because the words were lost in simple translation.

I deluded my friends, and those who surround me.
All simply because my thoughts would flee.
From brain to mouth, my words would smudge,
And to this day my tongue won't budge.

I'm still searching for a word to describe who I am,
But until then, I'm simply a scam.
So I'll lie and say what I'm not,
Because it's easier than saying my innermost thoughts.

This was the result of my first venture into poetry. An outlet where I no longer had to fear a misplaced comma or poor source usage in my exploration of my gay identity. This craft's lessons prevailed in my academic writing process as well. In poetry, I was required to give constant thought to my previous line and this attentiveness would carry over into my inner essayist. I now pause, significantly more times than the word 'often' suggests, in order to examine the current shape of my work and where it is going. If my poetry can directly portray a message by using so little words, then why must my writings be weighed with trivial fluff? They don't.

Excerpts from Sexuality and Confinement

Carter Piagentini

ENGL 216: LGBTQ+ Literature and Culture

Carter wrote this powerful collection of poems for his final project, which also included an extensive paper engaging several course texts as well as research in sociology, psychology, and literary study. In this collection, Carter experiments widely with form and imagery in order to explore broad questions about how sexuality operates as a confining force for queer individuals. Here, he provides his poems along with an author's note summarizing his aims.

Dr. Valerie Billing

As a gay man, I started realizing the many ways sexuality affects my life when I noticed that others tended to use the word “gay” to describe me as if my identity and personhood are predicated on my sexuality. Not only did I find this word in others’ descriptions of me, but also in my descriptions of myself—after all, I even started this author’s note with “as a *gay* man.” Ultimately, whatever I’m described as, it will always be subsequent to the label “gay.”

This unspoken obligation to use “gay” as a prefix engenders in me and in many other queer individuals a feeling of being confined by sexuality. However, upon researching why sexuality has this intrinsically confining feeling, I found that a lot of contemporary discourses draw from the concept of internalized homophobia, defined by social sciences as a queer individual’s redirection of societal disdain inwards toward themselves. And although I agree that internalized homophobia in part explains why sexuality can feel confining, I contend that it fails to capture the full range of aspects that contribute to these feelings of sexual confinement.

In this poetry collection, I endeavor to expand the language available to talk about this feeling beyond just the discourse of internalized homophobia. To accomplish this expansion, this collection meditates on social, physical, cultural, metaphysical, political, and religious factors that together contribute to these feelings of entrapment, suppression, and confinement. I hope to capture and reaffirm these feelings for a queer audience while also depicting them for a nonqueer audience to understand. While reading this collection, I invite you to consider the many ways sexuality interacts with every aspect of life and to embrace and sit with some of the discomforts that might arise when reading this collection. It is, after all, through discomfort that we best come to know ourselves and others.

***Note: The poems that follow are excerpted from a longer original collection.*

Sacrificial Dagger

Plunge that dagger deep in your heart

Because the moment you stop feeling its burden,

You will fall apart;

And plunge that dagger deep in your brain

Because the moment that thought returns,

You can no longer feign;

And plunge that dagger deep in your eyes

Because the moment they wander,

You tear your guise;

And plunge that dagger through your lips

Because the moment they become unpierced,

A sin you will commit;

And plunge that dagger between your legs

Because the moment it yearns—

You will never be the same.

Languish: that's the dagger's toll;

But once

it is plunged,

you might

live normal.

Deliverance

I wear a crown of madness,
Endowed to me by the prophets,
As they impel me towards a flawed rapture;

I will never feel their solace.

And when they dunk my head in the water,
Its sanctuary seeks to scorch and ravage
And rupture and puncture holes in my eyes,
For the barricade of murky ink to slowly drain out.
Then I can make the right decision:

The decision to break my petrification,
And join the choir of decadent halos
That illuminate elite, pure robes,
Embellished with beguiling gold.

It is opulence; it is grandiosity; it is deliverance—
It is ruin.

Opal

My body is an Opal.
It is more than the crimson color that is my veins,
And its deep cobalt surpasses beyond its internal,
opalescent banes;
Unequivocally, it is beautiful.

It is the mixture of the flashy gold that a topaz displays,
With the depth of an amethyst in a pensive, internal dismay,
That defies the lustrous scarlet of pink Rubies and garnet,
And outshines the oppressive, sulky Sapphires;
For as it is padparadscha in its colorful play.

My body is an Opal.
And even though the Sapphires and Rubies
May reduce my shine to a shimmer,
My body will still glimmer through the potch.

Because my body is an Opal;
And unequivocally, it is beautiful.

Specter

They can hear the chains

of shackles,

dragging... clanking... rustling...

It tolls them.

They're already dead.

bleeding... hemorrhaging... exsanguinating...

A graveyard of

Hospital cots.

Epitaphs:

1981-the end?

A Specter stays,

shackled... chained... bound...

Haunting this forlorn hospital:

A graveyard

Of elders—

We will never know

Their secrets.

Only a reverberation

Of their bleeding trauma.

We can hear the Specter's chains.

And it still tolls.

Iron and Blood

Sophia Fritz

LAS 110: Intersections

Sophia composed this poem as part of her final project in my section of Intersections, which is titled “Read Like a Poet.” The poem is well-crafted and vivid, with imagery calculated to elicit a physical reaction from readers. It gives voice to a speaker who is germophobic and experiences intense anxiety when in close proximity to her lover. Sophia was nominated by her classmates to read this poem at the Intersections Celebration of Learning, an event that showcased the highest-achieving work of the first-year class.

Dr. Valerie Billing

Caress my tea-stained lips with your cracked fingertips
to send shivers across my brittle skin.
The chill shatters my spill gates and raises
the fair hairs across my field of skin.

I yearn for this closeness, but
Keep your hands off me,
or the grime might permeate my pale skin
and transfer fragments of impurity.

Fingernails shuck cuticles like corn,
but this is no farmer’s harvest.
Blood swarms crevices between flesh and nail
as you pull back from my trembling body.

How do iron and blood differ?
They both reek of anxiety and toil
Both thread structures for support.
So, really, they’re quite similar

and remind me to wrap my wounds
under band-aids until they scab over
so your soot and my salted eyes
don’t creep into my bloodstream.

You warm another cup of tea
Knowing that it’s time to go.

Now, I understand that we are like iron and blood.
One, a solid foundation. The other, an escape artist.

Let His Home Be Mine Too

Allyna Inn

SUST 125: Introduction to Global Sustainability

During our Introduction to Sustainability course, students explore their connections to the natural world around them in several assignments. In this piece, Allyna tries to understand her father's longing for his native Cambodia. She does this by describing how she experiences Cambodia as a visitor. Her detailed descriptions allow readers to see what she sees as she wrestles with the country's painful history and the scars it left on her family. Her central question asks how her father loves Cambodia (home) despite the war-ravaged bodies of his family and friends that are buried beneath the surface.

Dr. Paulina Mena, Dr. Shelley Bradfield, and Dr. Sue Pagnac

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

–Warsan Shire

Home. If I had a penny every time my father said the word home, I'd be richer than Bill Gates. Although I am not speaking of the home he comes to after work every day. Not the ranch-style house in the south side of Des Moines, but *his* home—home in Cambodia where his work schedule would vary on the seasons and the birth rate of the cows. Home, where winter was hotter than summer days of Iowa, winter where needing any sort of long-sleeved top was deemed unnecessary. I would close my eyes, imagining what warmth I would have felt in the foreign heat despite the coldness of Iowa prickling at my skin under my coat. I found it strange how my father would mention a home thousands of miles away, but did not see the home he had created here in America—though, I suppose a home he loves was different from the home he had created.

It was eccentric for my middle-school self to pack sweaters on a trip to Cambodia, but I assumed I would need them since we were flying from the winter storms of Iowa to summer paradise in Cambodia. It caused some clothing catastrophes. I can easily recall the scorching weather against my skin that seeped through the seams of my jeans when I stepped out from my aunt's grand home, one she built off the money my father had sent from his hard work in America. Right away, a cow and her two calves steer their heads in my direction, then slowly turn away as they stroll through the rest of the unnamed neighborhood. What I found rather peculiar here in Cambodia was how, unlike in America, there were no such things as addresses. Instead, it was a sequence of lefts and rights.

My father's home was nothing like the one he told me in his stories – farms, war, landmines, and whatnot. Instead, what stood in front of me were marble homes with a vast open land, stretching out before you could even reach the front steps. Its large white beams held a balcony that allowed anyone to graze their fingers against the humid surface. When I raised my hand to cover the light of the sun, my skin glowed and a warm golden aura would embrace my palm. Light would pour through the gaps between my digits and in a way, it reminded me of my father. My father resembled the warmth and brilliant rays that held me on the coldest days. He was my sun that I would often find myself looking upwards at in a daze. Perhaps it was just the relationship of father and daughter, but even so, I do not think he realizes just how much of an enlightening person he may be in my eyes. His light guides me through the dark, the same way his words would encourage me to plow through anything that stops my own light. My father was such an empowering individual that I could not help but be enchanted by every thought that crossed his mind. I believed that whatever he said, it was nothing but the truth. My father's story reminds me that, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie).

I recall traveling to Cambodia for my very first time expecting rurality to cover the entire country where life was a struggle to bear through, but this peaceful life my family in Cambodia had lived was nothing like the story my father had informed of. There was air conditioning in each room and functioning cars that naturally occupied the space in the living room with no sort of barrier that separated the room from the outside. The biodiversity underneath my sandals was a great assortment that thrived graciously. The grass was still wet from dew, coruscating underneath the blistering rays of the heat. The flowers embraced the front gates as if they were the barriers themselves—preventing any form of intrusion with their captivating violet and yellow ombre. I cherished this home my father had loved so much, inhaling the fresh air that felt so light compared to the air in America where the flow of traffic stained my lungs with black smoke.

I would lean against the car window with intrusive thoughts on how many lives rested underneath the dirt road my family and I traveled on. A thought would often haunt me: Why does he love home so much when home became a graveyard of his friends, his family, and childhood? War took his home away. It created too many awful memories and yet here my father was – recalling all the precious memories of his home. From smiling at the naked children jumping into creeks, to the way cows would cause an upstir in traffic. He smiled at everything as if the lives underneath us were nonexistent.

Walking barefoot outdoors was rather common in Southeast Asian countries, and I would often find myself doing exactly that to answer my own pondering questions. I was trying to understand why my father had loved Cambodia so much despite the horrible memories home had. I remember the first time my foot touched the orange-stained sand in which many species of insects had inhabited. The sand dipped under my weight as if making room for another species inhibiting its grainy walls. My toes curled and the sand began to climb the gaps between my toes and ultimately leaving a warm, bristling sensation. I walked, dipping my feet into the nearby creek, flinching at how brisk the water was. The tiny bits of sand dispersed and traveled into the tide like blood cells through capillaries. Over in the distance and beyond the creek was an open land – untouched, and it stretched beyond the horizon from what I could see.

At the time, my cousins' chatter synced with the chirping of the laughingthrush birds. Their white winged eyeliner left streaks of their presence within my peripheral vision as they flew past. The beating of their rounded, feathered, and chocolate-tinted wings contrasted against the beryl sky; there was not a single cloud in sight. The laughingthrush is a common bird in Cambodia and other regions of tropical Asia ("Beauty of Birds"). These unique birds are categorized under the Leiothrichidae family of Old World passerine birds and are diverse in size and coloration so seeing an identical bird is very unlikely. Their vocals were like a banshee amongst the land—a discord that I found soothing in the moment. Everything seemed so surreal. It was as if these laughingthrushes were singing to me about what nature was— a mixture of beauty and dissonance that want to disagree with each other, but ended up orchestrating a euphonic tune. The balanced synchronization was suddenly disrupted when the cool water crashed and the screech of my playing cousins intruded my thoughts. I blinked, and a war flashed on that open land. Again, I asked myself: Why does he love home so much, when home became a graveyard of his friends, his family, and childhood?

I wondered how many lives lay underneath the new soil of the land. How many fathers, mothers, and friends rest underneath the soles of my feet. I wondered if my uncle, aunt, or cousins rest here on this battlefield. Even so, above their corpses was a beautiful field of staggered grass with different shades of green illuminated

under the sun. The breeze carried a calming chill down my spine as well as a whiff of new life and scents of various flowers.

I learned to place my palm against the breathing soil, feeling the heartbeat of those who were lost on this land, fleeing or fighting a pointless battle. War was a horrible, but natural occurrence that destroyed lives of all kinds— humans, animals, and even the dirt that brought forth new life. It truly is upsetting to know that what lies underneath is the result of what humans are capable of, specifically the destruction humans can cause. It is misleading to see this scenery. It is easy to forget the war of greed and gore, so I implore humanity to consider this battle a lesson to learn and realize that their brutal actions will always leave a trail within the soul of nature. “But if we woke up to our place in the world, we would see the amazing intricacy of nature and our part in it, and the amazing damage we can do” (Farrell 33). My hands grazed the sharp grass, feeling their moistness and soft *hush* sound they made upon brushing against each other. It was quiet here and it truly reminded me of how much of a graveyard this land can be.

Nature is an interesting topic to bring up. I, myself, was never the type to take time to explore the wonders of the outdoors; however, I learned that nature of all life moves in a peculiar cycle. Although fatality and cataclysm take the lives of living things, life will always seem to return and brush away any trace of hurt and sorrow. Nature was calming, and peaceful, like a strum from a guitar that created the perfect chord. My father’s home was without a doubt beautiful, and his connection with the land of Cambodia was strong, that not even painful memories would hold him back. His entire life was dedicated to coming back home after leaving, and to abandon that connection was like abandoning a part of who he is.

My father had accepted the new life and dealt away with the mass pain of watching his home fall into darkness. When he smiled, yellow stained teeth showing, it was the brightest I had ever seen when he was home. He was the sun that nurtured me as his flower of a daughter, leaving the war behind to bring me into this world.

It is bewildering to assume that home is structural, but I see that home is a feeling. The feeling of rejuvenation, history, and connection. In Cambodia, I felt the life of the land that made my father the man that he is. I felt as if I understood him more. Nature helped me understand what made his home, *home*, but it was not only his. I let his home be mine too.

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Mortality, Cuticles, and the Best Way to Slice an Apple

Mattie Francis

ENGL 240: The Personal Essay

In a lyric essay, the writer works by art of indirection, presenting the reader with a set of disparate particulars and then writing toward a point of connection. For her final project, Mattie opted for this difficult form as a way of communicating the experience of existential anxiety. Using particulars such as her great-grandmother's quilt, a pesky hangnail, Jerry Spinelli's Milkweed, and the skin of an apple, Mattie's writing invites readers to join in her experience. The particulars are, at first blush, unrelated; however, careful readers will note the connective tissue: picking, fidgeting, skin, fluids, stains, wax, among others. With the "bare-bones" assembled into a loosely connected whole, the shape nudges readers to acknowledge their own fragile and vulnerable bodies.

Mattie's writing is at once beautiful and haunting.

Dr. Lance Dyzak

I can't tell where the plum tree used to be. The year before it died it produced a singular plum. My parents let me eat it. Juice dribbled down my arm and into my sweatshirt sleeve as I mouthed at the soft skin. Delicious. The next year, my dad was pulling its poor corpse out of the ground with a chain and his black pickup. When its roots came up covered in earth and its form laid stretched out on the ground, it looked like a woman reaching above her head.

At the time, my third grade class was doing projects on news stories. Mine was about a man who thought he had a tumor, but it turned out to be a pea plant growing in the humidity of his lungs. If I swallowed the last plum pit, would the same happen to me?

I chew lightly at the side of my thumb. I look at the plum woman's dry branches. There are dark spots in her bark that look like shocked eyes and a mouth in the middle of a scream.

The quilt is suffocating me. I kick it off and rub my hot face into the ridged fabric of my grandparents' futon. I'm sticky. A bead of sweat trickles from my armpit down my ribs. Dim orange light from the streetlamp filters through the living room window. I poke around for the quilt at my feet. Got it. There's a hole in the top layer of fabric that I like to pick at. The quilt depicts children playing with a ball and a stick. They all have the same face – big, round eyes and massive foreheads. Some of them are upside down, running towards the ball that matches the fabric of their outfits. A girl in orange gingham might be my favorite. She's much closer to her ball than the others. Great-grandma must have misjudged the distance. A boy in soft blue polka-dots is missing his head. I pull some of the loose stitching. He is split down the middle now. Grandma won't like that. I tug at the fabric until the little boy in blue is severed from the ball he chases. Some of the stuffing falls out.

It's so *hot* in this room. I'm in hell. I'm burning. I'm dying.

The ceiling fan spins lazily above me.

The bathroom is three feet away from the futon I'm melting into. I extract myself from my wet, scalding cocoon to splash cool water on my neck. I text my parents on the flip phone I got for my eighth birthday: *I think I have a fever. Please pick me up.* Date night is officially over.

My grandparents are disappointed. It's nine o'clock at night and they've been in bed for two hours. Sleep crusts the deep lines in their faces. I know I don't have a fever. I just can't breathe in that house.

Grandpa hugs me. His belly is hard. It protrudes past his belt like he swallowed a classroom globe and

can't get it back out. He enjoys a beer and a nap in his La-Z-Boy after work. There's a hole in the back of his nightshirt. I tug a little. The cheap fabric gives easily.

I get in my mom's blue Subaru. It's December, but I leave my window down even after I'm done waving goodbye.

I'm finally cool when we pull into our driveway. It's lined with apple trees covered in blankets of snow that sparkle under the white light of the headlights. Deer love the frozen, fallen apples. None are out tonight though.

I'm reading *Milkweed* on the loveseat across from my grandpa's hospital bed. He took off his seventies style glasses with two wires across the nose. Aviators. His face looks gray and vulnerable without them. His eyes are watery and small. Pink around the edges.

I roll the edge of the page I'm on between my fingers. The librarian might have something to say about that. Any books I checked out in middle school were subject to foul treatment. I wasn't one of her favorite students. When I let go, the page curls in on itself like a scroll.

Grandpa needs a piss so I step out. I can't sit on the floor of the hospital. I'll definitely catch something. I lean against the wall, my finger keeping my place in the book. Nurses in pale blue scrubs rush by me. I blend into the wall. Doctors walk slower. Most of them have clipboards at their sides. I wonder if they actually read what's in them.

Grandpa calls out that it's clear now. The whole room smells like his piss. I wish I could open a window. His incontinence bottle sits on the tray by his bed. I can't let him know I smell it. He'd be so embarrassed. They're pretty sure he is going to die soon, so I try to give him as much respect as I can.

I resume my position on the floral loveseat, *Milkweed* in hand. I'm at the part about stone angels. I try to hold my body still like Misha and feel the hard wings sprout from my shoulder blades. I fail immediately. I can't stop the twirling and folding. All of *Milkweed's* pages are curled at the edges. The librarian might have something to say about that. I was never one of her favorite students.

I pick at the strands of dead skin around my finger nails. I think it's past the point of a hangnail. Sensitive crimson caverns line the thin tissue on all ten of my fingers. I can't stop making them. I rip and chew and shred and taste the loose flesh there. I dig, starting at the bottom of the nail, where most people have pretty pink crescent moons over smooth and undisturbed skin. I excavate the surface until I hit the pink and watery level below. It's tender. I rub the not-blood around on my thumb. It stings. Whatever I have on my hand, oil, sanitizer, irritates the new wound. Sometimes when I pick my skin bleeds. My thumbs are my favorite. Most surface area I guess. If I bloody it, I put my thumb inside my mouth and suck like a child. Copper. Metallic and slick and disgusting. I wait a few minutes. Check to see if it's done bleeding. A sting of spit follows my thumb from my mouth.

Everyone in the lecture hall must think I'm crazy. Sucking on my thumb in class. I put my mangled thumb back in my mouth after studying it intently. At least no one is facing me. The girl in front of me must dye her own hair. There is a patch of gray-brown in the center of her head that auburn dye didn't reach. I wonder if the color suits her. I press my bloody thumb to the outside of my jeans.

I accumulate a lot of stains.

I'm nervous she's not coming. Driving in the rain was frightening. I'm not used to driving in shit weather — my license is only a month old as it sits in my wallet. I haven't touched the menu. I'm tying the paper straw wrapper into knots as the bell above the door rings.

My cousin, Mila, slides into the booth across from me, her wet clothes squeaking on the vinyl seat. She looks awful. Her dark hair is plastered to the sides of her long, drawn face. She is pale and cold and small. I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. She orders a long island iced tea and extra napkins.

Maybe meeting today was a bad idea. We get Mexican food every week or so. La Herradura downtown has peach salsa we both go mad over. Elaine's fingers press deep into her eye sockets, so hard it looks painful, before she speaks.

"You think you want the weather to match the grief. So, freezing rain would be perfect. But, it actually just makes burying a child even worse."

I swallow the bloody spit that had pooled in my mouth after I bit down on my lip too hard. A stain on the white of my sleeve stands out. I can't tell if I spilled salsa or if I opened my mouth and bloody saliva dribbled out. I rub the red around on my forearm.

She tells me about the way her neighbor boy died. She'd only babysat him a few times. He loved his fire truck and wearing his sister's headbands as hats. A drunk driver crashed through the family's living room. He was the youngest of five children.

The waitress brings the long island iced tea, but she forgets the napkins.

There's supposed to be a crunch. The soft flesh of the apple gives way too easily. The inside is grainy like sand. *Bleh*. I spit. Not far enough. Some of the apple-mush falls onto my white shirt. I turn the treacherous thing in my hands. It's overripe. The skin is deep red, like blood or a merlot, and it has dark freckles. My mom used to tell me that those are butterfly eggs. If you get close, you'll see that each freckle is in fact a colony of minute black dots. I toss the apple as far as I can through the corridor of the orchard. It's always well shaded. Our trees are too tall. Too mature. Their branches tangle with each other. Their roots probably do the same. A disease recently swept through the orchard. The stumps of the infected trees slump like gravestones. The survivors look especially strong next to them. I search for a perfectly ripe Red Delicious. It's difficult to find.

In fall, the sickly-sweet ferment of our fallen apples perfumes the air. You aren't supposed to eat them after they fall to the ground. You could get salmonella. But the bees love them.

When we first moved to this house in 2008 I pictured all of our bountiful harvests. Apples, pears, grapes, and plums from trees we didn't plant. No holes were dug by our hands. All the hard work was done.

Sometimes our apples are delicious. They're sweeter than the ones in the grocery store. Their skin is thinner and easier to bite through. I'd never cut one of our apples with a knife. I think it affects the flavor. Grocery store apples are coated in an edible wax. That's why they're so shiny.

I rub another apple on my shirt. I press hard. When I take it away, its polished surface bares my warped, red reflection. There's a gray splotch on my shirt now. Dirty fruit. I take a monster bite. Sweet and crisp.

Some flesh tastes better than others.

They're glossy. Pine, walnut, cherry, mahogany, oak. Stacked like bunk beds. I place my hand on top of one whose little name plaque reads: "Congressman." Another is named "President." "Monarch." I walk down the center aisle lined with coffins. My friend wants to be a mortician some day. Odd for a twenty-something. She asked if I'd come with her on a tour of a mortuary she wanted to intern at. I couldn't tell her no. She chatters incessantly with the short, balding man leading us around. He's surprised by her enthusiasm. I think he was handsome at one point. He has clear blue eyes that would be startling if he didn't wear such thick glasses. I feel underdressed. He's wearing a light gray suit and she's wearing a long black dress. I pull at a thread on my sweater.

We go through the double doors in the back of a winding hallway. "Staff Only." In the center of the room is a long steel table with a sink at its head. He talks about how the drainage from the bodies goes into the sewer system. Blood and feces and urine and the contents of their stomachs. It's not a health hazard, he says. Most dead bodies aren't.

He shows us the long, pointed tube he uses to pierce the arteries. Then he pumps chemicals in to remove all of the natural fluids that make us rot faster. He jokes that we have a natural highway that makes his job easier. Our arteries and veins help him siphon out our blood.

He takes out the wax he uses to sculpt back on missing body parts. Noses are difficult, he says. They're the fingerprint of the face. If he gets it wrong, the corpse will be unrecognizable. I nod. This makes sense. Our flesh is not easy to replicate.

I shudder in repressed horror. I should have said no to this tour.

I had a dream the night before about being buried alive.

I hear the muffled chirping of birds. My breath is shallow. I feel the hot puffs reflected back into my face. I try to sit up, but my forehead scratches against the rough wood of the pine box. I press my nose against a crack in the wood. It smells like dark earth. Some of it crumbles down onto my chest and in my eyes. I blink rapidly and move to brush it off of my shirt. The box is too shallow. My arms stay pinned to my sides. It's dark in here. Deeper than nothing.

I pause. I inhale again. I swear I can smell the foul and saccharine soil of our orchard. Did they bury me with a headstone of rotted wood? I know the bark is gray like ash. The stump will crumble like dry sand.

I think about screaming. Instead, I roll the loose skin of my thumb with my pointer finger.

My Dear Wormwood

Cade Brouwer

PHIL 282: The Philosophy of C.S. Lewis

After reading Lewis' The Screwtape Letters (a book of fictional letters from a lord demon to an underling demon about collecting souls for hell), students were asked to write a creative "Screwtape Letter" of their own, following the writing style and phrasing choices made by Lewis, er... the demon Uncle Screwtape... in the original letters. For example: they had to use a letter form, use complex arguments, refer to Satan as "Our Father Below" and God as "The Enemy." Cade did this admirably (read: properly diabolically?) in the context of demons touting the use of internet and social media as a way to decrease human happiness.

Dr. Anna Christensen

I would like first to apologize for my last letter. I know that it may seem as though I was fully embracing your terrible fate, but I tell you truthfully that I meant it only as motivation. As I am sure you are aware, your secret work with some of your colleagues was noticed by Our Father Below, and he has suggested that you be pardoned from your fate on that basis. Now that you know you are safe, you can know that I am writing this letter as your *affectionate* uncle, and not as your *ravenously affectionate* uncle as I implied before. Rest assured that I will remain at your disposal to be of help... so long as you continue to perform so well.

Now on to business. I have noticed that in your last few letters (you have managed to send me so many even while you were hiding from me) you have mentioned the effect that the internet could have on your new young patient. I am sure you have noted by now that the rise of the World Wide Web was the direct result of centuries of hard work on the part of Our Father Below. However, my colleagues and I have been drafting up new rules for how the internet should be used in temptation. Until the final rules have been posted, I ask that you avoid the subject altogether, as in the current state of the internet there is too much potential for the Enemy to get His hooks into our patients using such a tool. We must not underestimate the capabilities of our Enemy to twist our own tools against us. I am of the opinion that we must further develop the Web before we can fully utilize its capabilities. I have heard from Triptweeze that he is working on an idea that he calls "Social Media", which I find quite promising. He informs me that there is great potential for not only deepening existing bonds with Our Father, but also to put more of our patients in contact with those who are already destined for Our Father's house.

Once this "Social Media" is fully developed and implemented, I hope some of the following advice will help you to use it properly. The new technology will allow for us to tempt patients in two ways which used to contradict each other. First, we will be able to isolate patients even more, as "Social Media" will draw them further into arguments and conversations with people they do not know, pushing them further away from their true friends and family. Second, we will be able to force patients to be even more connected and overwhelmed than ever before, as we can push them into groups of people with similar interests which are far larger than most can keep track of. The isolation allows us to better control the patient's thoughts with less outside influence, and it also inspires a sort of depression as they draw apart from people they used to be close to. The connection, however, is where the true genius lies. We can use what Triptweeze refers to as "algorithms" to force our patients into close-knit groups that encourage exactly the sort of behavior which Our Father so adores. And that's the best bit; these "algorithms" are fed, not by positive reactions, but by any reactions at all. Since the internet itself makes it so much easier to inspire negative reactions, we can use that to our advantage, and make sure no group on this "Social Media" has pure intentions at heart.

However, I must be careful not to speak too kindly of this project just yet, as there are many dangers involved, and I must be sure to inform you of this as well. While the internet and Triptweeze's "Social Media" seems to be perfectly made for our use, there are many pitfalls you may encounter as we start to use this technology in our temptation centers. I must first warn you about how you approach the subject with your patient. You must make sure that he does not use his full attention at any moment, as this would lead to your patient knowing too much of our traps and how to avoid them. Instead, you must guide him to the internet in a moment of laxity. Our traps are designed with utmost care to snare the inattentive most easily. If we are careful, this strategy should even lead to inattention becoming more prevalent, making our jobs even easier in the future. You must also take care to guide your patient in his first interactions, as Triptweeze's "algorithms" are built upon every interaction at the beginning. There is potential for any misstep to lead to your patient using the internet in a wholesome way. Therefore, take care to guide your patient's eye to the most shocking information you can find. I have also been informed that we must avoid something called "cat videos" AT ALL COSTS, as they can cause an overload of happiness and even that blessed "joy" which Our Father hates so much. Once he begins to gravitate toward the negative on his own, we shall have him within our grasp. I am personally working on a method which should make this easier, which I call "clickbait".

But enough of this talk of the internet! I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your promotion! Your work with your last patient may not have gone so well, but with all the extra work you have done and your most recently assigned patient being such a devout brat, I can confidently say that you are doing very well in your new position. Speaking of your newest patient, I have noticed your previous mention of his inherent evil which you have harnessed. I must take quick action to correct this misconception immediately. While it may seem that some humans are inherently evil, this is actually not the case. In my experience, while many people have a tendency toward good or evil, humanity in general is neither inherently good nor evil. The Enemy, strangely, saw fit to gift them with the ability to choose their own path, instilling within them free will. Therefore, do not grow to rest on your laurels. While you are doing well with your patient right now, do not assume that some inherent evil in this young boy will make your job easy. Stay vigilant and watchful, and ensure you do not let his mind wander to questions such as this. When a patient begins to think such philosophical thoughts, you can be sure that the Enemy has got His hooks in them.

If your patient begins to wonder whether he is inherently good or evil, you can be sure he will want the answer to be "good". Once he has decided this, the Enemy has His way in. From this point, it only takes a careful nudge or two before your patient has decided that the way to be good is to do good, and then we will have lost him forever. If you cannot turn his mind from such thoughts, though, do not guide him to think that humans are inherently evil. There is much more potential to turn him away from the path to the Enemy if you let your patient believe he is good. Instead, you must turn his gaze to his neighbors, family, and friends. Let him see that they do not live up to his standard of "goodness". However, you must take care not to let him realize that he also fails to meet this standard. If you can only make him believe that he alone is worthy of being called "good", then we should be able to conceal the value of other people from his mind. From there it is only a simple task to let him go on through life as just the sort of self righteous prick who believes everyone else to be beneath him, and there is no faster road to Our Father Below.

Your affectionate uncle,
SCREWTAPE

Rupture

Emma Carlson

ENGL 241: Short Story Writing

The final project for this course asked students to compose a story using one of the “shapes” we read and analyzed in the first half of the semester. Emma chose to write a “Last Lap,” which places a character, from the very first lines, near the climax of a series of events. In “Rupture,” we’re dropped into Vera’s harrowing experience as a midwife for her sister. The present action bristles with tension and Emma skillfully weaves in flashbacks to raise the stakes, highlighting each character’s past conflicts, grievances, and bad decisions. The “Last Lap” strategy, however, doesn’t quite contain “Rupture.” Emma’s writing—the lyric quality of their prose, the strange and vulnerable tone and style, the bold experimentation with form—doesn’t allow for easy categorization, which is a quality all good fiction writers strive for. The result is a narrative that is unflinching and brutally powerful.

Dr. Lance Dyzak

“How the fuck does a watermelon head push through a hole the size of a quarter?”

“It doesn’t.” I swish my hand around in the bathtub, watch the ripples that chase themselves into nothing. A bit too cold. I crank the faucet until steam licks at my glasses. “Muscles are a lot more elastic than you think.”

“Not *my* muscles.” Mandy raps her knuckles against the taut skin of her bulging belly. It reminds me of a circular island protruding from the Atlantic, a brontosaurus hump poking out of the prehistoric lake. “Everything in me is stretched as far as it can go,” Mandy says. “Like I’ve been reaching for the top cabinet with every part of my body for nine straight months.”

“You weren’t even showing until four.”

“But I felt it. From the first day.”

“You’re so full of shit, I’m surprised there’s room inside you for a baby.”

“Yeah, well.” Her stomach flexes, hardens, gleams with sweat. A contraction. I click the stopwatch on my phone. Mandy nestles her temple into the cold ledge of the porcelain tub. “I’m running out.”

Holly Markle had a baby. I was seven. I didn’t care until Mom touched her for it.

First Sunday service of the year. I wasn’t tall enough yet to see over the pews. Dad dropped me onto his lap. He always did before leaning his forehead into my back. *What are you doing?* I’d whisper. His bald skull was like a hot moon eclipsing half my body. Sometimes he said, *praying, Vera, baby. Praying.* When he was feeling clever, *hiding from God in His own house.* More often than not, he just snored.

“I’m going to ask Holly how she is before we go,” Mom announced to all of us. Mostly me. Dad’s sleepy breaths dampened the space behind my lungs. Mandy suckled her pacifier into oblivion.

I started to shuffle off Dad’s knees. Mom held up a finger. “Stay here. I’ll come back when I’m done.”

“But I want to see the baby,” I lied. I wanted to follow her, practice my big girl walk, assimilate into the mob of blunt-bob women circling Holly and the pink creature bundled in her arms.

“Oh, please. You hardly even look at your little sister.”

“But—“

“Enough, Vera.” She walked towards Holly. “Be good.”

I was not close enough to hear what anyone said. I was mesmerized by Mom’s hands anyway. They peeled back the baby’s blanket, stroked a tender line down the globe of his tiny cheek. This was expected —

the same routine Mom used on Mandy when she fussed in her stroller. But then Mom's fingers danced up onto Holly's head, tucked a strand of fallen hair behind her right ear. Holly's smile crinkled all the way up to her eyes.

Mom never touched me beyond a small prod of my back. Sometimes, if we had three passengers in the station wagon, she'd shove my stomach aside to buckle the tricky middle belt.

My scalp prickled with envy.

I rocked back, trying to rouse Dad from his comatose state. I needed him to confirm my findings. I needed him to tell me this was not some jealous dream.

"Shh, Vera," he mumbled. His arm constricted around my waist. "Service will be over soon. Can you hold it till then?"

The ledge of the tub bites against my ribs. I stay plastered to it, petting her back in circles.

"I'm gonna kill him," Mandy pants into the Walmart sack. It breathes with her, crinkling and folding in rhythm. "I'm gonna k—"

Brown bile slaps against plastic.

"It's alright," I shush. My hands gather her bangs away from clumps of regurgitated saltines. I swallow my stomach when it rolls up my throat. "I'm going to kill him for you."

Mandy nods through her next belch.

Joseph is an asshole. Joseph is searing slabs of bacon until they scream. Fatty smoke leads me like a bloodhound to the kitchen. He has the audacity to frown at me when I reach around his ribs to switch off the burner.

"They were almost done," Joseph complains. His lower lip juts into a pout.

"Shut up." My forehead aches from creasing. I wrench open the window above the farmhouse sink. "Your wife is giving birth and you're making breakfast?"

"Not just for me."

A huff of air scurries out of my mouth. "Mandy isn't in the mood to eat right now." I'm flapping a dish towel so violently that I almost don't hear it – nails clicking on the counter behind me.

The hollow space below my stomach goes cold. A phantom ache.

Mom taps a disjointed rhythm. "I didn't get to eat on my flight."

...

I asked for a baby doll every Christmas until I stained my lilac bicycle shorts at thirteen. I held the shorts tender, pinching the hips to maximize my fingers' distance from that crusted black crotch. It was disgusting.

It was as good as proof of God.

"I got my period at the track meet," I told Mom. "Look."

She glanced up from the red onion she was mincing, bottom lip strangled between her canines. Mom blinked at me, the blotted shorts I stretched out for her to see.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

I shifted my weight from left to right, considering. "It hurts. But... I'm excited, too."

"Excited?" Her brows climbed the rungs of her forehead wrinkles. "For what?"

Heat crawled up my face. "I'm a woman now."

Mom stared at me, considering. “Oh, Vera,” she sighed. She scooped the purple cubes of onion into a hissing skillet, swiped off the bits that clang to her blade with a merciless thumb.

“At least your kids will be cute.”

The scar below my navel aches; a jagged line, a hollow pain.

“How are you?” Mom asks.

I clear my throat, fold the dish towel into fourths without looking away. “Fine.” I’m a prisoner to the sad slant of her eyebrows, the pitiful twist of her lips.

She tries again, “Are you really?”

Grit my teeth. Change the subject. “Wasn’t your flight supposed to get in tomorrow?”

A muscle in her cheek twitches. Irritation. “Yes, well. I thought it best if I was here for Mandy’s labor. I knew it would be a hard day.” She glances at my stomach. Even covered by a shirt, I still feel like Mom can see it. Like she always can. “For both of you.”

“Today’s not about me.” The scar is so cold it burns. “Today’s about Mandy. I should be getting back to her now.”

Mom jerks her head, a tense imitation of a nod. “Right,” she says. “Lead the way.”

If I were a better sister, maybe I’d tell our mom that the bathroom is small. That there’s barely room for me, the midwife, and Mandy, the birther. That Joseph will have to squeeze his thick torso behind his wife’s in the tub and it will still be cramped. That Mom must decide between perching on the toilet seat or casting a dim shadow in the doorway.

But I’ve never seen anyone reject Mom. I don’t know if it’s possible. And I don’t think she’s ever wanted anything more than a grandchild – her baby’s baby, a perfect mathematical square I cannot provide.

My stomach goes numb again.

“Yeah,” I say. “Follow me.”

In Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, God and his first man do not touch. White sky divorces them, breathes a small, insurmountable distance between the tips of their fingers.

I met my husband in a class spanning the history of the renaissance. I needed an art credit to get my bachelor of science in nursing. Vince didn’t need that class at all. Just took it on a whim. He plopped his heavy body into the seat beside me.

“God and Adam are definitely moving towards each other,” he said as we zipped our backpacks open. “The lines of God’s body suggest forward motion.”

Maybe I should have been wary of this pretentious stranger. I wasn’t.

“Why touch something you’ve already made, though?” I asked. The middle seat belt buckle of the station wagon clicked in the back of my mind. “I think it’s more likely God is pulling away.”

Vince curled his fingers around the scraggly hairs of his chin. He had nice hands, artist’s hands. Stained with charcoal, chipped in yellow paint. My cheekbones felt hot. “I guess it just depends,” he said.

He didn’t have to finish the thought. Part of the reason we just worked. Was God pulling away or towards? It all depends on the origin of creation. Whether something is made by touch or by the cessation of it.

I bumped my shoulder against his on the way out the door.

...

Her hand beats mine to the bathroom door. Mom raps her knuckles too quick, too light.

“Mandy, honey.” The pet name stings my eyes. She only ever called me that a few times. Only when my stomach was round as my sister’s. “It’s Mom. Can I come in?”

I anticipate an annoyed, *no, go away*. Maybe, *ask again later*. Something petulant and funny. Mandy makes good use of the dry wit inherited from Dad.

But she doesn’t answer. I press my ear to the wall. There’s only the whir of the exhaust fan, the polite stream of the faucet.

“Mandy?” I call. Wait, but nothing happens. The sweat of my palm slickens the doorknob when I grasp it. “Okay, I’m coming in.”

The boy’s head didn’t even come up to my waist.

I peered down the crimson cavern of his throat. White stones like geodes glinted back. Tonsillitis. I was sure of it.

“Alright, kiddo.” I clicked off my flashlight, ruffled his buzzed hair. He blinked back at me, miserable and feverish. “Sit tight. The doctor will be in soon.”

“Thank you,” his mother said. She averted her eyes the second I nodded, returned to the vigorous study of her child’s pale face. I could not be offended. My own hand traveled to my bump of a belly in sympathy.

At seven months pregnant, my feet became invisible. All floors were obscured by the globe protruding from my stomach. The sky seemed easier to reach than the ground. Vince spent three minutes every morning wrangling my ankles into compression socks, five in the evening tearing them off.

I should have been more careful. Should have spun in my chair. Should have glanced around, made sure my walkway was clear. Should have taken the day off. Should have worked somewhere else. Should have been someone else.

Should have laid in a white room made of mattresses until my baby plunged himself outside of me, until I was sure he was a separate creation, a being that could be without me, a person that could reach for me as Adam reached for God.

My foot caught on the mother’s purse.

I don’t remember falling.

I remember the wet heat that painted the insides of my thighs. Boiling blood soaked through my scrubs. The muffled sound of something ripping inside of me. The scream of a boy with no voice.

Red.

Everything is red. The bath water is a small lake of thick red wine, the tub’s ledge streaked in ketchup-colored handprints.

It’s all red except for Mandy. The white bones of her face glow through her skin like moons in a burgundy sky. Her eyes are wild, bloodshot things bucking around, twin desperate horses. It takes a moment before they find me, another to settle without rolling back.

I’m paralyzed until she whimpers my name.

“What’s happening, Vera?” Mom cries from behind us, muffled by her hand. “Why is there so much – ?”

hemorrhaging in the backseat of my car. By the time our tires screeched into the parking lot and Joseph threw Mandy on the stretcher, her skin was an absolute dichotomy. Either bright blood or pale flesh. Stark contrast. No blush, no transient colors. Only red. Only white.

Mom emerges from the bathroom, shakes water off her hands. Besides a smidge of black crusted to her cardigan, she's unscathed. Made clean again by the sink and a wad of wet paper towels. I watch her for too long, too open. I can't explain it. I just need to see her be human. I need to see her shake.

"Wipe your face," she says, gesturing to the corners of my mouth. "You look terrible."

I could live with shag carpet. I could live with weak water pressure, a small cellar spider infestation, kitchen cabinets that never quite closed. I could live in my shitty apartment. Vince made it livable. He would swirl his feet on the floor, chase me with a protruded finger, doing his best impression of a static E.T.. He scooped every bug beneath a glass jar and cardstock, goosebumps jumping off his skin. It was funny. He was funny. I could have lived anywhere with him.

But not there. Not that apartment. Not anymore. Not a haunted place. Not where I imagined a baby boy with his blond hair, his small hands, his big eyes, would stumble the first few steps.

I perched on a moving box. It was full of books. Or photo albums. Or the Holy-Fucking-Grail. I couldn't give less of a shit.

"What the fuck is this?"

Frida Kahlo's unibrow was a darker brown than the deer's body it furrowed from. Her centaur form sprawled across the painting, galloped into the refuge of the forest. In my opinion, too late. Arrows plunged between the vertebrae of her furry back, the exact center of her chest.

I glared at the postcard-sized print Vince had pressed into my lap. *The Wounded Deer*.

Vince sniffed, possessing the good grace to look embarrassed. "I just... I've been thinking about her a lot recently."

"Yeah?" I asked, but I'd already lost interest. I wanted to go back to my staring. I was fascinated by our popcorn ceiling. Since I came home with no baby, the white asbestos seemed so much bluer. The blank space also gave me ample room to consider the voicemail Mom had abandoned on our landline. *Vince told me what happened*. Her silence translated to radio crackles; delicious, painful pops. *I was going to come down when he was born, but... I suppose I can just cancel my flight*.

"Yeah," he continued, oblivious to my inattention. "She got in an accident when she was eighteen. The bus driver fucked up. An iron handrail went through her pelvis. It cracked three of her vertebrae, busted her collarbone, her leg in eleven places."

I blinked. "That sucks."

He paused for a moment, tapped the pads of her fingers together. His eyebrows pulled his whole face down. Made him look so much older. Made him look like my dad doing his taxes.

"It also punctured her uterus," Vince said, tone solemn. "So she couldn't have kids."

I gritted my teeth. The staples holding together the hollow space beneath my stomach strained to stay in place. "Get out."

He sighed, palmed the left side of his head. It was the half he got migraines at most often. "Vera."

"Get the fuck out."

“I lost a baby, too, you know!”

My hands didn’t hit him. They didn’t touch him gently, either.

They dragged, raked, scraped, ripped at his shirt, his hair, his skin. I pushed him off our bed, slammed him down the hall, ran him out the door. All the while, someone was crying. Someone was making these awful, guttural moans. It wasn’t human. I’d tell anyone that asked it was Frida.

I’ll never tell myself it was me.

No one knows when Mandy will wake. The rupture was severe, a lemon-scented obstetrician informs Joseph, Mom, and me. Tubes and medical machines crawl out of Mandy at every artery. They tell us the same thing in fewer words, longer beeps. Joseph can’t stand it. He beelines for the cafeteria. I listen until the doctor’s done speaking. Mandy lost a lot of blood. An organ, too.

It feels like there’s a rope pulled taut between my sister’s body and my own. The gravitational force of planets orbiting each other, of a twin destiny realized.

This baby will be her only one. This peach-fuzz baby nestling into the crook of my left arm, pink and raw, will be Mandy’s only daughter. My only niece.

Mom’s only grandchild.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mom croons, stroking a tender line down the little girl’s face. “What a perfect angel you are.”

I stare down at the newborn. Her button nose twitches like a bunny. The motion swirls around the soft features of her face, transforming her into a different person that I don’t recognize, can’t know.

My chest is empty space. I feel nothing for this creature. She is another baby doll on Christmas. Something I wanted just so I could be seen wanting it.

“You did so well.”

Even in my catatonic state, I spare a glance toward Mom to make sure she doesn’t dislodge Mandy’s oxygen cannula on accident.

But she doesn’t touch Mandy.

Mom’s fingers lace through *my* hair, shift *my* bangs back. Her palm cradles *my* cheek. She’s warmer than I imagined. Softer, too. Heated silk soothing away my frown lines, the sharp edge of my jaw.

It feels good.

I press my face against her hand, shut my eyes, steep myself in the moment. Even the band of her wedding ring is blissful – a sweet piece of ice cooling my face. It’s too much. Everything I longed after, lost after, lived after for three decades is smoothing the angry indents of my eyebrows.

Her laugh is wet with joy. “I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

It all sours in an instant.

I jerk my head back out of her hold. I become aware again of Mandy’s pale, wired body, the vertical parenthesis incision that will haunt her each time she zips her jeans. Shame blisters through me.

“Take the baby,” I choke. When Mom just blinks, I lose patience. I thrust the squirming entity away from my chest and towards hers. “Take it. I’m not kidding.”

After a split second of pause, she does. Mandy’s daughter curls into Mom’s arms, whining. The noise wrenches my stomach, reminds me of Mandy’s pitiful whimpers from the bathtub.

As soon as I'm separated from them both, I bolt.

I don't know. I don't know where I'm going. I walk. I bash shoulders with strangers and hallway corners until red, green, yellow light bathes me. A stained glass Jesus extends both wrists. The door clicks closed behind me.

The chapel. I've gone to the chapel.

I stare at my feet. Feel a bizarre anger flare in my chest, the heat of the betrayed. It fizzles so quick it's pathetic. I'm too tired to keep anything alight.

I don't know. I don't know. I'm not here to pray. I don't believe. I'd like to say I lost faith over my baby, the rupture, the lost fawn. But that's not true.

I stumble to the pews, collapse my body onto the hardwood.

No, I lost faith at a Sunday service. Mid-April, a few months before Mandy came into the world. The snow wasn't sticking to the ground anymore. Father Michael paced the podium, thumbing his penguin collar.

A lump had knotted in my little throat. I can't recall what made me so upset. Maybe I didn't eat enough of Mom's egg and hashbrowns breakfast. Maybe the dingy fluorescents were flickering. Maybe my sock slipped in my shoe. Whatever it was, salt water streamed down the curve of my cheek, stinging the seismic cracks in my lips.

"Mom," I croaked. I tried to crawl across the pew into her lap, but a heavy purse occupied the space. I tugged at her shirt. "Mom. Hold me."

She didn't turn – eyes still fixed on Father Michael. I tugged her shirt again.

"*Mom*, hold me. Please, I –"

"No, Vera." She shook her head. Her lower lip quivered. She bit down on it. Like our house cat on a bird's heart. "You're too big."

Oh. The stone in my throat became a boulder. I felt like everything in my body doubled its weight in an instant. Still, I was selfish. "But I just want –"

"I'm not strong enough, alright?" Mom snapped. She jabbed a hand at the bulge of her stomach. "I'm pregnant, for heaven's sake. Just... just go sit with your father."

I don't think a real God would have ever let anyone outgrow their mom.

There's no one to sit with now. It takes some shifting, but the pew is comfortable enough if I lay on my side. I get to sleep without trying. I don't know. I don't know.

In my dreams, we are all deer.

In my dreams, I'm faster than the bow.

Likes Repel

Peyton Bytnar

ENGL 240: The Personal Essay

For her final project, Peyton chose to write a piece of memoir expressing the complicated notion of “twinhood” through the lens of competition. Peyton’s experience of racing against her identical twin sister functions as a maypole around which she skillfully braids her childhood memories, research into the science of twins, and passages of reflection. As a piece of memoir, Peyton does a fantastic job of transporting the reader into the world of her upbringing through concrete imagery and intricate details. Meanwhile, the researched passages provide important context to help us appreciate the complexity of competition with someone who is “identical” to you, and her use of figurative language in reflective passages adds depth and meaning to the raw emotions depicted in her memories.

Dr. Lance Dyzak

The gun shot off and the smoke disappeared into the air. I was surrounded by hundreds of high school girls, all sprinting towards a narrow path that led into the woods.

Don’t fall, don’t fall, don’t fall.

All of the 99 girls clumped into a blur around me, but I was able to keep a clear sight on one of them.

My twin sister.

From birth, humans, just like other wild mammals, are born with a genetic code to compete against others for survival. All people experience different forms of competition at some point in their life. Unlike most people, my competitive drive began before I was even born. On January 10th, 2002, at 5:16 pm, my mother birthed two identical twin girls, each one minute apart. We were born two months early from our due date because we did not share food very well with each other. I was the second born, the second to see the world, the second to breathe in oxygen, the second to see my parent’s big smiles, and second to my twin sister.

We had not reached the mile mark yet and I was right behind my sister. I matched her footsteps to keep the same cadence. I could hear my dad’s thundering voice vibrate through my eardrums, “GO, GO, GO!”

In our two-story middle-class home on Fillmore Street, the pavement was covered with a blanket of white; the brisk wind trying to seep through the window. I slowly crept out from under my sheets until I felt the individual fibers of the carpet touch the tips of my toes. I tiptoed my way to the bedroom door, only stepping on the parts of the floor that did not creak. I slowly closed the door shut behind me, trying not to wake my twin sister who was still sound asleep. My goal was accomplished. My legs flew down the stairs when my gaze caught the most beautiful sight of the year, a mound of presents under the Christmas tree. I propped myself up against the couch, catatonically staring at each present glowing with its own radiance. The calm silence of the snow falling allowed my mind to wander until I heard footsteps approaching. My sympathetic nervous system kicked into overdrive as I knew exactly what she was going to do. My sister jumped for her stocking that was hanging down from the fireplace when I yanked on her shirt to stop her. I was not one to open presents before

my mom and dad had woken up. My sister squealed and hollered until my parents came running down the stairs. After a long chaotic moment of arguing, they finally got us to calm down enough to start opening presents when the rest of my family arrived.

I crawled under the tree, the needles scraping the side of my face as I slid the presents behind me. Normally, my sister and I would pass out the gifts first to make a pile, scouting out who had the biggest and most numerous presents. Taking turns, my sister and I would unwrap our gifts one by one, hoping that I would not be the one to run out first. It was no surprise that the present I opened would be the same item but in a different color when my sister opened hers. After all, we are the same person, which means we both like the same exact things. After I ripped open the present, I put on my best performance to keep the room entertained.

As a child, I never questioned the concept of receiving the same exact things as my sister, even though I wanted to have the “better” gifts. I had never known anything different; all of my things were my sister’s things. My birthday was her birthday, eventually, all of my Christmas gifts were her Christmas gifts. It was like we were a married couple having to share all of our things and being treated as one person. Our competition began as soon as we were born and so did the fight against our likeness – we wanted a divorce.

Mile 1.

My muscles were burning as I continued to concentrate on the back of my sister’s head. We had slowed down a little since the start, but we still held a faster pace than usual. Her braided ponytail whipped around with no patterned direction, like one of those tall blow-ups in front of a car dealership. It felt like this race would never end, but I had to keep going.

Identical twins are monozygotic, meaning one singular egg is fertilized before it then divides into two. These two eggs contain the same sex and share the same genetics. Twins share the same space with a diameter of a foot and receive the exact same diet for nine months. To be exact, twins are 99.9% genetically identical; the only variable being the environment to separate us into two totally different human beings. There is no diversity, which is needed in an environment in order to improve survival, but we are the exception. Twins are very dependent on each other, dependent enough to have a closer bond than anyone else. A bond strong enough that will not budge despite the high tensions that exist when two of the exact same people are living in the same space.

Our competitive drive only became more aggressive once we reached middle school. The hallways were filled with musty sweat and pubescent youth, who somehow managed to find their way to the bathroom and not to their next class. All of the lockers were the same pale blue color and in alphabetical order, so naturally, my sister’s locker was right before mine. We were not in the same classes, but we made sure to fill each other in on what we did during the day. Yelling over the sea of 7th graders strolling by was the only way to communicate.

It was a special day. The end of the second quarter meant that report cards were handed out at the end of the day. The adrenaline pumped through my veins as the clock on the classroom wall ticked closer to 3:20

pm, and my anticipation grew. I was determined to have all As each quarter ever since third grade when I was grounded for my bad report card.

At the end of the day, we both ran home excited to tell our parents what we had received. My sister and I ate our yogurt at the kitchen counter while we raised our voices over each other. My mom just nodded her head as if she knew exactly what we were going to say. We scanned our report cards, lining them up side by side for optimal comparison. As my eyes shifted back and forth between each one, my body sunk lower and lower in my chair. My heart rate slowed, and my eyes began to feel droopy. My sister was rustling in her seat with joy, but I slumped up the stairs. My bed was the only thing that seemed inviting, my face sank into the pillow, and I began to weep.

Getting overpowered by my sister began to diminish my confidence, not only against her but against everything I did. To most people this was nothing out of the ordinary, some students got better grades than others. However, the disappointment I had in myself was far more than my parents, teachers, and any adult. In middle school, my life was surrounded by being better than my sister, when no one had ever told us to compare ourselves. No one had ever told me that if I did not get better grades than my sister then that meant I was a failure. So why was I so focused on not losing to her? We were supposed to be the same and I was different from her. I was worse than her.

Mile 1.5.

Halfway there. My legs flew through the air and crashed on the sandy path. The hill at 1.3 miles created a little distance between my sister and I. She caught back up to me and positioned herself in the exact same spot she was in before. My mind wanted to get in front of her, but it was too soon, I had to be patient. Just like in everything else that we competed in, if I went ahead of my sister she would eventually catch up to me, and beat me. She always had to be one step ahead.

The transition from middle school to high school is not easy for any teenager. It is a weird concept considering that you are going to school with people who can vote for the next president, and people who have yet to learn how to drive. This may sound surprising, but my sister and I were involved in the same sports: basketball, golf, cross country, and track.

We had been running together since we were too young to fit into a pair of shoes. Growing older meant that we could run farther and faster. Practice was just as intense as competing in cross-country meets. Running well in practice did not matter unless I was faster than my sister. A personal record did not matter unless it was faster than my sister's personal record. The competition of the whole girls cross country team was no match for the competition of my twin.

Just like any other long day after our high school classes, my sister and I, along with other people on our team, set off for our five-mile run. My sister and I were the first pair in line on the sidewalk, setting the pace. My feet landed on each line on the sidewalk to propel myself faster along. My sister, as usual, a half a step in front of me, her heavy breathing made me clench my teeth harder. The way that her shoes hit the pavement, a tempo faster than mine, filled my head with annoyance. My brain wanted to shove her off the sidewalk and into

the next bush, but I continued to push the pace. My lungs gasping for air after 40 minutes of trying to sprint ahead of one another, I finally had enough and halted to a stop.

“Are you just trying to annoy me?” I yelled as the steam diffused from my ears.

Since we had stopped running, the engines of the cars whizzing by were louder, creating wind that made my muscles work harder to stand straight. The rest of the girls in the running group were unphased by the outburst. I could hear the faint giggles in the background, my sister trying to keep a straight face.

Mile 2.

It was not time yet. I still needed to follow in my sister’s footsteps. We passed a large crowd huddled by the second-mile marker. My parents yelled something at us, but all I could hear was the loudness of my sister’s breathing. It was so loud. She was getting tired. I was getting tired. Each footstep felt harder to pull up, like someone was adding bricks to my shoes.

Almost three years later, my sister and I ended our day by doing homework together, 183 miles away from home. Somehow, we found our way to the same college studying the same major, but playing different sports, on different teams, and with different schedules. Nostalgia filled the room as our nightly homework studies have been a part of our routine for many, many years now. My thoughts wandered back to the past, and I asked my sister one question,

“Why do you have to always be one step ahead of me?”

Tapping her foot against the rug that did not feel any softer than the tile floor, she remarked,

“It’s simple, I want to beat the .01%, “

Both of us knew about the .01%, the sliver of difference present between us. The odds were against us. A number that is barely greater than zero is what we were fighting against, some may think striving for the difference is pointless. It may be pointless unless your whole life revolves around that tiny number.

I noticed every little thing about my sister but did not worry about anyone else. The little things that annoyed me about her did not annoy me in other people. Why was I so critical of everything she did? It was unfair of me to judge my sister so much. The competition drove us to repel each other. I did not want to be the same as her athletically when I already looked like her. I thought that if I was faster than her, I would stand out by myself, and not be labeled as a twin. The competition made us better athletes, both being nominated for the student-athlete of the year, emphasizing the word BOTH. The more I tried to be unlike my sister, the more that people saw us as the same person. We both had the same hardworking, striving-for-perfection attitude that allowed us to grow and get better at the same rate. However, the exception was when my sister and I trained the same, but she would beat me in races. I questioned why she was running faster than me when we were supposed to be the same. At the same time, I wanted to be different from my sister, but I also used the excuse of us being the same. I wanted the two of us to be different, yet nothing made sense when we did not perform at equal levels.

Many people throughout my life have coined the term “alpha and beta twin” to describe the power we had over each other. By default, I was the “beta twin” because I was born second, to be specific, one minute later. There were only a few moments where I got to be the alpha twin.

When other people call us the beta or alpha twin they meant it as a joke. However, the sound of my sister being called something above me was not music to my ears. The more people called her the alpha twin, the more I started to believe it. My confidence slipped away from me every time a friend group voted that she was the alpha twin. On the other hand, this raised the confidence in my sister. As we have grown older, she has acted like the protective older sister, the one who knows all.

Mile 2.5.

The finish line is so close. I was even with my sister now; we were the same. My strides were longer than hers, and my head bobbed side to side. Her strides were short, but she maintained a straight posture. We both simultaneously ducked under a tree branch and began our ascent up the final hill. She quickly turned her head and grinned at me. The time was up.

My sister was the one who got a boyfriend first in high school. In college, she had been through different relationships whereas I had not. When I first started talking to different people, I could feel the protectiveness looming above my head. Her judgment against the people I was talking to made me question if I even liked them. She told me that she needed to approve of the boy before anything. She was my twin sister in an older brother’s body, waiting to strike a male in the face if I was ever hurt.

It made it hard to even talk to people when I was always compared to another person. The possibility of them thinking that they got the second-best twin was uncomfortable, I did not want not to be the 2nd choice to anyone. Always striving for the alpha position, so that one day I would not have to worry about being the second choice.

Her power over me made her the more beautiful one, the more confident one, the one everyone liked better. Even though we look the same, we were anything but. The tension between the competition of our appearance grew. It grew so far that we would never wear the same clothes. Each strolling out of our separate dorm buildings, I looked across the road, still blurry from my morning eyesight, to see my sister wearing a pastel blue shirt from high school. I peered down at my shirt and tilted my head back in frustration. This instance had happened millions of times before, but it still stopped us mid-stride. “Go change.” Each of us not moving a muscle to see who would break first, who would be the alpha twin that day. Eventually, one of us would give up or lose to the stare-down and go back to change into different clothes.

There was a psychology article “Identical Strangers,” of two twins who were separated at birth, for a nature versus nurture study. They were unknowingly both raised by different families while being across the country from one another. Once they got older the two twins found each other, being very spiteful of the scientist who held them apart for so long. The twins did not beat the .01%, nature was the winner. They found their taste in books and music was the same. Interestingly, both of them also saw the same personality in the

other person. They felt as if they had never been apart even after 35 years.

In my mind it is easier to compare us when we have the same clothes on – we stand out more. Being a twin was somewhat embarrassing because we were not like ordinary people. When we dress the same, the stares from people become more intense. Instead of people noticing we just look alike, they are focused on specific facial features and body structure when everything else is already the same. It is easier to not stand out when we look less alike when we do not look exactly like twins. My sister and I have lived our whole lives as twins, and wearing the same clothes just reminds us more of how much we look alike. If someone spends their whole life doing the same thing every day, would they not want a change?

It is easier for my sister and I to spot differences amongst ourselves than other people. My sister has a slightly wider face and squinty eyes like my dad. Her hair is an inch and a half longer than mine. My sister's muscles are more prominent with a stronger, taller stature by two inches. Her ears have one more piercing than I do. Her resting face is more welcoming than the stern-looking expression on my face. If you hear her talk, she is louder and more confident in her voice. She is less worried about what everyone thinks, so you may hear her say something idiotic across campus. Hence, this is why everyone asks us for differences between ourselves when they want to tell us apart.

Twins are competing against each other at the exact same level. Fraternal twins may be of the opposite gender, have different hair colors, different heights, the list goes on. Regular siblings have all sorts of different variables that cause them to be very different, not living under the same conditions. My sister and I grew up exactly the same, in the same environment, playing the same sports, taking the same classes, and having the same type of style. Our likeness has driven us to try to be more different or independent, however, it is not enough. We still depend so much on each other for competition, to keep improving and growing in our lives. We strive not to be the same when our drive to win is only creating convergence between us.

My sister and I no longer live in our middle-class home on Fillmore Street. We moved to the city nearby, where we have lived ever since third grade. I arrived at my house after being away for three consecutive months at college. I slid the glass door open to the backyard, my bare feet felt the grooves on the wooden deck. My two dogs ran under and between my legs, dashing down the hill. The yellow and orange leaves created an autumn tornado in the backyard right around our old tetherball pole. The poor yellow ball had gone through so much in the past 12 years. Some of the yellow leather was ripped, and the ball crinkled and deflated. This tetherball pole brought the whole neighborhood into our backyard.

When I was younger the tetherball in our backyard was like a neighborhood shrine. A three-hour competition after school would leave me exhausted by dinner time. I could still feel the rope burn on my forearms and the sting of my palms trying to hit the ball. Even though I was drained after three hours with the neighbor kids, my sister and I continued to play, until my mom was screaming at us to come inside. We were both very good because we played so much. I smacked the ball with all of my force and the ball hit my sister square in the nose. She immediately bent over, and tears rushed out of her eyes. Before I could help her, I had to make sure the tetherball went around the pole completely. I wanted to be able to boast about my win after

her pain eased. Even after my sister was attacked by the tether ball, she was back trying to beat me five minutes later.

I went back inside to carry my bags into my room, all the stuffed animals that I had accumulated since I was younger were scattered on my bed. On the opposite wall, I admired all of the trophies and medals I had won, thinking that my sister has the exact same ones. We no longer run against each other in races or play in golf meets together, but the competition between us has never stopped, and it may never end. Sitting on the white floating shelves, the awards coated in dust were not just because of my talent, but also because of the help of my sisters 99.9%.

Mile 3.1.

My sister and I sprinted down the flag-lined path that led to the finish line. I was falling behind, with no more energy to spare.

My sister yelled to me, "Come with me, c'mon."

She pulled my hand across the finish, her foot crossing .01 second before mine. I collapsed on the ground, the grass itching my skin. I could not move, but all I saw was my sister with her hands on her knees reaching for my hand. I groggily got up, stumbling over my own feet, and I gave my sister a weak hug.

It was only .01 of a second. A .01% chance of being different.

The Lucky One

Bria Holthe

ENGL 318: Literature of Peace and Social Justice

The goal of this project was to display how poetry can be used as a tool for peace. In her paper analyzing poetry through a both an environmental and social justice lens, Bria sharpened the focus in a second draft to “dive into some of the references to the experiences of Black Americans in this poem that I didn’t notice on my first draft. This allowed me to discuss how Komunyaaka compares the plight of the coyote to the plight of African Americans.”

Dr. Mary Stark

Dance, dance, as the hive collapses

Dance, dance, while the colony disassembles

Dance the occasion

Dance the gorgeous design

Tiffany Higgins, “Dance, Dance, While the Hive Collapses”

We exist in an environment under severe threat. We are swiftly approaching the point of no return in the climate crisis. Eventually, we will be forced to figure out not how to stop it, but how to live through it. Scientists already know some of what we can expect: increased severe weather events, rising sea levels, severe flooding, droughts, famines, and a myriad of other disasters, but what society will look like through these events is less clear. By creating works that attempt to draw pictures of both the ways that humanity is currently harming our earth and what earth may look like if these actions continue, writers can illustrate the true effects of the actions of their readers. In the case of Yusef Komunyaaka’s “Crossing the City Highway”, these impacts are also compared to the ways that African Americans have been treated in the US, adding new depth to the conversation. In this paper, I will examine “Crossing the City Highway” by Yusef Komunyaaka to explore the intersections between environmentalism and racial justice.

Yusef Komunyaaka is a poet I became familiar with for his work writing about the Vietnam War. Outside of speaking about war and the consequences it wrought, Komunyaaka also has an interest in writing about the intersections between industrialization and the wild. In “Crossing a City Highway” Komunyaaka examines the effects our modern industrialization has had on the life of a coyote. Komunyaaka sets the stage by describing “The city at 3 a.m.” as “an ungodly mask” (line 1). The phrase “ungodly mask” suggests both that something is being hidden by the city and that the action of hiding is a sin. What is hidden is nature beneath industrialization, as Komunyaaka describes throughout the rest of the poem. The next part of the city that Komunyaaka describes focuses on the way that “a fiery blaze of eighteen-wheelers / zoom out of the curved night trees,” (lines 5-6). Here we see him juxtaposing the man-made “eighteen-wheelers” with the “night trees”. The image of a crowd of trucks bursting out of a grove of trees is a perfect metaphor for how humans have altered the natural environment. The trucks are a bright “fiery blaze” representing the zeal with which humanity has come to dominate the world while the trees are forced to curve and bend under our will. These two opposing images shine a light on the degree to which humankind has altered our natural environment.

Komunyaaka then shifts to focusing more on his description of the coyote and her perspective. Our narrating coyote knows that her male counterpart will still be able to “follow her scent / left in the poisoned grass & buzz / of chainsaws,” (lines 9-11), but only “if he can unweave / a circle of traps around the subdivision” (lines 11-12). Here Komunyaaka is making an argument for how the products of our industrial efforts - “poisoned grass” and the “buzz / of chainsaws” - are not enough to counter the keen senses of a coyote. The male coyote will be able to overcome these man-made obstacles and track his mate. However, despite the coyote’s ability to ignore these sensory distractions, he is still threatened by the cars that roam the subdivision. Komunyaaka is illustrating that despite the array of difficulties that nature has been able to overcome, our progress still represents a major threat.

This major threat is explained perfectly in Komunyaaka’s next stanza, where he outlines the coyote’s narrow escape from becoming roadkill. The coyote “stops / on the world’s edge” (lines 13-14) and the image of this wild creature standing on the edge of the void is created. She is standing on the precipice between two worlds, her world of trees and carefully ordered chaos, and this encroaching world of cold steel and speed. Here Komunyaaka uses a carefully placed comma in the middle of a line to force his audience to pause and hold their breath; to wait with the coyote until she makes her move and “quick as that / masters the stars & again slips the noose / & darts straight between sedans & SUVs” (lines 14-16). As she moves into this foreign environment she “masters the stars”, drawing the audience back to that void imagery and also reminding them of navigating by the stars. By mastering the stars the coyote has followed their path and “slips the noose”, narrowly escaping a certain death sentence. Typically speaking, death by a noose was a state-endorsed method of execution, but within this poem, it takes on a double meaning. It refers to the fact that there are no legal consequences for striking and killing a coyote with your vehicle, so in that way, it is a state-allowed manner of killing, but also alludes to this country’s troubling history of lynching. Yusef Komunyaaka is a black man who lives in Louisiana, it is unlikely that this word choice was made without the racial history lynching has in mind. As shown in the CBS News interview with Bryan Stevenson, “Confronting history, to heal a nation”, a memorial has even been constructed to remind Americans of our country’s sordid history with lynchings. With that underscoring the use of the word “noose” it takes on an additional meaning, comparing the lack of care people show for the death of a coyote to the lack of care America has expressed towards the murder of African Americans.

Komunyaaka then pivots and discusses how time has changed the coyote’s experience with another reference to the experience of African Americans. He points out that the coyote is “now in Central Park / searching for a Seneca village” (lines 23-24). Seneca village is the community that used to exist in the space that Central Park now inhabits. Seneca Village was an African American community that existed in the mid-1800s and “allowed residents to live away from the more built-up sections of downtown Manhattan and escape the unhealthy conditions and racial discrimination they faced there” (The Central Park Conservancy). After the city purchased the land to transform it into Central Park the residents of Seneca Village were forced to relocate and the community dissipated. By remarking that the coyote is “searching for a Seneca village”, Komunyaaka

is both remarking on how quickly things change and once again reminding his audience of the ways America treats its black citizens. Humans change landscapes far faster than nature does. The natural change of landscapes occurs slowly and takes decades, but humans are able to completely change the layout of space in a matter of days. The seven blocks that were once taken up by Seneca Village were transformed into a carefully managed park far faster than animals typically adapt. Animals like the coyote would visit the area expecting Seneca Village but instead finding Central Park. Through this example, Komunyaaka compares the way that we treat coyotes to the way that African Americans have historically been treated in the US. Just like how we typically don't think about how alterations we make to the environment affect wildlife, the New York City higher-ups didn't think about how forcing the residents of Seneca Village out of their homes would affect them.

To follow up on the coyote's narrow escape from death, Komunyaaka writes arguably one of the most impactful stanzas in this poem:

Don't try to hide from her kind of blues
or the dead nomads who walked trails
now paved by wanderlust, an epoch
somewhere between tamed & wild. (Lines 17-20)

The first line: "Don't try to hide from her kind of blues" (line 17) is the first time Komunyaaka addresses his audience directly. As described by Pam Houston, the coyote feels "a wall of grief so huge" that it felt "honestly, unprecedented" (256). While the grief that Houston describes came after viewing a dying whale, the coyote's "blues" are caused by what has been done to its home. The "blues" that he is referring to is the coyote's sadness that its natural environment has been changed by humans. Komunyaaka is telling his audience not to hide from the harm they have done to the natural world by altering it. He further emphasizes this point by telling his audience not to hide from "the dead nomads who walked trails / now paved by wanderlust" (lines 18-19). Here, who Komunyaaka is referring to can be interpreted in different ways. The audience can view "the dead nomads" as referring to humans who lived in the area prior to industrialization, walking trails literally not yet paved or they can view it as referring to animals that wandered the land which has now been entirely paved. A broad-thinking reader may even think of it as referring to both. No matter what way it's viewed, Komunyaaka is referring to a way of life long since gone before the trails were "paved by wanderlust". The use of the word "wanderlust" is interesting here as it has connotations of adventure and travel. Here Komunyaaka shows the consequences of such a mindset as humanity's wish to travel and experience everything has caused us to pave over the very nature we once wanted to explore. In the last part of this stanza, Komunyaaka refers to this paved environment as "an epoch / somewhere between tamed and wild" (lines 19-20). We exist at a unique moment in time where humans have dominated the natural world and the other organisms we share the planet with are forced to figure out how to survive in this new order. By describing our current moment as "somewhere between tamed and wild", Komunyaaka perfectly describes this tension; our planet is wild and we are trying to tame it.

Within this tension between society and wildness stands the coyote. Komunyaaka explains that she is "lucky" (line 26). The use of the word lucky here stands out because it's the first blatantly positive word

used in the poem. The change in tone for that singular word emphasizes its importance. Komunyaaka wants us to meditate on the luck of the coyote, that despite how dramatically her environment has changed and all of the obstacles that stand between her and her instinctual behaviors, the coyote is still a coyote; “she hasn’t forgotten how to jig / & kill her way home (lines 27-28). Describing the coyote’s movements as a “jig” feeds into the hope that Komunyaaka wants to leave us with. A “jig” is typically thought of as a happy, joyous dance, possibly in celebration of something. Here, the coyote is doing a jig because she still knows how to survive in this modified environment. She is embodying Higgins’ suggestion to “Dance, dance, as the hive collapses” (line 70), jiggling along as our world becomes something unrecognizable to her. Despite all of the alterations to the world, her instincts were adapted to, she has still managed to survive and fulfill her biological niche, as shown in how she hasn’t forgotten how to “kill her way home”; the coyote continues to adapt and overcome. I thought that it was particularly interesting that Komunyaaka chose to end the poem with the phrase: “kill her way home” because of his own history. As a veteran, Komunyaaka would have been through situations where he literally had to kill in order to make his own way home alive. This insight makes us view the coyote in a new light as well. She becomes framed as a soldier, fighting against enemies to make her way to safety. Though the enemies she is fighting may be industrialization and pollution, they are just as deadly to her as an enemy soldier would have been to Komunyaaka.

Yusef Komunyaaka uses his art to teach readers a valuable lesson: that our actions have consequences. Every time we change the face of this earth we affect the animals that call that space home. These animals either learn to adapt to us, like the coyote, or they are forced to leave their home or die. Works like “Crossing a City Highway” force their audience to view the impacts of our society from an animal perspective. Some animals, like the coyote, are able to find ways to survive in human-dominated environments, but others can’t. By sharing a story about an animal that can survive, Komunyaaka leaves us hopeful that nature can survive despite our interference while reminding us that this coyote is a lucky creature, and others aren’t so lucky.

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Sycamore: A Sense of Wonder

Ashley Robbins

LAS 410: Ecotones

Ashley integrates scientific facts with historical and etymological details, local lore, and poetic description into a delightful invitation to the reader to pursue a sense of wonder.

Dr. Mary Stark

Leaves of the Sycamore are wide and fat. Sycamore's latin name is *Platanus occidentalis*. Occidental is Latin for "relating to countries of the West" (North Carolina State University Extension). This is an important distinction, because in historical literature of Southwest Asia (notably the Bible), there are descriptions of "Sycamore" trees. These trees however are not the American Sycamore, they more closely resemble the fig tree (Easton).

The tree I sit under now stands tall, taller than most. It is old and strong. Sycamores often live for over 250 years when left alone (Sullivan). In fact, here where Lake Red Rock is now, once stood a sycamore 500 years old! It was called the Peace Tree and served as a trading post between settlers and Native Americans (Dirks). Even after the Des Moines River Valley was flooded in 1969, it continued to be a monument to the harmony we can all strive for. It stood for many years, jutting out of the water as a beacon and reminder of the history buried deep in murky waters. Boaters would visit the remains of this great giant and it became a landmark part of Lake Red Rock. As the years passed and the tree slowly began to deteriorate, mariners would often stop by the remaining snag on their boats. At times when they feared it was truly the end for the Peace Tree, they would decorate it for its final send-off (Dirks). However, despite the many rises and falls of the lake, it held on. Eventually though, in 2018, it succumbed to the waters surrounding it, and the Peace Tree finally said its goodbye as the remaining stump broke free of withered roots. Contacted by the Army Corp of Engineers, some kind volunteers from the Red Rock Marina dragged it back to their then-flooded parking lot, where it now serves as an educational opportunity for visitors. The Army Corp of Engineers has installed interpretative signage to help illuminate the hidden history that stems from the skeleton of the Peace Tree.

I look up and admire the tree I sit under. Its base is sandy and open, dotted with bark that has fallen as the tree sheds and grows. Sycamores are unique in that their bark peels as they age, revealing a white smooth undercoat. Ashy brown and lightly rippled, the bark covers most of the trunk and mottles the branches above. Where it has peeled away there are layers, an intermediary of soft almost smooth gray, and under that a textured cream like bleached leather. It looks so soft, and it feels soft too, like well-worn deerskin gloves. The outer two layers are rough to the touch but not jagged. They have deep cracks running among them and look like the salt flats of Utah — dry and ready to shatter at any moment.

The leaves of the sycamore are jagged along the edge, with a tri-fold pattern of peaks and valleys very similar to maple leaves. However, they grow much wider and broader than the maples. They also do not sport the same bright fall colors as maples do, often being a mixture of gold and brown as winter comes on. Like all deciduous trees, they lose their leaves in the winter and then bud anew in the spring alongside their wind-pollinated crimson and canary flowers. The tree is monoecious so both male and female flowers grow on the

same tree (Aviles, 2014). The males look like a perfectly round berry with a thousand cherry-colored crumbles crusting the surface. The females are deep, vibrant suns, their thousand rays jutting out from the crust. It is these little mini-suns that will eventually turn into a seed pod for the next generation.

Interestingly enough, the spring is also when they drop their seed pods (a.k.a sycamore balls) full of fluffy nutlets waiting to be caught by the wind or taken along with a passing animal. The prickly little balls that dangle from branches in the spring remind me of star orbs, floating through a cosmic realm. They are ready to open up and *puff* *whisp* *poof* their fluffy seedlings off to a galaxy far, far away.

These little nutlets are especially popular with songbirds (bplant.org) and each prickly pod contains several hundred seedlings, each with the opportunity to create another ode to nature. Though a germination rate of 5-10% (Mitchell) may sound low, if we estimate a sycamore ball has 500 nutlets, this means each seed pod has the potential to create 25-50 trees — extrapolate that to the hundreds of pods on any given tree, and you can quickly see why they are good re-colonizers of land!

In fact, they are quite hardy despite their susceptibility to fungal rot. They have been used in everything from cityscapes to strip mines and are good at tolerating saturated soils (Sullivan). However, they are not so strong when it comes to air pollution and can easily suffer from ozone damage, causing the cells of the foliage to oxidize and break down (Leininger; et al, 2010). This paired with their vulnerability to cankers has lessened their use in cities in recent years (Sullivan).

However, In the summer their broad, dense leaves offer a reprieve from the heat so they are If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.

A spiky sycamore ball falls into my lap. It is like a million pyramids on a small fawn orb, each with a tuft of chestnut brown hair threading out from the tip. I gaze up, leaves sway to the sound of the breeze. Their dappled holes opening up to gray sky beyond. The wind is rough and shoves the branches, like a bully, shaking free the tree's treasured seed pods. They fall like a spring shower, bouncing lightly off the soft emerald grass as they do.

The American Sycamore, known in the scientific world as *Platanus occidentalis* is a unique species only found in North America, and mostly within the contiguous United States. Its name is derived from a Latin base, with Greek bits intermixed. *Platanus* comes from the Greek stem of *Platus*, meaning “broad” (North Carolina State University Extension). This is a reference to the often still seen in parks and are a tree of choice for native restoration. They take especially well to wetlands but will grow in most soils. I commonly see them dotted throughout the parks near Lake Red Rock and there is a beautifully giant specimen in the town square of Pella too.

An interesting note that comes from their size and tendency to rot from the interior is their ability to be used as a shelter. There is a story that dates back to the mid-1700s in which two brothers, while stationed in North America, deserted the British Army. In their wanderings, they eventually found refuge in a hollow

sycamore tree! They lived in that tree for three years, and when one of them got married, the other brother moved out so the newlyweds could have the tree to themselves (Maloof, 2005). What an experience indeed! These massive old-growth trees were also used by passing herders and shepherds as cover from the elements, as well as being popular pantries and roosts for many other animals.

Since the tree has to be fully mature before the “heartwood” tends to rot out, we don’t usually see these massive cavernous structures in our modern day. The general age when a Sycamore hollow is about 200-300 years old (Mitchell). However, with any luck and many generations down the line, there are some very special Sycamores that have been planted with the potential to be preserved for that long.

In 1971, a batch of sycamore seeds (among others) went to the moon on the Apollo 14 mission (Williams). When these seeds returned to Earth, they were planted in two US forests and cultivated until the country’s bicentennial birthday. At this point, they were given to various non-profit entities across the United States. Unfortunately, many of the fates of these “Moon Trees” have been negligently forgotten, but we do know one was planted at the State Capitol in Des Moines (The Nonpareil). Next time you are there, perhaps take a look around and see if you can find it!

The mighty American Sycamore, strong and tall, with wood as cumbersome to work with as the Americans’ reputation for being hard-headed. Despite this coarse-grained, crass wood being difficult, it, like the people of the land it grows in, has found usefulness. From butcher blocks to shipping crates, and even musical instruments, the Sycamore has found its way into many industries. Prior to the industrialization of the country, it was also used for other important staples, like buttons and baskets (Mitchell). In addition, it served as the basis for many homeopathic remedies both by Native Americans and early settlers. It was brewed, pulverized to a poultice, squeezed, sliced, and chewed for everything from stomach ailments to “blood purification” and as a cure for smallpox and tuberculosis among others (Mitchell). It was of course also fermented into wine and if one could collect enough sap (like A LOT), it could be boiled into a syrup.

Perhaps it was the sturdy reliability of this tree that led to it being included in the name of the agreement which founded one of our largest and most important financial institutions, the New York Stock Exchange. It was in 1792 that the Buttonwood Agreement (Buttonwood being a colloquial term for the tree) was signed underneath an American Sycamore (Mitchell). That document would be the beginning of an important economic device that continues to drive not just ours, but financial systems across the globe to this day.

So, with these “facts” and “impressions”, to take as you wander through this world, perhaps you will find your own sense of wonder. Perhaps you too will be encouraged by something you’ve seen or heard to delve deeper into the details of this thing that seeded your curiosity.

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Beauty and Monstrosity: Race in Early English Literature

Quinn Deahl

*ENGL 251: Monsters and Monstrosity in English
Literature, 800-1785*

In this exceptionally well-researched final project, Quinn reads three course texts from different periods in English literary history alongside extensive scholarship on pre- and early modern race in order to trace a long history of anti-Black racism. She deftly refutes scholars who argue we cannot study race in early periods and contends that understanding how race and racism were constructed in the past can help us combat systems of oppression today.

Dr. Valerie Billing

The medieval and renaissance periods of British history mark the point in time when England began developing its national identity. This evolution coincides with the increasing contact between the English and different national groups which allowed them to truly distinguish themselves. Early English literature reflects these developments and the subsequent attitudes that the English began to advance about themselves and their perceived others. An important example of these attitudes can be seen in the descriptions of black and white that are evident in a broad range of medieval and renaissance texts. Although the notion of race as we know it today didn't define these distinctions at the time, descriptions of monstrosity as dark and beauty as light in early English literature reflect the racialization of cultural otherness in England that laid the foundation for our modern conception of racial difference. The development of this racial discourse in early English literature began with the Christianization of Europe and evolved with the rise of colonialism and transnational trade in England.

Using critical race theory to analyze literature from the early modern period has been highly controversial and remains so today. Ayanna Thompson and Ian Smith explain that their work in early modern critical race studies has often been met with backlash because some scholars believe that since the term "race" in the modern sense didn't exist and wasn't conceived of until later than the early modern period, it is inaccurate to deploy the term in critical studies of this time ("Othello and Blackface"). However, this argument delegitimizes the fact that the attitudes that the English developed towards dark-skinned people in the medieval period were foundational to the racial oppression being perpetrated by the English in the 18th century and what became our modern conception of race. As Smith argues in response to accusations about critical race studies of Shakespeare specifically, "this narrow thinking somehow did not and does not give due credence to the fact that there are patterns of behavior and sort of practices that Shakespeare was clearly calling attention to, to which we may give the term 'race'" ("Othello and Blackface"). I argue that descriptions of dark and light regarding monstrosity and beauty in early English literature are racialized, and are the medium that gave way to the attitudes that eventually allowed for the English enslavement of African people in the 1700s. In order to make this argument, I will analyze the progression of racialized language in Beowulf, Queen Elizabeth I's speeches, and Shakespeare's sonnets before drawing conclusions about the implications of this racial discourse using

Olaudah Equiano's 1772 slave narrative.

The Christian Origins of English Racial Discourse & *Beowulf's* Monsters

The origins of the dark/light binary in English culture trace back to Christian representations of good and evil. England converted from paganism to Christianity during the 7th century with the Germanic invasion of Europe and subsequent missionary operations of the Europeans they were able to convert ("The Middle Ages" 6). Christianity began mixing with the rest of Anglo-Saxon culture and by the beginning of the 8th century, Christianity was the dominant ideology of England. This conversion greatly impacted English literacy as no books existed before Christianity was established ("The Middle Ages" 6). Thus, the literary output of the time was highly intertwined with Christian ideology and illustrates the beginnings of what became racial discourse in England through the biblical binary of good and evil (Gayle 41). Traditional Christian symbolism equates blackness with death, sin, and ugliness while whiteness is associated with purity, hope, and holiness. Addison Gayle explains that these symbols translated into English literature in that "the villain is always evil, in most cases the devil; the protagonist, or hero, is always good, in most cases, angels or disciples. The plot then is simple; good (light) triumphs over the forces of evil (dark)" (41). These representations are evident in *Beowulf*.

Beowulf's depictions of light and dark as well as its attitude toward non-Christians demonstrate that the racial discourses some argue didn't develop until modernity are already present in this oldest of English texts. *Beowulf* was likely written between 700 and 900 CE and is written about a period of time several centuries before this. This would place the story told within *Beowulf* at around the point in time when Christianity was beginning to infiltrate English culture, while the writer would be reflecting on this period after England—and likely the author—had been almost completely Christianized ("*Beowulf*" 37-38). This context sheds light on the perspective that *Beowulf* presents regarding dark and light symbolism and otherness. Kim Hall explains that the origins of racial discourse derive from "the traditional association of blackness in conventional Christian symbolism with death and mourning, sin and evil" ("Introduction" 4) which are clearly seen in *Beowulf's* descriptions of the monstrous. The author describes Grendel as "a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark" (*Beowulf* 86) and then goes on to explain that "a fiend out of hell, / began to work his evil in the world. / Grendel was the name of this grim demon" (*Beowulf* 100-102). There is a very clear connection between darkness, hell, and evil in this initial description, which demonstrates the way that Christian ideology associates these three notions in the way that Hall describes. On the other hand, when Beowulf is describing his victory over monsters that he'd battled in the past he boasts that "light came from the east, / bright guarantee of God" (*Beowulf* 569-570). This imagery that Beowulf associates with his own heroism stands in stark contrast to the imagery that is associated with monsters. Beowulf is related to light, brightness, and God, all of which prevail over the evil of darkness.

Furthermore, *Beowulf* marks the dark and evil monsters as outcasts, which illustrates a form of "othering" that is prevalent in racial discourse. Hrothgar describes Grendel and his mother as "prowling the moors, huge marauders / from some other world" (*Beowulf* 1348-1349). A moor is defined as a "wasteland" and

“uncultivated” (“moor, n.1”), and is also associated with North African and Indian people (“Moor, n.2”). Hall argues that this form of othering reflects anxieties over the security of social institutions and power in England and is reflected in that “whiteness and fairness must be made visible with the addition of ‘Moors’ whenever the opportunity arises and that the black/white binarism shapes social occasions as well as discursive practices” (“Introduction” 9). This othering can be seen through Hrothgar’s distancing of his own society from that of the monsters to distinguish between himself from what he perceives as “other,” which is already being related to darker-skinned people or eventually was. Hrothgar also claims that “one of these things [monsters], / as far as anyone ever can discern, / looks like a woman; the other, warped / in the shape of a man” (*Beowulf* 1349-1352). He compares the monsters to what English society would have defined as human but describes them as less than that, calling them “things,” again distinguishing between himself and the other. English expectations for the way people should look are here being used to differentiate between categories of beings and mark themselves as superior, which lays the foundation for future racial categories in English society.

Beowulf also demonstrates the way that gender and race work together to construct otherness. Hall maintains that in early English society, “threatening female sexuality and power is located in the space of the foreign: male, Grecian order is opposed to the dark, feminine world” (“Introduction” 22). Identities associated with female authority are closely intertwined with that of darkness—both of which portend to jeopardize the white, patriarchal social structures of English culture. This anxiety is revealed in *Beowulf*’s description of the monsters’ affiliation with femininity. The author writes that Grendel derives from an “unnatural birth” (*Beowulf* 1353) and that he and his mother are “fatherless creatures” (*Beowulf* 1355). The monstrosity of Grendel and his mother are described in terms of their lack of masculine authority and are categorized as different and dangerous for this reason. The author insinuates that because Grendel doesn’t have a father, his birth is abnormal and perverted, and that his mother’s lack of male authority has allowed her power to extend into the realm of evil. Moreover, Grendel’s mother remains unnamed throughout the epic, further demonstrating the menace and otherness associated with femininity. Hall argues that the interconnectedness of gender and race is crucial to understanding the racial discourse of the early modern period because “notions of proper gender relations shape the terms for describing proper colonial organization” (“Introduction” 4), which shaped the oppressive ideologies that the English supported throughout this period and into today.

Elizabeth I’s English National Identity & Whiteness as Beauty in Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Soon after *Beowulf* was written, England became involved in the Crusades, in which the English increasingly came in contact with foreign people and further developed their distinction between self and other. These Christian conquests of the Middle East took place between 1096 and 1291 and were derived from European’s sense of religious and cultural superiority. The Crusades led to the development of “aggressive territorial ambitions, the consumption and discipline with alien communities, and the nascent, overarching impulse toward the formation of the medieval nation” (Heng 137). Attempts at territorial expansion at the expense of foreign communities led to a type of nationalism that was based on the superiority of the English

self to the Muslim and Jewish others. By the end of the Crusades in the 13th century, England had begun developing a true sense of national identity and racial discourse subsequently became clearer and more targeted. Geraldine Heng asserts that “the emergence of a distinctive racializing discourse in the later medieval period specifically attests the instrumentality of racialized categories in the formation of a medieval nation” (139). The establishment of English national identity is in part due to the racialization of other cultures, which lays the foundation for England’s colonial ambitions.

The Norman Invasion in 1066 further sparked an English national movement with the beginning of the current Royal Family line taking power. By the time Elizabeth I took power in 1558, the English had begun traveling abroad and bringing Africans back to England as slaves, leading the presence of black people in England to grow (Ungerer 20). Historians agree that it was during Elizabeth’s 45-year reign that the English truly began to see themselves as superior to others (Billing), which Hall explains was likely due in part to the increasing number of foreign and dark-skinned people in the English population (“These Bastard Signs” 68). Elizabeth’s speeches demonstrate that she was highly concerned with establishing English national identity and power. In her 1588 “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury” she maintains that she would “take foul scorn that Parma or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of [her] realm” (235). Elizabeth views England as a sovereign realm with set borders and believes that those who violate English land should be fought off by its soldiers. In another speech, Elizabeth asserts her power and national identity by asking English delegates “[w] as I not born in the realm? Were my parents born in any foreign country?” (“A Speech to the Joint” 226). She derives her power from the fact that she and her parents were born in the country, implying that if she was born in another place, she wouldn’t hold authority in England. Elizabeth makes clear the importance of English identity and Hall argues that this is because “England itself had a heightened nervousness about group identity and power and...was thus ripe for the development of race prejudice” (“Introduction” 3). Elizabeth was likely anxious about the growing presence of foreign people in England as a threat to English power and identity, which allowed for the racial difference to become an important signifier of people who were considered “other” than English.

The racial difference between the English self and other was further established during Elizabeth I’s reign through evocations of whiteness as powerful and beautiful. Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I exaggerate her fair skin, portraying it as almost completely white, and depict her body as both large and powerful and petite and womanly. She is also often illustrated with symbols such as globes and pearls which are meant to reflect her global influence and purity (“The Queen’s Likeness”). Hall argues that

Elizabeth herself is extremely white in these portraits, and if that whiteness reflects her virgin purity and Christian grace, it also, through the association of Elizabeth with the kingdom, represents England as white—as powerful and favored by the forces of good and a Christian God. (“These Bastard Signs” 68-69)

Queen Elizabeth and England are being explicitly linked with whiteness as goodness, which is a clear extension of the Christian symbols of lightness and holiness that *Beowulf* expressed. Hall also asserts that “this Africanist presence becomes a crucial part of a larger economy of whiteness in early modern England” (“These Bastard Signs” 66). In other words, the increasing amount of dark-skinned African people in England is what evoked the overt association of fair-skinned English people with goodness, which exemplifies that whiteness is indeed becoming racialized.

Shakespeare’s sonnets reflect the developing notion of beauty as white in Elizabethan culture. In his 154 sonnets, Shakespeare writes of two love interests who are commonly called the “fair youth” and the “dark lady”. The sonnets juxtapose these two love interests, especially regarding their skin tone and gender. The fair youth is a young man with light skin and the dark lady is a woman with dark features. When describing the fair youth in Sonnet 18, Shakespeare writes,

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade... (5-12)

He evokes imagery of lightness and Christian goodness when describing the man, and contrasts it with darkness and death, similarly to the way *Beowulf* and portraits of Elizabeth I do. Shakespeare praises the boy by equating his fair skin with beauty and morality. Unlike Queen Elizabeth I, though, the fair youth is a man, not a woman. Hall contends that “if the early poems all insist on the uniqueness of the young man’s fairness, these sonnets create his singularity by insisting on its difference from (and superiority to) the fairness of women” (“These Bastard Signs” 74). The patriarchal society of England would have understood a white man as superior to a white woman, both of whom are superior to a black woman. Through the use of a white man as the object of beauty in comparison to a black woman, Shakespeare further distinguishes the goodness and beauty of whiteness from that of blackness.

Shakespeare’s descriptions of the dark lady exemplify English attitudes towards black women. In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare describes the dark lady in the opposite way that he did the fair youth in Sonnet 18:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. (1-4)

He uses the same comparison to the sun that he did in Sonnet 18, but while the fair youth was even lighter than the sun, the dark lady is much less than. Shakespeare then goes on to further differentiate her from lightness and

eventually does the same with holiness by writing “I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground” (18:11-12). The dark lady is directly opposed to godliness, further distancing her from the fair youth and morality. Furthermore, in Sonnet 144 Shakespeare explicitly compares his two lovers:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit is a woman coloured ill. (1-4)

The positive connotation associated with the fair youth and the negative one associated with the dark lady clearly reflects English attitudes towards whiteness and blackness, evoking the same light and Christian imagery that Queen Elizabeth and *Beowulf* do to express beauty and goodness in opposition to darkness and monstrous. Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of his two love interests throughout this sonnet is evidence of the dangerous racial discourse that had developed in England by the 16th century.

The Origins of the Transatlantic Slave Trade & Englishness in Olaudah Equiano

Less than a century after Shakespeare wrote his sonnets England became a dominant force in the transatlantic slave trade, responsible for the transportation of an estimated 3.1 million enslaved African people to British colonies across the world (“Britain”). Motivated by a desire for geopolitical and economic dominance, the English understood African people as an exploitable labor resource to gain global capital (“Britain”), which was justified by centuries of racialized attitudes towards dark-skinned foreigners whom they believed to be undeserving of the human rights that white English people held. Furthermore, many African people weren’t yet Christianized (“Britain”), adding another layer of otherness to rationalize their ill-treatment. Evidence of English racial discourse, Christianity, and national identity can be seen in one of the few surviving slave narratives written before the 1800s, exemplifying that the origins of what inspired the enslavement of African people lie in the racialization of self and other which can be seen in English literature dating back to the time of *Beowulf*.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano illustrates the distinct identities of black and white, African and English, from the perspective of an enslaved African. In his account of the Middle Passage, the narrator immediately distinguishes between himself and his captors. He writes, “Their [the English’s] complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard)” (Equiano 982). Equiano differentiates between the appearances of the English and that of the Africans. He then goes on to explain “I found some black people about me...I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair” (Equiano 982). Equiano is terrified of the English people and has been given the impression that they planned to eat him. Joseph Miller maintains that this fear comes from the well-known fact among Africans that white Europeans, which they called “red-skinned”, actually engaged in cannibalism and would eat black people (4-5). Equiano sees the ways that the English have treated African people and has come to associate their character with their

complexion, which demonstrates the ways that the English have solidified the idea of racial difference into the minds of the people they've enslaved through their racialized practices towards people of color.

Equiano's narrative also gives evidence of overlap between English and African identity, reflecting the idea that racial difference is culturally constructed, and that Equiano subverted the racial divisions in some ways. At one point, Equiano expresses his desire to obtain the power that the English had and to become one of them: "I therefore wished to be from amongst them" (983). While being subject to torture and ill-treatment on the ship, Equiano wanted to abandon his own identity and be English to hold the power that they did, specifically explaining that he desired to be "from amongst" them, which shows that he understood the territorial aspect of being English. However, Equiano's narrative also acknowledges the contradictions in English nationality and expresses that he's able to hold both the African and English identities at once. At one point he calls his captors "nominal Christians" and points out the misalignment between their actions and the faith that they used to justify racism throughout English history (986). At the same time, Equiano often references his own Christian faith. When he buys his freedom he exclaims, "I called to mind the words of the Psalmist, in the 126th psalm, and like him 'I glorified God in my heart, in whom I trusted'" (989). In this way, Equiano recognizes that he holds the Christian component of English identity more genuinely than many of the English do. Furthermore, the title of Equiano's narrative recognizes his dual identity by also referring to the name that was given to him during his servitude, Gustavus Vassa, which was given to him to conceal his identity as a slave and make him appear English. But although he still calls himself by this name in the title of his narrative, Equiano still calls himself an African, acknowledging that his native country and skin color will never allow him to be considered English by their standards. Equiano's perception of the contradictions and fluidity of English identity allows him to both detail the horrors of the British slave trade and question their conceived notions of Englishness.

Conclusion

English racial discourse can be seen dating back to the 8th century, originating with the light/dark binary of Christian symbolism and its expression in notions of self and other. *Beowulf's* descriptions of the monstrous and the heroic in terms of colored and moral categories in addition to the othering of Grendel and his mother exemplify that the English began conceiving of racial discourse far before it presented itself in human classifications. As Hall argues, "traditional terms of aesthetic discrimination and Christian dogma become infused with ideas of Africa and African servitude, making it impossible to separate 'racial' signifiers of blackness from traditional iconography" ("Introduction" 4). This connection between Christian symbolism and racial signifiers can be seen in the development of an English national identity during the Crusades and Queen Elizabeth I's rule. The association of whiteness with power and beauty justified colonialism and depictions of racial difference as seen in Shakespeare's sonnets, which solidified the racial discourse that promoted white, patriarchal supremacy. With the increasing contact between white English people and black foreigners came racial discrimination and the transatlantic slave trade. *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*

exemplifies the ways that English racial discourse culminated in horrific human rights abuses against millions of African people, which were justified by a culturally constructed perception of white supremacy and English superiority.

Over the several centuries that followed the transatlantic slave trade, these white supremacist attitudes have become systemically ingrained in Western culture despite the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of black people in Western societies. Critical race analyses like this one are essential to uncovering the roots of systemic racism and working to eradicate white supremacy, but pushback from scholars and legislators alike has largely prevented this work from being done. Although the notion of race as we know it today wasn't invented until the end of the renaissance period or later ("race n.6"), it is clear through this examination that the origins of racial discourse in England lie in the early medieval period at the latest. Despite evidence such as this and from scholarship by dozens of renowned early modern critical race theorists, many medieval scholars continue to resist discussions of race in early modern scholarship. The website for a new conference series called RaceB4Race explains that early modern critical race scholars often see "the rejection of proposals for sessions on race and antiracism by Medievalists of Color in favor of sessions proposed by their white colleagues" and that "understandings of periodization, historicity, and even academic disciplines can become more expansive once race is acknowledged as a viable lens of investigation" (Arizona Center). It is imperative that studies of early modern literature and education systems more broadly recognize the importance of critical race studies in expanding the reach of scholarship and in reversing the racist ideologies that continue to plague society.

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Queerness and Queens: Queer Analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 14

Gannon Oberhauser

Comm 330: Media Criticism

The media criticism essay analyzes a media artifact using one theoretical perspective that students have examined during the semester. The essay must include a clear thesis statement with an argument about the film or television show and provide compelling evidence from the media artifact that supports the themes used for analysis. The conclusion reflects on the implications of the analysis, theoretical approach, and future areas for study. Gannon's critical essay uses queer theory to examine queer representations in RuPaul's Drag Race. He argues that the show provides new and progressive representations of queer people while also perpetuating some sexual stereotypes and expanding camp that queer audiences, in particular, can resonate with. Gannon's use of compelling evidence from the series leads to an insightful essay with a nuanced argument.

Dr. Shelly Bradfield

RuPaul's Drag Race is a reality competition show where the best queens from across the country compete for a grand prize of \$100,000. The queens participate in challenges testing them in areas of fashion, design, comedy, and acting. The show originally aired in 2009 and is now released on the VH1 network along with streaming services such as Hulu and Paramount Plus. Since its creation, the show has been nominated for fifty-six Emmys and has won twenty-six. The show has also been highly recognized at the People's Choice Awards, GLAAD Awards, and MTV Awards. *Drag Race* was created by the mother of drag, RuPaul, who hosts and mentors the queens on the show (*RuPaul's Drag Race* (season 14), 2022). The show is significant and highly meaningful for the LGBTQ+ community due to its wide representation of queer people on mainstream television. *Drag Race* is a queer show made for queer people to build community and find a sense of belonging in their shared experiences. Because of *Drag Race's* LGBTQ+ appeal and discourse, the show has provided a need for textual analysis, specifically through a queer lens. Therefore, I will analyze the 14th season of *Drag Race* focusing on queer theory. Based on Ott and Mack's definition of queer analysis, I argue that the show falls victim to sexual stereotypes while challenging what it means to be a queer person in America. I will specifically look at season 14 of *Drag Race* because it is the most recently aired U.S. season and acknowledges that representation, queerness, and visibility matter. I will begin by explaining queer theory and the categories of queer analysis presented by Ott and Mack; sexual stereotypes, problems with positive representation, and camp. I will then analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 14 as either challenging or reinforcing the categories presented above. My analysis of *Drag Race* through a queer lens will lead to the limits of queer theory and further areas of study.

Queer Theory

Queer theory can be described as disrupting "socially constructed systems of meaning surrounding human sexuality" (Ott & Mack, 2014). Queer theorists acknowledge that sexuality is a spectrum, and no person fits the full binary of heterosexuality or homosexuality. In this case, it can be argued that everyone is at least somewhat queer. For example, is a man who dresses masculinely but wears his emotions on his sleeves a queer person because of the dominant ideology that men do not have emotions? Although it may be ironic for an

extremely masculine man to be categorized as queer, Ott and Mack believe that any disruption of constructed sexuality is queerness on some level.

Further explaining queerness, Diane Raymond (2003) argues that queer theory is intended to be “universalizing” rather than “minoritizing”. Stigma involving the word “queer” has put specific groups, mainly the LGBTQ+ community, in a minoritized or othered position in society. However, the queer community has reclaimed the word and uses it as a way to establish individual identity and community. The universalization of queerness has allowed queer people to share their stories across the world and provides a space for queer people to explore their sexualities and live safer lives. Although queerness spans beyond the LGBTQ+ community, I will focus on the queens of *Drag Race* season 14 to analyze queer theory on a popular queer television show. Discussing queer theory further, Ott and Mack identify three categories of queer visibility/invisibility in the media: sexual stereotypes, problems with positive representations, and camp. As I go into detail about each category, I will discuss *Drag Race* season 14 as either challenging or reinforcing the media’s use of queer people in television.

Sexual Stereotypes

The media traditionally upholds a binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality, which sorts individuals’ sexual practices into two distinct categories. This is problematic because queer sexualities on television are then stereotyped as abnormal while heteronormative relationships and sexual activities are seen as correct and normal. Ott and Mack (2014) describe three binaries commonly used in television: natural vs deviant, monogamous vs promiscuous, and gender clarity vs gender ambiguity. Season 14 of *Drag Race* highlights all three binaries in different ways.

While heterosexuals are seen as natural on television, queer people are portrayed as deviant, villainous, and unnatural (Ott & Mack, 2014). The queens of *Drag Race* are already positioned as unnatural due to the concept of contestants putting on over-the-top makeup, outfits, and wigs to perform unique talents and showcase their creativity. The sexual stereotype of deviance is shown in almost every season of *Drag Race* as queens pick feuds with each other. In season 14, contestants Jasmine Kennedie and Daya Betty are seen frequently fighting about their opinions of each other. During the season 14 reunion episode, Daya reflects on her relationship with Jasmine. She states, “I said what I said, I don’t take any of that shit back. I was being honest. Jasmine said things at the wrong time.” Jasmine responds, “You dragged me for nine weeks straight... you came towards who I was as a person...you would attack people non-fucking-stop just so you would be fine” (Season 14, Episode 15). This dialogue is very representative of the way both queens treated each other throughout the entire season. The villainous portrayal of these queens suggests and informs audience members that queer people choose to pick fights and participate in drama, further feminizing queer people, when in reality, a majority of the season 14 queens share a sense of friendship, sisterhood, and compassion. While Jasmine and Daya reinforce the deviant and dramatic stereotype of queer people in media, the other queens of season 14 provide dialogue that contributes to a normalization of queer people on tv. The binary of monogamy and promiscuity is another way in which the media distances queer people through sexual stereotypes. On television, heterosexual relationships are seen as monogamous, with one man loving one woman.

The dialogue surrounding heterosexual couples and their sexualities is also considered “normal”, whereas homosexual people are portrayed as having sex with multiple people and openly talking about their sex lives (Ott & Mack, 2014).

Season 14 of *Drag Race* upholds this stereotype in all aspects of the definition. First, it is uncommon for queens to discuss life partners or relationships on the show, which can lead people to believe that the queens are not looking for relationships or can’t be “tied down”. Open dialogue amongst the queens also contributes largely to the promiscuity stereotype. For example, the queens openly express what positions they prefer during sex and the specific sexual acts they perform. Also, queens are not shy about stripping naked in their workroom, discussing how attractive their competitors are, or commenting on the figures of other queens (Season 14). The dialogue surrounding hypersexuality and sexual preferences is not commonly associated with heterosexual relationships and monogamy, which is why queer people are still portrayed as promiscuous in the media. Therefore, season 14 of *Drag Race* does not challenge the sexual stereotype of promiscuity and further portrays queer people as very sexual beings.

The final binary discussed by Ott and Mack (2014) positions heterosexuals as gender-clarified and homosexuals as gender ambiguous. In simpler terms, the media portrays heterosexual characters as easily identifiable based on their gender expression or identity. For example, heterosexual men wear masculine clothes and subscribe to masculine ideologies such as being emotionless, aggressive, and competitive. Comparatively, queer people are portrayed as not subscribing to particular gender norms. The media may characterize a queer person as dressing both masculine and feminine or challenging gendered lifestyles. Throughout *Drag Race*, the season 14 queens are portrayed as being gender ambiguous, with very little clarity on gender. Drag culture as a whole centers around ambiguity. Queens everywhere transform their face, body, and personality to portray different versions of themselves. In *Drag Race* season 14, queens are filmed both in and out of drag, which makes their gender even more ambiguous.

While some queens are female presenting, others are more masculine out of drag, creating a wider disparity between gendered norms. Queens also discuss who the “trade” of the season is. Trade refers to a queen that is the most masculine out of drag, therefore the most ambiguous and unrecognizable. Season 14’s Alyssa Hunter took this title as queens commented on her masculine features and handsome face (Season 14, Episode 1). Although *Drag Race* season 14 reinforces the sexual stereotype of gender ambiguity, I argue that the queens’ lack of gender conformity is what makes *Drag Race* a unique queer show. The concept of drag is not subscribing to specific gender norms, as it is an art form for queens to express themselves in outrageous and creative ways.

The Problem of Positive Representation

The second category of visibility described by Ott and Mack (2014) is the problem of positive representation in the media. Although it may seem contradictory, positive representations are not always realistic, making them not representative of the queer community. Many television shows and movies portray queer people in heteronormative ways. For example, many gay couples on tv include a very masculine and very feminine man who conform to stereotypical gender norms. Even though characters may be in same-sex relationships, queer-couples are constructed to function like heterosexual couples in the media, which limits the queer experiences shown on television.

There is also an important difference between visibility and representation, both being important aspects of queer visibility in television.

Visibility deals exclusively with the number of queer individuals shown on television without looking at other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender expression. Drag culture is centered around queerness and the LGBTQ+ community, so, *Drag Race* is similarly structured in a way that showcases a very large number of queer individuals. To put it in perspective, there have been more than forty seasons of *Drag Race* worldwide and over two hundred queens have competed for the franchise (Drag Race Wiki). Although the visibility of queer people is important in the media, the sheer number of queens has only provided a stepping stone to what representation looks like for queer people in television.

The representation of queer people goes beyond visibility and looks at how queer people act, feel, and engage in media. If queer visibility in media only reflected a heteronormative view of homosexuality, there would be a lack of representation and shared experiences between queer audiences and queer people portrayed on television. The *Drag Race* franchise is transnational, meaning it has seasons formatted for countries outside of the United States. A few countries participate in their own drag races including Spain, Canada, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. The queer community around the world needs to see people like them represented on a show that empowers queer individuals. Representation on the bases of culture, race, and values provides queer individuals with a sense of belonging and community.

The cast of *Drag Race* season 14 is one of the most diverse groups of queens in the U.S. franchise, coming from all different backgrounds and experiences. There are White, Black, and Hispanic queens, queens of all different shapes, sizes, and abilities, and queens that identify as gay, gender nonconforming, and trans (Drag Race Wiki). Also, for the first time in drag history, season 14 welcomed the very first straight drag queen to the competition! As I mentioned previously, it is important and necessary for queer shows like *Drag Race* to include people of all different experiences, because it provides audiences with a safe and welcoming space to feel included and a place to belong.

Members of the season 14 cast provide a necessary example of why representation matters. Kerri Colby was the only openly trans queen at the beginning of the season. However, as the queens became closer and were able to communicate their experiences, four other queens were brave enough to come out as trans. The four queens included Jasmine Kennedie, Bosco, Willow Pill, and Kornbread “The Snack” Jeté. It has now become the largest group of trans women to compete on a single season of *Drag Race*. Although these experiences took place in the show, I argue that audience members that identify with the trans community specifically felt seen and heard on mainstream television, which has been few and far between for the queer community in recent decades. I further argue that season 14 of *Drag Race* does not have a problem with positive representation, because of its widely diverse cast and experiences discussed throughout the season.

Camp

The final category of queerness is described as being invisible, positioning queerness as existing “between the lines” of what would normally be a mainstream media text. A concept that is described in more detail is the idea of camp. Camp refers to “a collection of stylistic elements that, as they happen to converge around and/or within a specific media text, resonate with the experiences of queer individuals living within a heteronormative social system” (Ott & Mack, 2014). This definition of camp posits that queer individuals who experience

life differently than other queer people will be able to identify and/or find different meanings in the camp that is presented in mainstream media. Camp can be broken down into four unique categories: irony, theatricality, humor, and aestheticism (Ott & Mack, 2014). For a queer show like *Drag Race*, camp is an expression that many audience members can understand, making it less “between the lines” than other heteronormative shows. A researcher and watcher of *Drag Race* states, “I gained a newfound appreciation for the show’s use of Camp references, double entendre, parody, and irony, and I discovered how I needed to immerse myself in Camp in order to understand the show” (Schottmiller, 2017). Schottmiller adds to camp and queer theory by explaining that camp is learned. Queer people don’t inherently understand what camp is or looks like, however, through their own personal experiences, they can begin to understand how camp is hidden in mainstream media.

Drag Race as a franchise is campy because it embodies irony, theatricality, humor, and aestheticism in its challenges which include acting, design, and comedy. Drag culture is performative and highly stylistic. While some queens excel at using humor and irony in their performances, others showcase their skills in creating out-of-this-world designs that challenge our perception of fashion, style, and art. For example, one of the campiest queens in season 14 is Willow Pill. Willow displayed her camp early on in the competition during the talent show challenge. Her performance consisted of her lip-syncing to “Only Time” by Enya, she was wearing a long white nightgown. Willow proceeded to pour soap into a bubble bath, followed by wine, spaghetti and meatballs, and a toaster. Willow ended her performance by stripping into a revealing outfit and getting in the bathtub (Season 14, Episode 1). There was nothing inherently queer about Willow’s performance, yet it was entirely queer at the same time. Willow was over-the-top in her theatricality, playing up her performance with wonderful facial expressions and timing. She was also able to use humor in a way that wasn’t necessarily funny, but humor so “dumb” that the performance was a huge success. Queerness is an expression that is indescribable because of the wide scope of experiences held by the LGBTQ+ community. Willow’s confusing, and purposefully stupid performance gave audiences a joy ride through how queer and campy Willow and drag as a whole are. I further argue that those who don’t self-identify as queer individuals could have looked at Willow’s performance as pure nonsense, specifically for the fact that they share little to no queer experiences.

Camp usually looks “between the lines” of mainstream media, however, *Drag Race* was made for queer people, so camp isn’t necessarily used within the same context as any heteronormative show. In fact, I argue that those who don’t consider themselves queer must work to identify queerness and campiness in shows like *Drag Race*, which is made up of almost entirely queer people. *Drag Race* has established itself as campy, and therefore provides easier access to understanding camp in performance, acting, and design challenges on the show.

Conclusion

RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 14 is a heavily influential media artifact for analyzing queer theory. *Drag Race* is one of the only franchises in the world that is now consistently highlighting queer people in mainstream television. I have acknowledged the wide representation and visibility of queens and the importance of their portrayals for queer audience members around the world. I specifically chose season 14 of *Drag Race* because it acknowledges that representation matters and it is filled with glamour, drama, camp, and real experiences of queer individuals navigating a heteronormative society.

Drag Race is a predominantly queer show, which means the audience is also predominantly queer. Queer theory in the past has been applied specifically to mainstream media and heteronormative television.

Therefore, *Drag Race* is one of the exceptions in terms of representation as a whole, the breaking of sexual stereotypes, and the presence of camp. Also, the stereotypes portrayed in season 14 are not inherently “homophobic” or hateful, due to the queer community’s dark humor and ability to read past negative commentary.

I argue that *Drag Race* season 14’s queerness challenges the popular media landscape by including queer people in all aspects of the show, yet it fails to challenge all queer stereotypes. Through discourse, the queens are able to challenge sexual stereotypes of deviance while reinforcing other stereotypes of ambiguity and promiscuity. However, *Drag Race*’s primary audience is made up of queer individuals, who can acknowledge these stereotypes and make fun of the way the media has previously represented queer people. I also argue that camp in *Drag Race* is not entirely read “between the lines” because of its predominantly queer audience. The visibility of queerness on the show has provided a greater presence for camp in the media, widening the scope of queer experiences viewers can share with queer people in television.

If I had time to look deeper into season 14 of *Drag Race*, I would provide a case study of queer analysis focusing on a specific queen, Willow Pill. Willow was the winner of season 14 which means she had the longest airtime and plenty of discourse with her competition. She was non-binary during the filming of the show but later came out as a transgender woman, making her one of five trans girls on season 14. Her experiences as a trans woman have shaped how she perceives herself and the world, which is something I would like to research a bit more. Willow is also suffering from a chronic disease, further widening the spectrum of representation in season 14. As she began to find herself in her own body, Willow was able to discuss problems related to her disability and slay runway challenges all the way up to her crowning. Willow was one of the most resilient queens in her season and I would suggest future research into her portrayal on the show related to queer theory. As a fan of *Drag Race* season 14, it was interesting analyzing its discourse through an academically queer lens. *Drag Race* is unique in and of itself because of its largely queer audience and it will be interesting to see how mainstream television continues to portray queer individuals who have now begun to have greater voices in the media.

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Robert Henri and the Ideal Woman: An Analysis of *Ballet Girl in White*

Fynn Wadsworth

ART 325 Modern Art & Architecture

Fynn's great strength here builds from an exceptionally keen eye for visual evidence that supports a compelling thesis. His nuanced analysis of the painting, together with primary and secondary sources, offers convincing support for the argument that, counter to stereotypes of the ballerina broadcast through popular culture in the early 20th century that often contributed to their marginalization and exploitation, Robert Henri's painting Ballet Girl in White (ca. 1909), presents a fully realized individual "in all her imperfect, human glory," showing us a picture that refuses to participate in the mistreatment of these women.

Dr. Susan Wight Swanson

In the early 1900s, artists were still largely defining who and what was worth documenting and drawing attention to. The upper classes still dominated the art world and while many artists were frequently depicting the lower classes in their work, they were still largely stigmatized subjects. The poor, especially poor women, were often romanticized in artists' depictions, and yet were often being exploited by the very artists who were painting them. These women came in many forms, from factory workers to seamstresses but none were as sexualized and romanticized as the women of entertainment. The dancer and the performer became an easy target for artists looking for a subject that could be exploited both artistically and sexually. In contrast, Robert Henri's painting *Ballet Girl in White* (1909) (Fig. 1) along with many of his other portraits of poor and working women, place these women away from their stigmatized professions, and does not depict them as simply a body, but instead, as an entire being. In doing this, Robert Henri goes against how early twentieth-century America viewed not only the dancer, but women as a whole. Robert Henri paints a more human version of the modern woman, versus an idealized one that serves the public instead of the girl herself.

To begin, artist Robert Henri, previously Robert Henry Cozad, was born on June 24th, 1865 to John Cozad and Theresa Gatewood. Henri and his family fled his birth state of Nebraska for Colorado after Henri's father shot a man in the local grocery store over gambling money to avoid charges.¹ The family, with new identities, then fled east to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where they would settle. He had an interest in art from a young age but did not consider making it a career until around 1885.² He would later study at The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While attending the Academy in Pennsylvania, he also studied for a semester at The Académie Julian in Paris.³ He found much inspiration in both of the teachers he studied under in Paris and in Venice, as well as many of the Paris Salons that he both attended and exhibited in during his time in France.⁴ Around 1891, Henri returned to America and began a career in teaching.⁵

Hence, in 1892, Henri would be offered a teaching position at the Women's School of Design, also known as the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, where he stayed for several years. The school taught over two-hundred women at Henri's time, and despite still relying heavily on the teaching of skills considered

1 Bennard Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991), 5.

2 Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, 6.

3 Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, 11 – 16.

4 Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, 18.

5 Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, 24.

“women’s work,” the school taught many formal painting and drawing classes.⁶ Henri would instruct drawing from the Antique, artistic anatomy, and composition courses, and would go on to be one of the most influential teachers competing before the Modernist period, having taught dozens of the most influential women of the movement, as well as hundreds of other female artists of the period.⁷ Henri emphasized how beauty was subjective in his teaching, which must have resonated with a lot of female students. In his own writing, he addresses the School of Design students with this, “Thus two individuals looking at the same objects may both exclaim ‘Beautiful!’ — both be right, and yet each have a different sensation — each seeing different characteristics as the silent ones, according to the prejudice of their sensations. Beauty is no material thing. Beauty cannot be copied. Beauty is a sensation of pleasure on the mind of the seer.”⁸ In other words, Henri largely believed that beauty came in all forms and that it appeared different to everyone, which gave way to a teacher who could resonate with many different students’ works. In addition, Henri’s emphasis on beauty and its subjectivity also aligns with the Ashcan School movement’s take on Impressionism. Henri pioneered this style of art known as the “Ashcan School,” with its mix of artistic movements that included elements of Realism, Impressionism, and Post Impressionism, coupled with depictions of the lower classes, urban environments, and cityscapes that most other artists avoided.⁹ Henri, true to Ashcan ideals, rejected many of the traditional ideas of Impressionism specifically. He favored a darker and desaturated color palette and disliked the prettiness or “holiday atmosphere” of artists like Claude Monet or Childe Hassam.¹⁰ This dislike of Impressionism would lead Henri to become one of the main contributors to the aforementioned Ashcan School movement, where he and seven other contemporaries and friends would continue to promote their own ideas about Impressionism and art in general, as well as exhibit and teach together.¹¹

To elaborate further, Ashcan School artists would focus on urban settings and the poor and underrepresented people within them, as well as favoring a darker, richer color palette in their works, while still utilizing the more expressive qualities of Impressionism. The movement of Impressionism itself focuses on depictions of nature, air, and light, something that artists like Henri would contort in order to express an Ashcan sensibility. In other words, he used these ideas as a base to depict the more raw, gritty setting of urban America.¹² In his article “Ashcan Perspectives,” art historian David Corbett notes the visual approach taken by the Ashcan artists, writing, “Commenters on the Ashcan artists have most often seen them as the visual equivalents of Walt Whitman, that is, poets of the humanity and dynamism of the streets whose urban realism provided a visual language for those qualities.”¹³ Strictly speaking, Corbett argues that the Ashcan artists are paving the way for the people of poor, urban communities within the art world through their blend of realism and Impressionist aestheticism. The Ashcan take on art focuses heavily on the urban and poorer areas of twentieth-century America and sought to portray these areas as beautiful and as fully as any other place in the world. The movement continues the Impressionist focus on *plein air* painting but with a focus on not just

6 Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art*, 24.

7 Marien Wardle, *American Women Modernists*, (Provo: Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 2005.), 4.

8 Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, ed. Margery A. Ryerson (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1923), 79.

9 Richard Boyle, *American Impressionism*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1982), 44.

10 Boyle, *American Impressionism*, 218.

11 Boyle, *American Impressionism*, 218.

12 Wayne Morgan, *Victorian Culture in America 1865 – 1914*. (Itasca, NY: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.), 23.

13 David Corbett, “Ashcan Perspectives,” *American Art* 25, no. 1, (Spring 2011): 14.

urban area landscapes, but on portraying the people residing in them. Many of these painters, such as William Glackens or John Sloan, have large bodies of work that exist somewhere between landscape and genre painting, just as it exists between Realism and Impressionism. Robert Henri himself would describe the people depicted in his paintings as “His People,” writing “Everywhere I see at times this beautiful expression of the dignity of life, to which I respond with a wish to preserve this beauty of humanity for my friends to enjoy.”¹⁴

Comparatively, Robert Henri’s painting *Ballet Girl in White* (Fig. 1) is a very good example of both Ashcan School sensibilities and Henri’s personal beliefs about beauty and humanity. Henri cared very deeply about the details of his paintings, saying, “The lace on a woman’s wrist is an entirely different thing from the lace in a shop. In the shop it is a piece of workmanship, on her hand it is the accentuation of her gentleness of character and refinement.”¹⁵ His attention to these kinds of details adds much of the needed intricacy to fully bring the *Ballet Girl* to life. The painting itself features a figure of a young, female ballet dancer, posed in 5th position with her hand clasped at her waist. Her dress is white and has a full skirt ending just above her knees. She wears white tights and a pair of light pink ballet shoes. She has a garland of leaves over her left shoulder, and puffy, white flowers in her hair. The room she stands in has a brown back wall and dark floor, with no furniture or other objects in view. The figure is painted on a large, long canvas that makes the dancer just above six feet tall. Her color palette consists of a selection of warm grays, pinks, and greens, with a few hints of a dark navy or black in some sections. The paint itself is very textured and thick in sections, with a few choice spots of heavy, mixed tone blotching. Her features sometimes fade into each other or into the background, while others are heavily contrasted with thick, dark paint.

The figure holds herself very firmly, holding back from the viewer in the shallow, empty space she’s painted in. Her hands being clasped in front of her and her eyes looking off into the distance give a feeling of reserved sadness, with her slumped body language adding to this feeling. Her feet are pointed but her body is not tense. She lacks the precision we often associate with a ballet dancer, instead she appears quite dejected as she looks past the viewer into the distance. In the same way she lacks movement, she also lacks the luster of being shown on stage. Her body or her artistic expression is not the focus of Henri’s work, instead it is simply the girl herself. His dancer also features the harsh shadow looming behind her, an embodiment of the shame or sadness she seems to hold. Harsh lighting plays up both her pale skin and her white dress. The lightness of the painting creates a feeling of innocence or softness in the figure, while the harsh shadows and splashes of dark color throughout her tutu and in her hair contrast the lightness with darkness. This makes the figure feel more rounded, her thoughtful expression and dark eyes coexisting with her youth and softness. Henri’s *Ballet Girl* puts emphasis on all of these parts at once, in turn putting the emphasis on the dancer as a person rather than just a figure. The way she holds all of these negative emotions in her demeanor and in her face create an image of the dance that looks deeper than her profession or her reputation. She is as much a dancer as she is human.

This contrasts with other popular depictions of ballerinas, notably those painted by Edgar Degas. I chose Degas’s *Dancer in Front of a Window (Dancer at the Photographers Studio)* (1873-1875) (Fig.2) specifically to contrast Henri’s *Ballet Girl in White* (Fig.1) because of their similar compositional elements. These paintings at first glance appear almost identical. They both feature a ballet dancer alone, in a very empty space and in their tutus, but this is truly where the comparisons end. The life and warmth depicted in Henri’s *Ballet Girl*

14 Henri, “My People,” *The Craftsman* 27, no.5 (February 1915): 459.

15 Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 124.

is completely missing in Degas's *Dancer*, where the figure's harsh and rigid movement pairs well with her expressionless face. The cool blues and greens of Degas's work bathe the figure in a dusky light that makes the dancer herself almost fade into the gray cityscape behind her. She holds the same darkness as Henri's figure but instead of adding a depth to the figure, the darkness instead flattens her further, as the deep blue tones and harsh angle of the floor continue to plateau the painting. These flat aspects are something many of Degas's ballerinas share, where they are often being shown to the viewer almost as if they were at a distance on a stage. Degas's dancers are not allowed the intimacy or depth we see in Henri's interpretation.

Yet, Degas is well known for his portrayals of the ballerinas, and twentieth-century dance critic Boris Kochno even claimed that "the ballet dancers had found their painter" in Degas.¹⁶ Degas himself, as well as many other men in association with ballet during the era, have been found by scholars to have personally exploited the dancers they so loved. Ballet itself took a harsh shift in the late nineteenth century that turned ballet from the beloved, genderless dance art into a wholly erotic and effeminate practice, in which the male dancer was viewed as contaminating and disruptive.¹⁷ The female dancer, on the other hand, was now seen as a symbol for beauty, femininity, and promiscuity. Further, the ballerina was often a daughter of a lower-class family, who sometimes chose the profession, or on rare occasions, was sold into it.¹⁸ These women's position, both in society and as sex symbols, created a very exploitative environment for the girls, who were often very young in age. Due to this, the lower-class girls of ballet were being sought out for sexual consumption by middle- and upper-class men.¹⁹ Degas was complicit in this in many ways, with his paintings taking the ballet dancer and conforming her to her stereotype, as historian Ilyana Karthas notes about Degas's dancers, "In his work, the ballet dancer was no longer a metaphoric symbol of nobility, grace, or poetry, but rather conceived first and foremost as a sexual being, a worker, and a titillating subject."²⁰ These paintings often portray the girls as something to be both admired and objectified. The flat, cold paintings shape the girls into permanent sex symbols, and in turn somewhat reflect the real life of a ballet dancer just as Henri's paintings do, but with none of the humanity or dignity of Henri's portrait. Even in a standalone portrait such as *Dancer in Front of a Window* (Fig. 2) that removed the audience that is often present in Degas's ballet paintings, the girl is still a vessel for others to project their thoughts on to. She is as flat as a blank slate, something that molds and bends for a paying audience instead of for her own passions or desires. As literary theorist Charles Bernheimer describes, "The grimacing body — distorted, disarticulated, unstable, even inverted — this 'reconstructed' body of 'the female animal' is the victim of Degas's misogyny."²¹ The way Degas forces his dancers into the stiff, unmoving ballet poses removes them from their humanity and pushes them even further into being nothing but a pretty object. Henri's painting, in contrast, takes the dancer and removes her almost entirely from her position as a sexual object, or even as a dancer. She stands posed, but in a way that allows her to draw back from the viewer in a way the allows her privacy, versus covering her in a romanticized sheen as Degas tends to. Her unidealized,

16 Ilyana Karthas, *The Politics of Gender and The Revival of Ballet in Twentieth Century France*, *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 964.

17 Karthas, *The Politics of Gender and The Revival of Ballet in Twentieth Century France*, 965.

18 Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, (Canada: Grey-stone Books, 2012), 14.

19 Charles Bernheimer, "Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology," *Representations*, no.20 (August 1987): 159.

20 Karthas, *The Politics of Gender and the Revival of Ballet in Early Twentieth Century France*, 961.

21 Bernheimer, "Dega's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology," 159.

slumped body allows her more privacy as well, pulling her further away from her sexualized position in society and allowing her room to breathe away from the gaze of an objectifying audience. Degas's exploitations of the ballerina compared to Henri's respectful portrayal in *Ballet Girl in White* show two very different sides of the ballerina, and I would argue that one clearly shows her more respect and that option is clearly Henri's.

Similarly, another artist of the period was depicting the idealized woman, although not through the context of ballet. Charles Gibson, the man behind the "Gibson Girl" who would dominate advertising and popular culture in the early twentieth century, created his "girls" to be quite similar to Degas's, although appealing mostly to a female viewer versus a male one. His girls are idealized in a more prim and proper way than Degas's, or as described by Gibson's friend Richard Davis, "Gibson has always shown her as a fine and tall young person, with a beautiful face and figure, and with a fearlessness on her brow and in her eyes that comes from innocence and from confidence in the innocence of others towards her."²² The Gibson Girl became an American ideal, with women across the country striving to the standard set by this idealized woman portrayed in Gibson's sketches and publications (Fig. 3).²³ Whereas Degas was portraying an ideal sexual fantasy for a male audience, Gibson was creating an ideal woman who could be a figure for the modern woman to look at and emulate. This could lead to a belief that Gibson was just as far away from the portrayal of women as Henri sets forth, but instead, they both seem to slightly alter what is expected of women in the period. As Davis continues with his interpretation of his friend's work, he says, "But with all this evident admiration for the American woman Gibson is somewhat inconsistent. For he is constantly placing her in positions that make us fear she is a cynical and worldly-wise young person, and of a fickleness of her that belies her looks."²⁴ Both Gibson and Henri portray a woman as much more than a pretty face in this way. Gibson's girls have an air of confidence and self-assuredness that is as equally lacking in Degas's work as the subtle sadness that is present in Henri's work, *Ballet Girl in White*. Henri's own assertion that a pretty face is dull and empty²⁵ could make Gibson's work something Henri would not have found a resemblance in, but I think they are more alike than different.²⁶ Many of Gibson's illustrations are also stand-alone women like in Henri's portrait. In Gibson's work, these women are often depicted simply standing, often with their hands placed comfortably in front of them or against their hip just as Henri's *Ballet Girl* clasps her hands in front of her. They are posed and sometimes face the viewer as in the Gibson Girl from 1900 (Fig. 3). Unlike Henri's portrait, this woman is shown head high, holding her flowers with pride, almost disregarding the viewer because of her own perceived importance. Her shoulders are high while Henri's dancer slumps into herself. Henri's dancer and Gibson's worldly woman portray contradicting emotions, and yet both create a sense of personality and underlying feeling that gives both women a depth of character instead of becoming just another portrait of a beautiful woman or another sexual fantasy. Both women are allowed depth, but Henri's figure still portrays a more realistic modern woman. The Gibson Girl is allowed depth and dignity, but she is still a constructed ideal. The *Ballet Girl in White* is a real woman, although we do not know her. The perfection of the Gibson Girl is truly her downfall, as she is not just one perfect girl, she is hundreds of them.

22 Richard Davis, "The Origin of a Type of American Girl," *The Quarterly Illustrator* 3, no. 9, (Jan. – Mar. 1895), 6.

23 Davis, "The Origin of a Type of American Girl," 6.

24 Davis, "The Origin of a Type of American Girl," 6.

25 Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 124.

26 Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 124.

To conclude, the authenticity in Henri's portrait is aided by his ballerina being a standalone portrait, and furthermore, one that is allowed imperfection. The rough, splotchy paint of Henri's *Ballet Girl* aids in making her feel multi-dimensional in a way Gibson's illustrations cannot. Degas utilizes texture in *Dancer in Front of a Window*, but it lacks the depth of Henri's tones. Both Degas's paintings and Gibson's illustrations also lack the scale of Henri's portrait. The lifelike size of *Ballet Girl in White* almost adds to her humanity in that you can look at her as you would another person, whereas Degas's painting forces intimacy in its scale just as Gibson's illustrations do. Further, the warmth that exudes from Henri's work is simply not present in the other men's works, where the flatness does not allow for the same intimate understanding of the figure. You can get to know *Ballet Girl in White* in a way that is not allowed in the work of Degas or Gibson, both of which have a shield of idealization and expectation wafting over them.

The painting *Ballet Girl in White* is simple yet gives so much depth and understanding to an otherwise misunderstood and overly idealized group of people. The early-twentieth-century woman is allowed very little room to move or grow within Edgar Degas's or Charles Gibson's works. In contrast, Henri's portrait allows for an exploration of a woman who is both beautiful and sad, poised, and dejected, and is portrayed as an entire, whole being. The flatness of the other works makes the rounded fullness of Henri's portrayal all the more evident. His respect for not only the woman he paints, but the women he teaches comes through in this work and allows a more human version of the modern woman to be put into the forefront of the art world, even for a moment. As Robert Henri himself says, "Beauty is never dull and it fills all spaces," and I believe this sentiment rings true in *Ballet Girl in White*.²⁷ She truly does fill all space, in all her imperfect, human glory.

27 Henri, "The Art Spirit," 124.

Fig. 1

Robert Henri (American, 1865-1929) Ballet Girl in White, 1909

oil on canvas, 76 7/16 x 36 7/8 inches (194.2x93.7 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections, Gift of the Des Moines Association of Fine Arts. 1927.1

Photo Credit: Rich Sanders, Des Moines



Fig. 2

Edgar Degas (French, 1834-1917) *Dancer in Front of a Window*, 1873-1875

oil on canvas, 25.5 x 19.7 inches (65x50 cm)

Pushkin Museum, Moscow. Inv. GMNZI: 39

Due to image restrictions, painting may be viewed at the following link.

http://www.newestmuseum.ru/data/authors/d/degas_edgar/dancer_posing_for_a_photographer.php



Fig. 3

“Special Exhibit,” detail of an illustration from *Sketches and Cartoons by Charles Dana Gibson*, 1900. Ink on paper. Public domain.

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Sara Sienkiewicz

ART 151 2D Problem Solving, still-life painting

The still-life painting project is where students mix their primary colors of red, blue and yellow to match the colors seen on the still life objects. While Sara's accuracy in color matching is notable, capturing the reflective quality of the chromed Christmas decoration is what makes this painting come alive.

Professor Mathew Kelly



Project: Create a sculptural animal form in metal that represents your inner animal or spirit animal using sheet metal and cold connections. Morgan's sculpture sets up a richer narrative through the posing of the orangutan in relation to the constructed setting. It also utilizes some original approaches for the cold connecting of the arms and legs at the elbows and legs that are very interesting.

Professor Brian Roberts



Madilynn Peitzman

ART 270 Book Arts, *A Day in the Life* tunnel book

This tunnel book by Madilynn Peitzman is for the “A Day in the Life” project in the ART 270 Book Arts class. Here Madilynn chose to describe the hikes she takes on a favorite trail. Sometimes foraging, sometimes identifying plants and animals she sees, it is always a place where she sees how all the world is in some way connected. The title of the piece is “Hike on an Easter Afternoon.” The choice of working on toned paper and the delicate ink work on each page of this tunnel book matched the quiet calm Madilynn spoke of while hiking on this favorite trail.

Professor Mathew Kelly



Project: End of semester assignment of creating your own work based off the techniques learned during the semester. Grace's vessel is a very original form for a first semester glass student. It has richness in its form and draws associations to things like flower blooms and sea shells.

Professor Brian Roberts



Payton French

ART 270 Book Arts, A Day in the Life tunnel book

This tunnel book by Payton French is for the “A Day in the Life” project in the ART 270 Book Arts class. Payton is a writer spending at least a little time each day writing her stories. In this book excerpts from these stories are printed on the pages with silhouetted images laser cut into some pages to highlight events in the stories. These images were built on the computer which created an additional technical challenge, and then laser cut into black paper before being assembled into a book form. The form and content work together to effectively convey the meaning in an elegant way.

Professor Mathew Kelly



Project: Replicate a historical, slip decorated vessel form and apply an original visual narrative about your interaction(s) with the world to its surface. Madolyn's design utilizes a good sense of economy in the creation of the visual narrative's composition. The corn stalk border surrounding the neck is a nice detail.

Professor Brian Roberts



Amelia Brown

ART 270 Book Arts, *A Day in the Life Tunnel book*

This tunnel book by Amelia Brown is for the “A Day in the Life” project in the ART 270 Book Arts class. It is a visually powerful image with all of the intense color and detailed painting. The content behind it is equally potent. I was given permission by her to share some of this personal content. In this book, Amelia is describing the difference between what it is like emotionally and in some ways physically when she remembers to take her ADHD medication and when she forgets to. What Amelia described in class educated us all on the variety of ways ADHD can manifest itself, and the spectrum of responses to the medication. Through her work and the critique some of the myths around ADHD were dispelled.

Professor Mathew Kelly



Project: Create a sculptural fish using decorative techniques learned during the semester and utilize bitwork to create fish components like eyes and fins. Sophie's fish shows sophistication in modeling the body and fins while the overall form captures an effective sense of movement and fluidity through water. It has a richness of detailing and effective use of coloration, and patterning giving it a sense of realism.

Professor Brian Roberts



Project: Design a sculptural cup and a related saucer form using the visual language of organic organization (forms, textures, structure) found specifically in botanical lifeforms. Fynn's cup and saucer forms have great visual appeal in the articulation of their surfaces. The forms are also very successful in meeting a goal for the assignment of creating new visual hybrids.

Professor Brian Roberts



“The Magic of Disney” Podcast

Chris Ver Heul

LAS 110: Storytelling and Change

The assignment asked students to create a podcast telling the story of someone who they think deserves more recognition. Chris chose one of Central’s own: Ron Rybkowski, our Musical Theatre department’s technical director. The podcast focuses on Ron’s earlier career working at Disney—and contemplations on why he left. Chris’s podcast stood apart due to his careful editing and his genuine curiosity about Ron and his story. I appreciated the way the podcast balanced a conversational style with a tone of learned professionalism.

Dr. Kate Nesbit

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