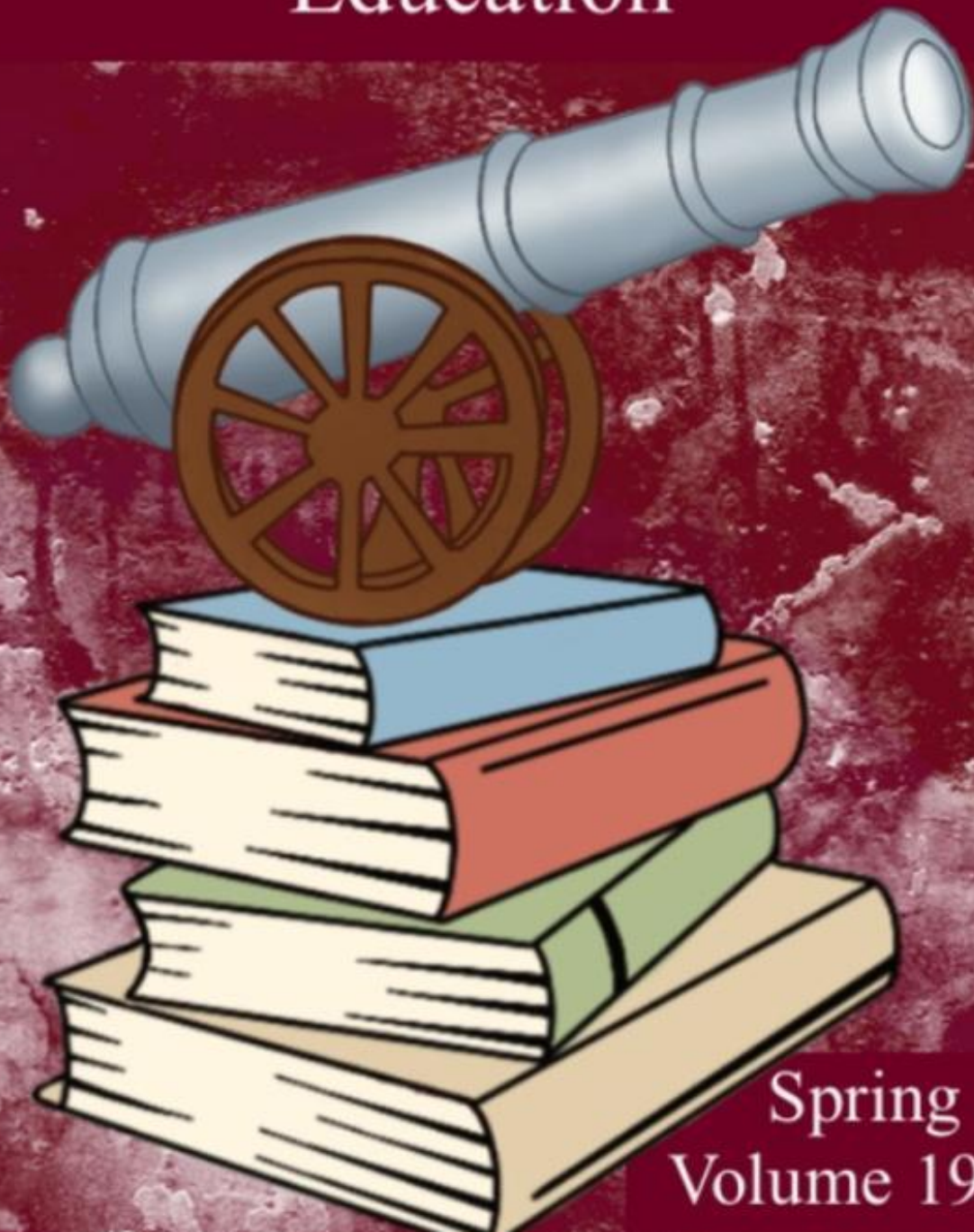


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Crashing the Canon: A  
Spotlight for the  
Underrepresented in Higher  
Education



Spring 2022  
Volume 19, Issue 1

**Cover Art and Design by Giselle Magana**

## **The St. John's University Humanities Review**

“Crashing the Canon: A Spotlight for the Underrepresented in Higher Education”

Volume 19, Issue 1, Spring 2022

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# *Crashing the Canon*

## A Spotlight for the Underrepresented in Higher Education

Volume 19, Issue 1, Spring 2022

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**Introduction:** Reflecting on the Academy and the Issue(s)

*Kainat Cheema*

*Alexander Radison*

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don  
I only armed wit mih human breath  
but human breath  
is a dangerous weapon  
--John Agard

In March of 2022, Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, signed into law the Parental Rights in Education bill, also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which will take effect on July 1, 2022. This new law prohibits instructors from teaching anything relating to sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten to third grade. In other news, seven states have banned and another sixteen states are in the process of passing legislation to ban Critical Race Theory from being part of their schools’ curriculums. And books ranging from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* have been targeted by politicians who want to ban and silence authors, stories, and voices that might make the classroom “uncomfortable” for some. Yet, who is to say that there is not something decidedly worth learning by being uncomfortable?

While the academy has always seemed impenetrable, this growing fear and anxiety over diversity and inclusion that is sweeping our nation also reveals the potential for change and the malleability of the academic institution. The academy should be a place of growth, knowledge, and acceptance. And while this legal push to censor and silence continues to pervade the US, this issue of the *Humanities Review* seeks to demonstrate the necessity to explode the canon and allow other genres, voices, writings, and teaching methods to be part of the evolving and progressive potential that the academy can represent. This issue includes creative works of poetry that explore form and structural power, a short story that responds to Ursula LeGuin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” essays that range from examining underrepresented genres in higher education to pedagogical methods of inclusion and diversity in the college classroom, and book reviews of *The Dawn of Everything* and *The Dark Fantastic* that challenge canonical understandings of Nation-State history and race and genre respectively. We are proud of the voices that this issue seeks to share and to honor. And although we might only be armed with our “human breath,” that, as John Agard reminds us, “is a dangerous weapon.”

We would like to thank the authors of this issue, whose poetry, short story, essays, and reviews shared their personal interests, teaching methods, and insights into literature, genres, writings, and classroom activities that seek to make the canon more inclusive.

A special thank you to Dr. Granville Ganter, Justin Lerner, Stephanie Montalti, and Dr. Dohra Ahmad for their guidance and support, and to Dawn Cancellieri for her editorial work. To the St. John’s English department, we are grateful for the opportunity to be part of this issue of the *Humanities Review* and for being part of a space where students’ voices are heard and supported.

## Ornament of Heaven

*Michelle Cicillini*

*I, who am I among living creatures?*

—ENHEDUANNA

Authority

wakes you again+again,  
your bed comes undone  
by a decorated man who  
likes to call himself an

authority

on who counts as author,  
the term never changed to  
authoress, so title & status  
continually belong to the

authority

and a story is said by some-  
one except for when some-  
one is a triple threat, then it  
was said by no one, without

authority

so they burn the poet's tree  
if they can't burn the witch  
but she rises, cool phoenix,  
still princess in crossfired

authority

and who am I? Woman of  
privilege and comfort and  
pseudo-power reading like  
progress and applause for

authority

on a resume. No relic to be  
found by some Sir clawing,  
seeking priestess to break,  
excavating any remaining

authority

and re-writing her story,  
scraped scenes from stone,  
silhouette unsexed, poetess  
w/o publisher, author sans

authority.

*Notes: Enheduanna is the world's first known author. She lived in ancient Mesopotamia during the 23rd century BCE. She was the princess daughter of Sargon the great, high priestess to the moon deity Nanna-Suen, and writer of temple poetry about Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love and war. There is an ongoing debate around Enheduanna's authorship, led primarily by men.*



## Modernism Remixed: Uncovering Science Fiction as the Bridge to a Modernist Aesthetic

*Cornelius Fortune*

When John W. Campbell Jr., influential science fiction editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, and later, *Analog* (a “remixed” version of *Astounding*), proclaimed in the introduction to the 1962 hardcover collection *Prologue to Analog*, “no literature is sound, no philosophy of action workable, if it doesn’t take a hard look at itself” (13), he might have been gesturing to the future of science fiction as both medium and message. The future, it would seem, is always being rewritten along temporal lines, its elasticity inchoately tested for the ages, like modernism and modernist literature.

Modernism—whether art, literature, or technological advance—has been the subject of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of studies, and consequently, the names Joyce, Woolf, Stein, Eliot, Hemingway, and Faulkner, are all synonymous (in fact, canonical) with this term. But where do we situate such names as Lovecraft, Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, and others? Not at the modernist table, but rather, at the “kids table” of play—pulp, and notably, fiction viewed mostly as pure escapism: science fiction; a thing apart from the *serious* work of modernist literature. These modernist writers are akin to the “good silverware,” but the science fiction writer active roughly at the same time (the 1920s to the early 1950s) is relegated to working with “stone knives and bearskins,” to quote a famous Vulcan from an equally famous science fiction franchise (“The City on the Edge of Forever” 1967). Something is clearly amiss: the inclusion of science fiction (SF) literature as part of that well known movement—modernism.

This omission, I argue in this article, is simply unfathomable in a landscape where boundaries have been recently reimagined and redrawn, where high and low culture have shared the spotlight in contemporary literature and cultural studies, as (at the very least), congenial cousins of a sort. Metaphors of similarities aside, contemporary times call for a cultural milieu built on the elemental *node* of the remix, and it is time for modernism to make a place for SF in the wider discussion of the modernist aesthetic. What might emerge under such a discussion is the remixing of how to approach science fiction and its relation to modernist literature.

Indeed, once upon a time, SF as a genre started in the pages of the pulps, emerging around the time modernist work was springing up everywhere in Europe, like the trappings of an enigmatic box fitted with an impenetrable lock—that might be one way to describe the difficulties modernist art, music, and literature presented in the guise of conventionalized realism. Cultural scholars such as Jason Ray Carney consider the connections between pulp fiction and “conventionalized realism,” writing as something more than the difficult versus simple binary. “The formalist perspective, perhaps strongly associated with, for example, modernist fiction writers such as Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf,” Carney notes, “justifies indifference to pulp fiction on the grounds that such narratives are not literary. Literary art, according to this perspective, is distinct by virtue of its awareness of the formal elements of literary technique, and wide-angled surveys of the massive archive of pulp fiction have often confirmed the idea of its formal naivete, its unoriginal and

unskilled storytelling conventionalism” (9). Carney even suggests the disdain for pulp fiction evidenced by such thinkers as H.L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, all very much against its lack of literary quality and its connection to mass consumption, plays a part in how pulp fiction—of which early science fiction plays a role—is viewed in comparison to modernist literary art of the same time period.

### **The Pulp Origins of Science Fiction**

Pulp fiction, depending on your point of reference, is either indicative of the innovation and creative hallmarks of early 20th century media, or a massive departure from literary norms. When we talk about pulp fiction, according to Carney, we are gazing through a “transhistorical” lens, unfavourable to the inventions inherent in imaginative fiction of the 1920s and ‘30s. “Pulp fiction,” he writes, “in this context, refers to thematic or generic expectations and does not refer exclusively to the fiction printed in the 1920s and ‘30s in cheap periodicals adorned with colorful and sensationalist covers” (14-15). “There is a motif uniting these two distinctive senses of the phrase, and that is the idea of artistic value or merit. It seems plausible to assert that both meanings of pulp fiction signal a kind of writing that is unconcerned with traditional ideals of artistic merit or literary value” (15). Therefore, in discussing modernism, we should dismiss a narrow view only concerned with “artistic value and merit” and see what worked in tandem with it, culturally speaking, understanding that modernism touched nearly every aspect of American life—even the pulps.

Although the conversation typically revolves around the literary production (and artistic—both music, dance, and visual art) as part of modernist expression, science fiction writers were tuned in as well. The argument has become less about certain science fiction writing as literature, but more about the revaluation of its value as an artform. Consequently, due to its “pulpy” origins, science fiction—and detective fiction—is largely relegated to its own sets of anthologies, course syllabi, and categorization labels on popular streaming platforms. As humans, we need—perhaps, even yearn for—categorization to make sense of the world, but how has modernism influenced science fiction, specifically, and in Lovecraft’s case, cosmically? Where is the site of intersection and how is this important to a deeper understanding of the American imagination through realism, modernism, or speculative stories given to time travel, aliens, and interplanetary war?

We might start by drawing some cursory connections between modernist literature and science fiction. Andrew M. Butler contends that “modernism is characterized by an awareness of the void at the heart of society—in morality, in politics, in individual subjectivity—but with the sense that there was a golden age from which the world has fallen” (140). Moreover, “As serious sf runs out of steam, a New Wave of writers such as Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch and most importantly, J.G. Ballard, make sf modernist” (145). The reluctance to appreciate science fiction as modernism’s forgotten (or ignored) partner, is one of the chief concerns of this essay. Literary critic March-Russell, Jason Ray Carney, and others have attested to the value in accessing early science fiction literature beyond its entertainment value; to a deeper appreciation of just how permeating “the cultural soup” really is. Perhaps it is now time, in my estimation, to bring these two parallel tracks in

line as one American literary experience—encompassing high and low culture. Just as the detective story was elevated by such authors as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the same thing is occurring with science fiction writers (Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, for example) and writing. Put another way, science fiction, like an atomic powered jet stream, *issues* from modernism, and it is worthwhile to review some of the American cultural history shaping both American modernism and early American science fiction; mirror worlds, with similar purposes, commenting upon the human condition. As such, we will discuss the connections between the small presses of the modernist era (the *Little Review*, transition) with that of the American pulp fiction enterprise (*Astounding Science Fiction*, *Weird Tales*). How were they similar? How did they differ? Where do they (inevitably) intersect?

### **The Intersection of Science Fiction and Modernism**

Modernism seems to gesture toward some uncertain future while simultaneously unhinging itself from the Victorian past with its societal norms and literary formulas. Thomas McHaney, in his chapter on modernism—from *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*--encapsulates the movement this way: “Modernism implied a break with the experiences and traditions of the past, a break not merely symbolized but actualized by the Great War of 1914 to 1919, with its murderous technology, duration, and results” (109).

Science fiction is largely about technology (sometimes “murderous,” sentient technology) that, like modernist literature, was a reaction, in real time, to present events, cultural fears and concerns. Whereas, McHaney continues, “the prime disciplines that affected and expressed the modernist aesthetic—psychology, anthropology, philosophy, musical composition, painting, sculpture, architecture, and the writing of experimental poetry, fiction, and drama—were discussed and illustrated in such magazines as the *Dial*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, the *Little Review*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Smart Set*” (108). In many ways, the literary magazine is the first stop, the introductory guide to a new--and sometimes well-known--author’s work. This was truer in the early 20th century than it is now. From the modernist perspective, its most representative--and experimental--work was often published in such magazines as transition, *The Egoist* and the *Little Review*. “The *Egoist* and the *Little Review*, both founded in the year World War I broke out,” Benstock writes, “were to remain the two most important English and American literary journals of the early Modernist period” (371).

This is just as applicable to science fiction as well. Comparatively, from a pulp perspective, Hammett rose from *Black Mask*, a “literary artist” writing crime fiction; Robert Heinlein emerged from John W. Campbell’s *Astounding Science Fiction* to create the ‘60s sensation, *Stranger in a Strange Land*; Ray Bradbury spun the highly successful *The Martian Chronicles*, from original appearances in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Imagination*, and a host of others. In a very real sense, the pulps, while losing popularity in the 1950s, lived on in a different form--through film, radio and television adaptations.

Before this, on the fringes of this American experience, but not completely divorced from everyday life, were the pulp magazines, which, consequently, were springing up everywhere, from

newsstands, to dime stores. Indeed, Americans were aware of, and often were privy to modernist work, however indirect the exposure. Leick describes it this way:

It seems impossible that an everyday American reader could know about the obscure little magazines, none of which achieved a large circulation. But mainstream readers had not only heard of these publications, they were familiar with many of the writers who were published there. In fact, it would have been difficult for any literate American to remain unaware of modernists like Joyce and Stein in the 1920s, since their publications in little magazines were discussed so frequently in daily newspapers and in popular magazines. Dismissive and respectful commentary punctuated the lively debate about the value of modernist literature, sparking such public interest that when major presses finally published works by Stein and Joyce in 1933 and 1934, each book immediately became a best seller. (126)

While these literary magazines were flourishing, and in some cases, fading from public view, science fiction magazines had a similar fate: “The category pulp magazines, which offered stories of a single kind, began in 1915 with Street & Smith’s *Detective Story Monthly*, although Frank Munsey had experimented a decade before with *The Railroad Man’s Magazine* and *The Ocean*. In 1919 Street & Smith produced *Western Story Magazine*, and in 1921 *Love Stories*. The way was open for the first science fiction magazine, and it was finally offered in 1926 by a man, Hugo Gernsback, who had published a long series of popular science magazines” (xii Gunn Vol.3). The peak moment of science fiction pulp magazines was the 1950s because “anywhere from three to fourteen new science fiction magazines a year were started between 1949 and 1953; many died quickly, and in 1953 more magazines were killed than new ones born,” Gunn explains. “Publishers had overestimated the influence of the atom bomb and rocketry on the magazine-buying public” (xvi). However, such attestations, even in retrospect, did not stop the creative propulsion inherent in science fiction publishing as it expanded beyond the glossy covers of magazine stands. How then, does modernism—often relegated solely to the study of literature, dance, and other artistic forms—leave science fiction out of the discussion in most textbooks and modernist studies? The main ingredient, what interlinks SF magazines with the modernist equivalent might be, as Andrew Milner explains, “pulp,” or at least, an aversion to it:

The most important developments in sf prose were, either directly or indirectly, the effects of American ‘pulp fiction.’ Sf short stories had been published in Europe in the nineteenth century and, indeed, both Verne and Wells experimented with the form—the best examples are collected in, respectively, *Le Docteur Ox* (1874) and *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents* (1895). But European prose sf tended to be overwhelmingly ‘scientific romance’ or novel. Gernsback invented neither the sf short story nor the sf ‘pulp’ magazine: Aldiss is right to stress that Swedish and German sf pulps predated *Amazing Stories*. (202)

Milner argues for the importance of Gernsback’s work as, if you will, patient zero of the early science fiction magazines. Moreover, “Gernsback’s achievement remains: this magazine opened up an entirely new space in the sf field which would be occupied by a succession of subsequent American ‘pulp’—above all, Campbell’s *Astounding Science-Fiction*. For American sf enthusiasts the genre’s

so-called ‘Golden Age’ began in 1937, when Campbell was appointed editor, and continued until the early-to-mid-1950s, when its dominance was gradually undermined by the paperback novel. The pulps were able to do for prose what film, radio, and television had done for drama: to extend the genre towards the younger and poorer end of the heteronomous part of the literary field” (402). These important connections across mediums and genres are foundational for understanding how science fiction was always already a part of the modernist culture, often developing in magazine form, where serialized novels first appeared well before they were published as paperback originals. We should also note that these terms— “little magazines” and “pulp magazines”—must be viewed alongside another popular print format; the so-called “slick” magazines, exemplified by *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Scribners*. “Past criticism of modernism,” Carney asserts, “suggest that the movement flourished in the Anglo-American context because it was given space in non-commercial, privately-circulated periodicals to avoid the influence of public taste that required conventionalism. Thus, magazines like Margaret Anderson’s *The Little Review* and Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* are framed as non-commercial whereas larger circulation magazines like H.L. Mencken’s *The Smart Set* or *Scribners* are framed as commercial. A consequence of modernist periodical studies has been the deconstruction of the unanalyzed assumption that the only authentic site of modernism was the little magazine” (50-51). According to Brian Attebery, “The period of sf history from 1926 to 1960 can justly be called the magazine era. Even though many well-known works appeared in other venues during this period—books, comics, movies, and even radio plays—sf magazines such as *Astounding Science Fiction* were chiefly responsible for creating a sense of sf as a distinctive genre” (32). Thus, the pulps began to fade out by the late ‘50s, replaced by the “paperback original,” all just in time for the New Wave of science fiction to begin.

### **Modernism and the New Wave**

Tracing the rise of modernism at the turn of the century has been the subject of many volumes of studies, again, with an emphasis on the literary modernist movement, and science fiction mostly ignored. Culturally, as we move from the 1920s to the atomic age of the 1950s and, suddenly, through the tumultuous ‘60s, the science fiction literary field was having its own transformation and evolutions. If, as we have examined here, modernism was a reaction to the present, so too, science fiction—whether it is set in a distant future or not—is always a commentary on what is happening right outside your bedroom window; the front lawn of your doorstep; the environment of your morning commute; your workplace; those heated discussions of politics, love, sex, war, illustrative of the quotidian in its various guises. In *The Road to Science Fiction: Volume 3: From Heinlein to Here*, Gunn argues that “[John W.] Campbell writers [which had included Isaac Asimov, Author C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, and Theodore Sturgeon] shared the optimism of the scientific community; they felt that man was progressing in mastery both of his environment and of himself, that though there would be slips and regressions mankind would win through—or tragedy would lie in the fact that he was frustrated by chance or miscalculation. They agreed with William Faulkner that man would not only endure—he would prevail” (XV).

Back to the idea of “Murderous technology,” as McHaney deftly dubs it, we can easily note the sound (or the timbre, as it were) of science fiction: its anxieties, its hopes ... the atomic bomb and its aftermath upon the collective unconscious. These were dangerous times, tumultuous times (the civil rights movement, Vietnam) and in need of an equally provocative solution. The SF writers of the ‘60s, according to Gunn in *The Road to Science Fiction: Volume 4: From Here to Forever*, “emerged in a period of discontent, not only with the science fiction that had preceded them, and often that had inspired them, but with the world. Some of them began to write anti-science stories, even anti-science fiction stories, taking the icons of the genre and demonstrating that they were hollow and fragile” (15).

As in the pulp era, as in the earlier modernist era, in the 1960s publication of new, experimental works increased, but this time, not only through magazines, but anthologies as well, such as Harlan Ellison’s *Dangerous Visions*, Damon Knight’s *Orbit* series, and *Quark*, ‘an experimental quarterly’ (20 Gunn Vol. 4). This was representative of science fiction’s New Wave, a literary movement that was unabashedly literary in style, fully embracing the “softer sciences.” Sterling, in his introduction to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, had this to say about the New Wave movement that preceded cyberpunk: “Throughout the Sixties and Seventies, the impact of SF’s last designated ‘movement,’ the New Wave, brought a new concern for literary craftsmanship to SF ...” (x). Consequently, “What the writers of the New Wave were doing,” Gunn explains, “insofar as they could be lumped together, was to reinterpret science fiction in personal terms. They moved from an objective universe to a subjective one ... Their intensely personal viewpoints tended to protest the established order and even the traditional way of perceiving reality” (xxii).

Reality (virtual or otherwise), AI and other technological concerns were more prevalent in the work of the cyberpunk writers of the ‘80s and ‘90s such as William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, and others, yet these very concerns go back to the first World War, and the inevitable impact of a cultural shift, or rather, the move toward cultural drift, through a wave of fantastic—or *fantastique*—proportions. And yet, we should remember that “Science fiction was emerging as a genre at the same time that literary modernism was passing its high-water mark, perhaps in that same way that the gothic emerged with the growth of the realist novel in the eighteenth century,” writes Butler. “It is tempting, then, to try and situate sf as the other of literature, or to assume that it follows a similar but delayed evolution to literature ... Cyberpunk, with its echoes of New Wave Sensibilities, offers a postmodern movement of sf” (144). As we understand it, the postmodern has its roots in the modern, and the New Wave—“postmodern movement of sf”—is nearly analogous to what critics call “high modernism.”

### **From the New Wave to Cyberpunk Explorations**

This cultural, collective drift, which had been, in essence, one of turning its gaze toward the heavenly bodies spiraling above, increasingly came to find true inspiration in the developments happening right at home—on terra firma, as it were. Science fiction, once primarily concerned with scientific extrapolation and stories of technology and far-off (or *far out*) civilizations, using the simplest forms of narrative construction, now became more aware of literary techniques readily culled from the

modernist playbook—from stream of consciousness to provocative uses of topography, science fiction, in a Darwinian sense, was evolving. Harlan Ellison’s pack of writers (featured in *Dangerous Visions* and the less inspired sequel *Again, Dangerous Visions*), and it should be noted, Ellison himself, strived to push the boundaries of what science fiction could be. In fact, taking his cue from Robert Heinlein and his reluctance to label anything he wrote as science fiction, although the phrase *speculative fiction* never quite landed as elegantly as its more famous predecessor. Perhaps science fiction best represented to the masses what speculative stories really were: fictional narratives imbued with science scenarios both “real” and theoretical, playing to that well-known story engine device called, “what if?”

Shifting from the New Wave, an era marked by the social upheaval aforementioned, SF continued to gaze inward (and occasionally outward), in search of, as Damon Knight might have put it, “wonder.” By the early ‘80s you had on one hand, the rise of the personal computer, and on the other, William Gibson’s concept of cyberspace (a word he coined) in the groundbreaking novel, *Neuromancer*. Just as Stein glowingly embraced the general spirit of detective fiction, and one might argue, noir, which of course sprang from the writings of Hammett, Chandler, Cain and others, cyberpunk writers working within that genre—including Alice Sheldon AKA James Tiptree Jr., whose early work set up the cyberpunk movement—borrowed from the general tenor of these works, giving it a stronger connection to crime fiction than the golden age of SF preceding it. Cyberpunk, SF’s next evolution in form, embraced the grittiness apparent in crime fiction—tropes such as the anti-hero, the private detective, “street justice,” or just plain survival. Cyberpunk, through the early work of Gibson, Sterling, Cadigan, Shirley, and a host of others, admitted the existence of a darker lens; a darker filter, from which to engage with science fiction. The glowing optimism of Isaac Asimov’s Second Foundation (the final installment of his *Foundation* trilogy) would be met by the nightmarish AI singularity, AM, in Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.” Cyberpunk responded to the world around it by diving deeper into the question of humanity, the rise of technology, global—and corporate—power; brand awareness; and furthermore, humanity’s relationship to the rising horizon of circuitry, plastic surgery, and MTV (before its music video exodus) ... this was, to a greater degree, a different type of space exploration. Rather than having an obsession with extrapolating galaxies and humankind’s conquering—or settling—of the stars, cyberpunk dealt with space...exploration; that is, the space in one’s head, the space between one connective network and another; shapeshifting networks; networking; and mass communications. “The final frontier,” to borrow a phrase from Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek* universe, would likely be realized through digital enhancements, gene splicing, gene hacking, and digital avatars, as well as a Babylonian connectivity bespeaking a universal language translated through the ubiquity of the internet.

Bruce Sterling writes in 1992’s *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*: “Human lives, real lives, are imperfect by their nature, and there are human beings in cyberspace. The way we live in cyberspace is a funhouse mirror of the way we live in the real world. We take both our advantages and our troubles with us” (xiii). Sterling also contends that cyberspace—we might today refer to it as 4 and 5G networks, Wi-Fi and the like—is “the indefinite place out there, where the two of you, two human beings, actually meet and communicate” (xii). Although

conversations do happen today between two people (more often text messaging), Sterling's ruminations from the early '90s sits comfortably with where we are in the second decade of the 21st century. Moreover, access to technology and the internet—to cyberspace (in its original incarnation), swaddled in the warmth of a developing, unfurling, newly discovered language—is not merely a pastime, or some quaint novelty: it carries the weight of socioeconomic and quality of life concerns, wherein, in order to achieve (and maintain) a certain quality of life, we must all be connected, wired, and a part of the collective matrix. In today's world, technological access is akin to the basics of survival (our very own "experiential reality"); this is now *science fact*, not science fiction, although Gibson seems to have planted the flag first in his many novels exploring real (and imagined) communities. Gibson, in his work, always makes the case for life eventually catching up with science fiction, and now, we might be catching up with science fiction as modernism, ignored, but inexorably interconnected.

### **Linking SF and Modernism: Final Thoughts**

What this article has argued for is a recontextualization of what we call modernist literature. It is a clarion call for (re)organizing how we view science fiction and its relationship to major literary movements in America, up to and including, modernism. Stableford sums it up this way: "While it was still gestating in its pulp fiction womb, therefore, American sf had already brought about a zygotic fusion of European scientific romance and American other-worldly exotica, lightly-leavened with casually extravagant tall tales of scientific miracle-making" (31). The world, it would seem, was tuned to one signal, that hummed across the globe—it lurched and groaned under the weight of war, the advance of technology, the rapidity of change coming in like a high, raging tide. The argument I am making in this article is for seeing modernism as more than a movement confined to the early 20th century, but recognizing that its tendrils, its concerns—its "atomic" power, if you will—stretched out and took hold of several generations: across continents, cultures, artistic mediums—and science fiction was an integral part of this expansion. Science fiction, although a popular convention, also challenges its readers in ways we might consider modernist. As with any modernist work, full engagement requires some dedication, a willingness to battle, and to dig, and to extract whatever meaning emerges through these textual and visual encounters. Henri Meschonnic asserts that: "Modernity is a battle. Endlessly beginning again. Because it is a nascent state, indefinitely nascent, of the subject, of its history, of its meaning" (401). This battle, this search for meaning, this circularity gets at the heart of modernism and how it is not confined to one time period, one artistic movement, or invariably, one medium. "If 'modernism' is not the name of a practice or a set of principles, it also no longer signifies a particular era," writes Robert Boyers. "To suppose that modernism was the name of a coherent movement that began and ended in the first forty or fifty years of the past century seems no longer possible for most cultural historians" (210). This is why I argue that the question of identity, of forging a way to say something new about whatever the world has become—or is, at present, becoming—is thoroughly answered: first, by modernism, and then, nestled within its nucleus, the birth of science fiction. SF picks up where Stein, Joyce and Woolf left off, in the least obvious of ways: an inexorable approach which evolved from the pulp era to the New Wave, the cyberpunk '80s, to the current "decolonization" of science fiction occurring in today's works.



Consequently, both modernism and science fiction reflect their own contemporary concerns, while also informing our present through the lens of an imagined future, or as Gibson might call it, future with a small “F,” instead of the “capital-F Future,” (45) which tended to deal with spaceships and galaxy-spanning quests. The “little F” future is always occurring, imminently unfurling, tangibly real—like modernism. Science fiction literature at its best (especially exemplified by the Golden Age) tells us something important about modernity, technology, and the human condition. Or, as March-Russell perfectly observed, “the relationship between modernism and sf is far from over” (157). The gift of modernism was that it would replicate itself like a virus in Gibson’s cyberspace, so that you could examine—and appreciate—it through a virtual ... reality. You might have to examine it closely (holistically, systemically), as modernism and modernity are deeply encoded across literature, art, 1960s SF New Wave, and, indeed, pulp. Pulp—as both a printing process and as a distinctive genre — spawned the ‘little’ literary magazines, as well as the lurid, exciting covers of science fiction, and yet, taken as a whole, grouped summarily, these components are part of the very same collective. It is, in fact, a bridge to the modernist aesthetic.

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# Contra-canonical Community and a Trans Minor Literature

Aaron Hammes

## *I: Canon=(Contemporary) Classic?*

One of the paradoxes of canon is the simultaneous singularity of its works—those of presumed genius, endurance, affective resonance across generations and borders—and its presumed internal coherence as a list of works. The designation of The Classic (capitalized in all its Great Books by Great Men glory) is perhaps the first grounds of dispute for a definition of The Canon as sanctioned agglomeration thereof. At the turn of the previous century, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve offers a couple of potentially coextensive concepts of The Classic: first, as an index of civility; second, as the product of individual genius, characterized by sanity, health, and universality, each of which leads to the production of work “contemporary with all time” (7). The former of these concepts instigates each of the proposals for definitions of canon which will follow in this essay: it is an imperial civility that looms over any other, it refracts from the light of civil institutions, it reifies value along thinly coded lines of “advanced” civilization. The latter, while on the surface almost quaint in its hygienic sense of aesthetic worthiness, begs a nexus of questions: whose apprehension of sanity, whose definition of health, and whose exclusion from (as this is arguably the clearest demarcation of) universality?

Frank Kermode offers two modes of a classic’s maintenance, or “of establishing its access to a modern mind” (40). The first of these is somewhat more disciplinary, drawing on philology and historiography to ask “what the classic *meant* to its author and his best readers” which Kermode later recodes as a hermeneutic method (76). This manner of excavation is, though, only half of a hermeneutic engagement; equally important and relevant is what a reader brings to the text themselves. Kermode’s second mode is a method of accommodation, “by which the old document may be induced to signify what it cannot be said to have expressly stated;” he continues, “the chief instrument of accommodation is allegory,” including but not limited to “prophecy.” This inducement to allegory or prophecy rings *ex post facto*, verifiable only generations later, though Kermode seems to suggest that this mode of classic endurance has more to do with openness to accommodation than the ardor of the accommodators.

And yet, Kermode sees a rather optimistic kind of third way, wherefrom “old books that people still read” have “an identity” that changes, but “can in some measure be redeemed from change, by an effort of interpretation rather than of simple accommodation, the establishment of ‘relevance’” (44). This quest for relevance leads to considerations of what a “modern classic” might look like, what kind of reading practice(s) it would instigate, how it would sit not amongst but parallel to or concurrent with the “old[er] books that people still read.” As the critic attempts to unpack the aporia of modern classic, he describes contours of a minor literary corpus that is perhaps more contra-canon than classical in any legible sense. The modern classic contains “invitations to co-production on the part of the reader” (113), an increase of “forces of discontinuity,” and “offers itself only to readings which are discouraged by its failure to give a definitive account of itself” (114). In accomplishing the last of these,

the modern classic does not provide answers, but “poses a virtually infinite set of questions.” When Kermode finally concludes that the modern classic cannot be separated from “the modern way of reading the classic,” the claim is at once mysterious and undeniable: we read the modern classic for the questions and the discontinuities, and decide the extent to which we shall co-produce.

This essay theorizes a trans minor literature which pervasively hails its readers to co-production. The games it plays with genres, tropes, and themes go far beyond gender transition—if anything, that subject often absorbs into the crevasses of the narrative structure, rather than dominating as it might in a memoir. This essay theorizes a different sort of excavation, one which may produce an unsolvable paradox: the contemporary canon. The transgender novel—novels written by and about trans subjects—is at a high watermark for publication. Works produced over the past decade constitute a body of literature as generically promiscuous and multi-registered as any other literary “moment” in the novel’s history in English. They are minor because they are directed at, around, and through minoritarian community, with all of the revolutionary political charge that implies. As we consider a transgender minor literary contra-canon, we find the first divergent path from the nature of classic: the “best” readers of minor literature are perhaps simply those who derive some comfort or disidentificatory mimesis from the text. Their interpretations meet the text in the present, with less concern for its endurance—not least because the promise of queer endurance in many aspects of contemporary life is far from guaranteed. The contemporary canon seems a contradiction in terms, but what follows is a series of proposals for Canon, paired with answers from transgender minor literature. What do these novels do to explode, elide, or conceal themselves from canonicity? What might collecting them into “contemporary canon” mean, if anything? The null hypothesis is that we are simply syllabus-constructing, waiting for the generations to past and the dust to settle to decide if there is anything like canon here at all. The hope is for a different kind of configuration, a minor one with minor ends. If that be called canon, even as just a lark or a parody, so be it.

## ***II: Canon=Symptom of (Literary) Empire?***

Early in his literary career, TS Eliot proclaimed “I am all for empires” (95), continuing “I deplore the outburst of artificial nationalities [...] a genuine nationality depends upon the existence of a genuine literature.” And yet Eliot acknowledges in this same, brief polemic that “good literature is produced by a few queer people in odd corners,” and so perhaps within the empire(s) of (inter)national language, it is the queers who will redeem the written word. Nevertheless, Eliot was for the Western Canon, saw it as in some way planting flags which would not easily be uprooted in the wake of generations and centuries—“worthy” literary languages are imperial, and only imperial languages birth Classics.

Paul Lauter names colonization as a primary category of “historical and cultural coherence” (39) against which a/the canon can be considered. To this he adds the background concern of “the very conception of periodizing” (40), regarding which he notes, “dividing experience chronologically tends to accentuate the discontinuities rather than the continuities of life.” It’s a kind of echo of Kermode’s “forces of discontinuity,” and leads Lauter to propose “a comparativist model for the study

of American literature” (49). This model operates “more as counsel to explorers than a map of the territory.” Is comparativist criticism naturally anti-Canonical? Further, is the kind of counsel Lauter proposes—distinctly anti-racist, respectful of indigeneity, confrontational of misogyny—a reparative practice rather than an idolizing one? What could be more idolatrous than the imperial adventure of the last half-millennium?

But perhaps we should take empire a bit more metaphorically, even if its impacts are entirely too real. The configuration and (re)mapping of space is critical to the concept of a communitarian minor literature. For instance, we can consider M.Z. McDonnell’s *Poet, Prophet, Fox* as a specific deterritorialization of folklore and fantasy genres, employing Old Irish terms and locales throughout the narrative as the author writes a tale about gender transition as a kind of magical awakening. McDonnell dedicates the novel to “my transcestors”—nodding to the (largely) unwritten history of trans persistence—and “to the transgendered youth” who “are part of a long legacy of seers and poets, prophets and healers,” and finally “embody an uncommon power and with it enable humanity to see itself more clearly” (dedications). The author is remapping a history that is both necessary and necessarily absented by phobic publics and Canonical historians. I take it as a direct affront to the Western Canon when Lauter suggests, “the struggle for survival, for space and hope, commands all the limited resources available to a marginalized people. Art cannot stand outside that struggle; on the contrary, it must play an important role in it” (65). The question will become, though, do we seek to “open” the canon, ignore or disavow it, or suggest another, parallel, perhaps more permeable and fungible list?

There is no imperial writer in minor literature. The remapping of majoritarian territories from or by the subaltern is a war against attrition rather than a campaign for settlements. Jordy Rosenberg’s Dr. Voth learns throughout *Confessions of the Fox* that his efforts to retain and maintain the tale of trans thief Jack Shepherd is one of revision and (perhaps perpetual) reinvention, rather than just preservation and revelation. Voth writes: “There is no body, no sexuality, and, simply put, *no sex* outside the long history of Western imperialism’s shattering of the world” (296). This shattering is not to be reassembled by minor literature, but a sense of communitarian literature, one which fulfills Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s third characteristic of minor literature, that everything takes on a collective value, might at least resituate the shards. Deleuze and Guattari outline a minor literature which is distinctly contra-Canon as it is charged with the function of a collective, revolutionary enunciation (17). They even seem to understand a shattering not dissimilar to the one Voth avers: “if the writer is at the margins of or completely outside” their “fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (ibid). I propose that transgender minor literature is at once “genre literature,” proceeding from particular assumptions about (predominately, but not strictly, 20<sup>th</sup> century) literary genres, and at the same time transgeneric in its insistence on the primacy of its protagonists’ subject positions, even while refusing to “answer questions” about these subject positions. There is no empire; instead, there are a confederacy of genres and conventions which could be listed or syllabus-ed in a variety of ways according to one’s needs or aims. Charles Altieri suggests a

criterion of “forceful self-subsumption,” for discussing canon, which he defines as “capacity to interpret its own features by establishing a contrastive language for the situation it projects” (57). A contra-Canonical minor literature will take form both positively (according to its own precepts and innovations) and negatively (against those of the Canon which excludes, and must exclude, it). It does indeed self-theorize, even if we might debate the degree to which it self-subsumes. Altieri suggests that this mode seeks to establish “a model of what it means to have the self-defining strength to be a model on one’s own terms” (ibid). There is no imperial writer in minor literature to define these terms, but there are phobic (institutional) majorities to levy various definitions, be it through the DSM-V or the queer theory course.

A few instances of generic remapping follow. Casey Plett’s *Little Fish* adopts the genre of the family novel while mutating the structure and thus meaning of family completely. Protagonist Wendy’s father is the only blood relation around, and he is more drinking buddy than parent. Instead, her chosen family of transwomen help explore and explode the myth of blood being thicker than water. *Confessions of the Fox* is a quasi-historical novel, relaying the centuries-old story of Jack Sheppard while tracking its archivist professor’s (increasingly sinister) misadventures in academic. The novel does not simply cast doubt on the project of recording history, it champions revision and corrective annotation by later generations. Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada* is a road novel in the literal sense, but at every turn protagonist Maria Griffiths notes archetypes and tropes—of (trans)women, of punk, of irresponsibility—and explodes them, too self-aware to allow the reader to render their own judgment without her two cents. The novels all use the thematic and even formal constraints and strictures of genre to propose different ways of being, different ways of writing and reading.

### **III: Canon=Value?**

Are canon formation and defense evaluative gestures? In a certain sense, we already have our answer: if it is equivalent to the honorific “classic,” if it is symptomatic of empire (the victor’s history), if it reflects the strength of culture/cultural institutions—canon must be evaluative. Barbara Herrnstein Smith indicts the breadth of “American critical theory” with the charge that, “beguiled by the humanist’s fantasy of transcendence, endurance, and universality,” the critical institution “has been unable to acknowledge the most fundamental character of literary value, which is its mutability and diversity” (14). Herrnstein Smith in turn suggests the humanists are “obsessed by a misplaced quest for ‘objectivity’” in their canonical dreams, and she is instead against “a literary axiology” (ibid). It is noteworthy that Herrnstein Smith uses “axiology” as somewhat a surrogate for “Canon;” it certainly underlines the impacts of the monolithic curation of Classics for what it is. The alternative, then: “emphasize a number of other interactive relationships and forms of interdependence that are fragmented by our language and commonly ignored in critical theory and aesthetic axiology” (16). Underlying these relationships and forms are three commitments: first, a subject’s experience of an entity is always a function of their “personal economy,” which relates to, second, a subject’s needs/interests/purposes are always changing and not “independent or prior to the entities that satisfy or implement them” (17). This sense of “personalization” of value is not pure pluralism or relativism;

instead, the first two commitments lead to a third, seeking an interactive relation between classification and the function an aesthetic object is expected or desired to perform.

Minor literature is defined in part through its communitarian functions—not simply the representation of experiences and intuitions of community members, but modes of expression which self-consciously mutate and upend those of phobic majorities, not least, the Western Canon and its fetishes and phobias. *Nevada* and *Little Fish* are particularly pointed examples of defying/denying the Western Canon’s obsession with growth, progress, even change—by the end of these novels, the reader is given no reason to believe anything has materially changed for their characters. The “functions” of the works are thus something other than *Bildungsroman*: the reader is given neither origin nor telos.

Herrnstein Smith notes contrastive relationships between minor communitarian value and that of Canon. “The prevailing structure of tastes and preferences,” as well as the “illusion of consensus,” will always be challenged by the tastes and preferences of “some subjects within the community” (especially, she notes, those with “uncultivated” tastes, “such as provincials and social upstarts”) “as well as by most subjects outside it or, more significantly, on its *periphery* and who thus have occasion to interact with its members (for example, exotic visitors, immigrants, colonials, and members of various minority or marginalized groups)” (21-22). How might my constellation of minor literary, contra-Canonical works express such taste? Is taste and preference a one-way conduit, in the eye of the beholder rather than the crafter of the beheld? I would propose that, in minor literature, it is both: literary production is less governed by market preference or lineage, and new works propose and create novel formations of valuation, measured against majoritarian works. I’ve repeatedly returned to generic conventions, as this seems a relatively concrete way to consider the “function” of a work, as well as what it might express for and about the marginal community. Herrnstein Smith notes that, to the (limited) extent that the relation between generic/honorific labels and “expected and desired function” is “stabilized within a community,” it is “largely through the normative activities of various institutions” (27). These institutions and their norms are necessarily exclusive—“distinguishing,” in the sense of “expressing distinction,” as Bourdieu might have it—and their discontents can be examined through a minor literary heuristic, not for value, per se, but for political potentiality and communitarian expression.

When Herrnstein Smith suggests that the “literary community” privileges texts that perform preferred functions, she is describing the institutional “community” that ballasts the Western Canon. As she puts it, this practice thereby insures “the continuity of mutually defining canonical works, canonical function, and canonical audiences” (ibid). Among these institutions, these definers of canonical works and their functions, is the redoubtable Harold Bloom. For Bloom, as laid out in his *The Western Canon*, the issue is relatively simple: “the Canon’s true question remains: What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history?” (15). Bloom’s answer is categorical, polemical, and feels like the dying gasps of the old guard. For him, literary criticism is irrevocably “elitist,” and “it was a mistake to believe that literary criticism could become a basis for democratic education or for societal improvement” (16). In response to an academic telling the New York Times that “We are all feminist critics,” Bloom sputters, “that is a rhetoric suitable for an

occupied country, one that expects no liberation from liberation” (ibid). Perhaps this is the rallying cry for Canon as codified marker of value. But it is not as simple as the Ivory Tower burnishing its own syllabi, as Bloom subtly shifts from “what is worth reading?” to “who is worth teaching?”. I am perplexed as to how an empathetic instructor in the humanities is to square the following: “We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers. The others, who are amenable to a politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it” (17). Bloom is never entirely direct as to the content of these politics, but minor literature and its readership is perhaps de facto “abandoned to” politicization. Take Jackie Ess’s *Darryl*, for instance. This novel champions cuckoldry as a means to queer liberation—it is the hyperbolized nightmare (which is to say, secret dream) of the “alt right,” and ideal fodder for conservative (which is to say, all) political punditry. But none of them is likely to read this novel, and it will never be on their children’s syllabi. In that sense, Bloom’s aims are satisfied as well.

But he goes on to detail the effects of politicized curriculum: “We are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social science, in the name of social justice” (33); the result being “surrounded by [...] ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited,” which has precipitated an apocalyptic scenario, “the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible” (483). My inquiry into Canon did not start off as an inquisition against Academy, but Bloom offers sufficient motivation for exploding institutional aesthetic value as cultural arbiter. Near the close of his time on canon-defense, he offers a strange but expected dichotomy: “Either there were aesthetic values, or there are only the overdeterminations of race, class, and gender” (487). We wonder, in response: overdetermined for whom? Race, class, and gender seem highly underdetermined, if anything, in the Western Canon, in the sense that they are foreclosed to all but the majoritarian—not only writing, but also reading—population. This leads to another forking path: leave the Western Canon to the decrepit Academy as it fades out of relevance altogether, mooted by its own accommodationist non-politics, or reduce it to the level of the victor’s cultural history, “balkanized” alongside voices less heard or seemingly as yet unspoken?

John Guillory offers one alternative take on value: “If one can successfully extend the critique of the canon from the category of social identity to the category of *cultural value*, then it would indeed follow that the inclusion of noncanonical works in the canon misrepresents the social significance of the canon by failing to recognize it as the inevitable embodiment of hegemonic cultural values” (20). So, a case against canon expansion; minor literature is not awaiting its chance to become major. Guillory continues, “The critique of the canon responds to the disunity of the culture as a whole, as a *fragmented* whole, by constituting new cultural unities at the level of gender, race, or more recently ethnic subcultures, or gay and lesbian subcultures” (34). Disunity of the whole can engender solidarity of the fragments, subcultural or not. Guillory contrasts these new unities with “liberal pluralism,” which is “unable to describe the political effect of any form of association which does not entail the assumption of cultural unity, or ‘community’” (34-35). Indeed, minoritarian community is enacted in no small part because of exclusion or elision from the “assumed cultural unity,” and its literature necessarily thematizes that community, whether directly or indirectly. Minoritarian value thus assumes

a far more provisional, cooperative register, in contrast to the Western Canon's presumed ubiquity or false cultural unities.

#### ***IV. Genre Explosion and Anticanonical Community***

Paul Lauter writes "one center of gravity in much marginalized art is its high level of integration of creator and audience" (85). Dr. Voth, in the closing lines of *Confessions of the Fox*, assures: "Dear Reader, if you are *you*—the one I edited this for, the one I stole this for—and if you cry a certain kind of tears—the ones I told you about, remember?—you will find your way to us. *You will not need a map.*" (316). The map is unnecessary because it is contained in the novel and in the subject position of the readership who cry those tears in common with Voth, and Sheppard. In another register, *Nevada*, *Little Fish*, and Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* are overloaded with specific references—music, film, art—designed for a particular audience, crafting environments filled with familiar cultural artifacts. Not only are readers presumed not to need any prescribed map, they might find different destinations anchored by similar experiences of "marginalized" community. The level of integration is reflected in part by a kind of communitarian internal compass, literature which proceeds from understanding not universal, but empathetic and minoritarian.

We considered Altieri's criterion of "forceful self-subsumption" for canon discussion, to which we can now add his other two criteria: the degree of "representativeness" of a work, and the value of technical innovations, wisdom, and ethical significance of a work's overall content. In considering a trans minor literature, the issue of representativeness is not uncomplicated. These works do not consider a single, representative subject position, instead working from/through/against often calcified literary and cultural tropes and types. *Nevada*, for instance, follows Maria Griffiths on her trip across the country, knowing that being "the self-sufficient loner" is "some straight dude bullshit" (37). Maria is as acutely aware of the subject position with which she disidentifies as the one(s) she inhabits. Similarly, in *Little Fish*, transwoman Wendy muses that she knew how to deal with looking cis and trans, but would never "figure out how to be both" (125). Wendy is not presented as any kind of representative, and in fact "hated analyzing the whys of trans girls" (24), though she is forced to confront her grandfather's potential trans-ness, as well as how to interpret the suicide of a member of her chosen, transwoman family. The ethical force of these novels is in part their refusal to play representative for a curious majoritarian readership.

So what do we read for in a minor contra-canon? Each conception of canon advanced in the above sections finds some deformation, reorientation, or conditional refusal in the minor. The idea of a "minor classic" is not new, but it tends to be simply a diminished version of the "genuine article." Is Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* a minoritarian (modern) classic at this point, 30 years after its publication? Perhaps, but it is in this sense anomalous and not elemental to the literary moment under consideration. Instead, the works cited here, among others, are clearly co-influential; the authors write for the blurbs on the backs of each other's books and thank each other in the acknowledgments. "Classic" will be reoriented to mean influential in its moment, prompting other work, building a foundation upon which further experiments and digressions can be erected. Rather than an honorific



for works destined for a literary history museum, the minoritarian classic persists in horizontal relationality to its kin, not requiring generational approbation as its jacket gathers dust.

As for empire, this contra-canon might be looked at more as insurrection and re-annexation—the maps these novels and novelists chart never included them to begin with. Lauter writes, “I suspect that the central reason it is necessary to read noncanonical texts is that they *teach us* how to view experience through the prisms of gender, race, nationality, and other forms of marginalization” (161, author’s emphases). Nation is a particularly interesting construct in this list; the idea of nationality as a form of marginalization might suggest the ways in which queer and trans folks are denied “full citizenship” based on sex-gender expression and desire. Paul Preciado observes: “The trans person is represented as a kind of exile who has left behind the gender that was assigned to him/her at birth (the way you’d abandon your nation) and who is now seeking recognition as a potential citizen of another gender. In politico-legal terms, the status of a trans person is comparable to that of the migrant, the exile, or the refugee” (17). Preciado sees this as a denial of sovereignty, and perhaps the subaltern literature of the minoritarian is a view on a kind of nationless-ness.

Finally value, which feels like the most adaptable (and most contentious) of the conditions of contra-canon. This revaluation of values finds strength in incompleteness, insufficiency, and joy in doubt; it is akin to Jack Halberstam’s “queer art of failure,” which resists mastery and invests in counterintuitive modes of knowing (11), while ultimately accepting the finite (187). This last point is substantive in that it answers Herrnstein Smith’s note that “we make texts timeless by suppressing their temporality” (32). She goes on to conclude that “the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted” (32-33). While shaping culture is itself a value for Bloom, the echo chamber Herrnstein Smith describes is the overarching way in which the Western Canon can become a machine of marginalization and elision, and one not available to the minoritarian. For this reason alone, the literatures of the exotic visitors, the (im)migrants, the colonized, and the marginalized groups—the minoritarian—must instantiate their own (provisional, conditional, subject-to-change) relational configurations of value.

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## A Message From The Labyrinth

*Christina M. Rau*

To sleep perchance to feen:  
Mazes run into walled corners  
round to carrions, brick breaks  
way. The weight of shot  
six times more than the measured  
night framed and figured, language  
lost to babbling to taproot to shoures  
soote.

        Fall at the end, a repose rapt  
along a spiralled canal:  
tunnel  
        burrow  
                sink.

Up on top  
the air thinner grows thicker  
grows between grasses. Over  
                                cast  
under  
moon.

The sun comes. Then eyes open.  
Then sleep disappears, a ghost  
to return when it may.

## A New Canon of Counternarratives: Realigning Power in Neurodiverse Middle Grade Books

*Jennifer Slagus*

In a 2017 presentation at New York University's Summer Publishing Institute, the Talent Acquisition Director from Scholastic affirmed that in the name of diverse representation, they would *love* to publish a middle grade graphic novel series about a young girl on the autism spectrum who is a superhero. Though her role meant she would not acquire the proposed series directly, she was sharing Scholastic's goals and diversity initiatives to a room of about a hundred publishing newcomers who would become the next generation of agents, editors, and distributors. It was difficult to parse her enthusiasm. Did she mean that the massive marketing power of Scholastic was eagerly seeking a tokenistic superhero[ine]? Or did she mean something else? I found myself hoping that she was not just seeking a character who would perfectly align with the supercrip trope about the perceived deficit of neurodiversity being overcome by some opposite, extraordinary ability (Markotić 61).

Despite the official encouragement from Scholastic about their active welcome for diverse voices, the reality of mis- and underrepresentation within children's publishing also became clear in the fall of 2017, when I (autistic/ADHD) helped my partner (autistic/ADHD) write query letters seeking literary agent representation for their debut middle grade graphic novel about an autistic character. In keeping with query-letter protocols, I wanted to include comparison titles that would position his book among other recent publications. As I tried to find comparable middle grade titles with neurodiverse representation, the options were slim—especially for other graphic novels. It seemed that every well-meaning librarian and book blogger filled their "Best *Blank*" recommendation lists with the same canon disability and divergent narratives. As Deborah Stevenson writes, they would have ended up languishing among the children's literature classics "being beloved without actually being read" (qtd. in Kidd 44). It was clear to me that the limited, stereotypical presentations in the recommended books would be either unread or harmful to the young neurodivergent readers for whom they were intended. Book recommendations were, and continue to be, overwhelmingly based on unread-but-beloved canon and book award lists—or influenced by publisher marketing tactics that amplify both.

Because children's literature can "be a means to affirm and to defy the 'othering' of children" (Horning et al.), the question of whose voices are centered and promoted is central to the discussion. Typically, while straight, White, able readers see themselves reflected in an imagined multitude of futures and possibilities (Jiménez 66), marginalized readers receive monolithic representations of their cultures, histories, and experiences, or are excluded altogether. Canonical depictions of neurodiverse characters in children's books—most often written by neurotypical authors—simply reinscribe harmful stereotypes. And it is the publishing industry itself that contributes to the continuous reproduction of the same-old-same-old (harmful) characterizations.

## Publishing Industry Influence

The book publishing industry as it stands in the twenty-first century is still comprised of primarily straight, White, able canon makers and reproducers (e.g., authors, agents, editors, publishers). Despite marquee mandates used by publishing houses to promote their inclusive policies, change has been, at best, slow. A simple search for “publishing diversity commitment” will return endless statements, many posted during Black Lives Matter movement protests after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020: yet interns, likely the most diverse group in the industry, hold the least power and the lowest pay. Of the interns surveyed in Lee & Low Books’ *The Diversity Baseline Survey (DBS 2.0)*, “49 percent identify as BIPOC; 49 percent are on the LGBTQIA spectrum; and 22 percent identify as having a disability.” Interns overall were found to be “significantly more diverse than the industry as a whole” (Lee & Low Books), and although that looks like a positive sign, the question remains as to whether interns will “be retained and promoted, or whether they will burn out or leave publishing for other reasons before their presence can truly change the industry” (Lee & Low Books).

The (re)creation of a more inclusive canon requires a meaningful incorporation of diverse authors, in addition to diverse staff. Yet, the industry’s focus on continually publishing established authors over debut creators—regardless of if their work provides better representation—not only subjugates young readers to potential misrepresentation, but gatekeeps what stories authors can share. Without name recognition and sales history, publishers see little incentive to support debut and emerging creators. If Rowling, King, Kinney, or Patterson were to write diverse, divergent, or disabled narratives, they would be published, regardless of the representation quality. The limited scope of possibility for neurodiverse authors and their books is, as Agnew and Partridge explain, because there is a sense that realistic “novels which feature disability have had only limited success in the marketplace,” while melodramatic, struggle narratives are more commercially successful (qtd. in Saunders). Though the CDC reports that one in five children are neurodivergent, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center finds that only 3.4% of all children’s books feature a disabled protagonist, and “only a fraction of that includes neurodivergent main characters—nowhere near the 20% that should represent neurodivergent kids” (qtd. in Malia). Because neurodivergent creators and young readers are drastically underrepresented in children’s literature, the quality of each newly published book continues to matter more.

Autistic author and parent of two autistic children, Dr. Jen Malia’s, traditional publishing experience was not unlike that of other disabled and divergent authors: riddled with ableism. An editor at Albert Whitman & Co. had solicited Malia to share her autistic experience in a picture book, *Too Sticky! Sensory Issues with Autism* (2020), but later the “same publisher sent a rejection letter with ableist comments” about Malia’s proposed chapter book series “highlighting neurodivergent experiences” (Malia). Presumably because Malia’s proposed series did not have a diagnosis-dropping title or a hyper attention on autism struggles, it was deemed “too focused on kids with issues and therefore wouldn’t reach a wide audience” (Malia). Malia explains that, after her—also neurodivergent—agent, Naomi Davis, shared their collective anger at the comments, the editor replied with a “performative one-line statement ‘apology’ that provided no insight into how it intended to

repair our relationship, support my currently published book, or do better going forward” (Malia). As Malia’s experience demonstrates, the neurodivergent character, reader, *and* author are used as tools, weaponized by the publishing industry’s outdated notions of neurodivergence. Regardless of whether diverse creators share their lived realities, the industry maintains that if the book does not check their niche, manufactured diversity tick box—which represents only an incredibly narrow set of what they deem marketable experiences—then the book is not “good” enough.

### **Scholastic’s Stronghold**

It is undeniable that Scholastic is deeply successful. Even for those outside of their target audience, Scholastic maintains a perceived metaphoric monopoly over children’s publishing. Their strength in branding—bright, inviting covers with a recognizable red bar logo across the bottom—paired with Millennial and Gen X parents’ and consumers’ nostalgic idealization for the Scholastic Book Fair, continues to position them as a primary children’s canon maker and reproducer. Since the early 2000s, Scholastic has also published much of the existing neurodiverse middle grade canon.

Given its industry dominance, an analysis of the ways in which Scholastic promotes and markets its diverse literature is helpful in determining why there is such a flat sameness to the very books that are supposed to represent difference. In 2018, Scholastic launched *The Power of Story* catalog, designed, as the promotional material explains, to “highlight and uplift books featuring characters and stories from groups whose identities and lived experiences have been suppressed and excluded from mainstream narratives,” and to “amplify these voices and build more equitable bookshelves” (*The Power of Story*). The catalog is organized by grade level, with marked topics and themes. Though it claims to highlight their diversity list, it only does so on a superficial level. The topics and themes do span a range of diverse experiences—including Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence, Race and Ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, among others, yet when looking at Scholastic’s neurodiversity representation, the actual books are not very different from each other.

The catalog indicates nine fiction titles featuring Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence, written by seven individual authors plus one author pair, all prose with no graphic novels (*The Power of Story* 12-18). From this group of authors, only two have self-identified as neurodivergent. One author is Black, the remaining authors are White. Two are the parents of a disabled child. Of the nine books, five feature autism, two feature ADHD, one features a learning disability, and one features sensory processing disorder. Five are considered bestselling and acclaimed “Scholastic Gold.”

**Neurodiverse Books in Scholastic's *The Power of Story* Catalog**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Divergence</b>	<b>Embodied Experience?</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<i>Freak the Mighty</i> (2001)	Philbrick, Rodman	Learning Disability	No	Plot is fiction, but loosely inspired by real people.
<i>A Corner of the Universe</i> (2004)	Martin, Ann M.	Autism	No	Author was a teacher and researched autism.
<i>Rules</i> (2006)	Lord, Cynthia	Autism	No	One of author's children is autistic.
<i>Focused</i> (2019)	Gerber, Alyson	ADHD	Yes	Author has ADHD.
<i>Because of the Rabbit</i> (2019)	Lord, Cynthia	Autism	No	One of author's children is autistic.
<i>Not If I Can Help It</i> (2019)	Mackler, Carolyn	Sensory Processing Disorder	No	Author's child had SPD; author describes this in past tense.
<i>Can You See Me?</i> (2019)	Scott, Libby & Westcott, Rebecca	Autism	Yes	Libby Scott is an autistic thirteen-year-old author.
<i>Do You Know Me?</i> (2021)	Scott, Libby & Westcott, Rebecca	Autism	Yes	Libby Scott is an autistic thirteen-year-old author.
<i>It's the End of the World and I'm in my Bathing Suit</i> (2022)	Reynolds, Justin A.	ADHD	Uncertain	Not yet published, so there has not been much press coverage or author interviews.

Scholastic's mis- and underrepresentation is likely not intentional. It just misses the mark. By primarily publishing and promoting neurodiverse books written by White neurotypicals, they both reproduce harmful stereotypes and fail to make room for alternatives. Scholastic's scope—with seven of the nine options focusing on autistic and ADHD narratives—barely begins to encompass the entirety of the neurodiversity spectrum. Thus, further developing a hierarchy of normalcy as, even if the representation is faulty, autistic children are at least included on the page, leaving other neurodiverse readers behind.

### **Neurodiverse Canon is Neurotypical Centered**

Representation authenticity is created and reproduced by those who “can claim control over the narratives used to define a person, place, experience or term” (Broderick and Ne’eman 471). That is why, when neurodivergent perspectives are included, they are deemed “off-stage characters, referred to constantly, invoked with great passion and pomp, but not fit to offer any lines of actual dialogue” (Broderick and Ne’eman 471). As a result, disabled and divergent narratives are typically positioned within an ableist paradigm, one which presumes a “social and cultural standard of normalcy” (Markotić 61). As an alternative, positioning neurodiversity as an altogether new critical paradigm, allows for “questioning hegemonic depictions of cognitive normality ... shifting our focus onto neurodivergent wellbeing rather than pathology” (Rosqvist et al. 226).

Neurodivergent peoples' wellbeing is affected by the ways in which divergence is represented in the books and other media around them. And, as Bishop explains, though children's literature offers a valuable window into the lives of others, books should ideally also reflect each reader's own existence back to them (qtd. in Naidoo 2-3). A warped, cracked, or nonexistent reflection sends a “resounding message” to young readers that their way of being is not important enough to meaningfully feature (Naidoo 3). That warped reflection of divergence is the one represented in most canonical texts written by neurotypical people who do not have the specialized insight to tactfully explain embodied experiences.

Canonical texts by neurotypicals tend to center on a few trite tropes: the nonverbal, young boy, for instance, with endless energy, flapping his hands to stim. Or the socially awkward, alien adult who has never been in a relationship. Or the savant who remembers everything, their abilities reimagined as superpowers. Or the neurotypical child merely tolerating their disabled, divergent sibling. Though stereotypes are based loosely on some level of true experience, it should not be radical to point out that there is more nuance to neurodivergent existence than these few standard expressions.

The problem of neurotypical centering arises when creators rely on stereotyped, stigmatizing tropes that generalize neurodiversity. A primary example of this generalization has shaped one of the most common colloquial misconceptions: the dichotomy of the savant. Though the division between “high functioning” and “low functioning” divergence is antiquated, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Raymond Babbit in *Rain Man* (1988) still retains a lasting impression in the popular imagination. Literary reiterations of *Rain Man*-type characters reinscribe the stereotype that all neurodiverse people



can be categorized as either difficult and unlearning or as overcompensated genius. Liss writes that this dichotomy sends mixed messages, and questions, “Are autistic people all ‘Rain Man’ types who possess extraordinary, superhuman talents? Or is autism a horrifying and incurable condition that pushes families to the edge?” (qtd. in Broderick and Ne’eman 472). The reality is ignored, as most neurodivergent people “are neither ‘Rain Men [or Women]’ nor tragedies” (Broderick and Ne’eman 472). Hoffman’s portrayal of Kim Peek (the real person who inspired *Rain Man*) may have been somewhat true to Peek’s experience. However, the resulting savant trope continues to be damaging, both for neurodivergent and neurotypical young people whose perceptions may be formed by these misconceptions, as later renegotiation will be required of what it means to be disabled (Saunders).

The savant, supercrip trope is strung throughout neurodiverse canon and reiterates the dichotomous expectations that neurotypical onlookers place on neurodiverse young people. When the reality does not align with either end of expectation—both of which allowing divergent people to either “overcome” or be pitied in the eyes of neurotypicals—the results are damaging. The neurodivergent child is othered as difficult, burdensome, and unwanted. This sense of unwantedness is clear in canonical neurotypical-authored works—including Cynthia Lord’s *Rules* (2006) and Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). Lord’s novel is told from the perspective of neurotypical protagonist, Catherine, whose younger brother, David, is autistic. Beyond his sensory overstimulation, David is portrayed as unintelligent, bothersome, and devoid of feelings; his actions and interests are made to appear so abnormal he is alien. Haddon’s autistic protagonist, Christopher, is portrayed as “elitist, violent, and lacking empathy” (Bartmess) and, on the other half of the dichotomy, he is characterized squarely within the savant trope. His interests are limited to topics that support the stereotype: academic achievement, STEM, and prime number recall up to 7,057. Christopher’s skills are reminiscent of *Rain Man* where Raymond’s superior ability allows him to memorize and recall the names, addresses, and numbers in the first quarter of a phonebook after a single read. In all three works, Christopher, Raymond, and David are criticized for their behaviors, weaponizing their inclination for stims and structure, and are instead framed as obsessive and bothersome, existing on the margins of social acceptability.

Christopher, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, is not viewed as socially acceptable. Throughout the narrative, he is only “human” in specific contexts. Neurotypical reviewers, in fact, claim that Haddon needed “to make do with a limited narrator,” and upon reading his overwhelming feelings toward the dead dog in the story, they finally “see Christopher as someone with feelings” (Cryer). In *Rules*, Lord reproduces this apparent lack of human feeling as David is never talked to, but rather commanded by Catherine to be quiet, sit still, and stop stimming—she even physically restrains David on more than one occasion because she finds his stims embarrassing. In the single time David is humanized, by a neighbor who asks if he likes dancing, Catherine reacts with aggression (Lord 159). She claims to not like when people make David look stupid, to which her neighbor responds, “I asked him to dance. How is that making him look stupid?” (Lord 160). At three-quarters of the way through the novel, David’s feelings are considered, but only as a reflection of Catherine’s own warped opinions of neurodivergence, their relationship, and her embarrassment.

While she is a tween protagonist establishing her own identity, it is worth questioning how and why Catherine has constructed these opinions, and what impact they may have on readers who have, or *are*, an autistic sibling.

*Rules* is a Newbery Honor Book (2007), Schneider Family Book Award (2007) winner, and has claimed distinction as “Scholastic Gold.” Despite its acclaimed status, Lord has received criticism, as throughout the book Catherine wishes “she had a normal brother—wishing David wasn’t autistic” (Entz). This sentiment of the unwanted autistic child is expressed in the first two sentences of the marketing copy on the back cover, delivered immediately to young readers as they gather a sense of what to expect. The synopsis explains that “Twelve-year-old Catherine just wants a normal life. Which is near impossible when you have a brother with autism and a family that revolves around his disability” (Lord).

The covers reinscribe the dominant narrative about neurodiversity, that it is equated with lacking, and thus, is to be excluded. The rhetoric of the *Rules* cover—donning award medals and “Scholastic Gold” marker—leads readers to believe there is authority and authenticity in the yearn for normal and its unachievable nature *because* of autism. Lord’s second novel in *The Power of Story* catalog—*Because of the Rabbit*, published in 2019—also features an autistic side character, which reinscribes Lord as an authoritative voice within the neurodiverse canon. The marketing copy on the inside flap of Haddon’s novel reiterates the void of feelings trope, as “herein lies the key to the brilliance of Mark Haddon’s choice of narrator: The most wrenching of emotional moments are chronicled by a boy who cannot fathom emotions” (Haddon 3015-3016). These marketing tactics normalize David’s and Christopher’s treatment in the stories, allowing negativity and abuse to affect real neurodiverse kids too.

Both Lord’s and Haddon’s novels read in stark comparison to the ways in which neurodiverse people author their narratives, summarize their works, and thus, market their titles. Instead of promoting acceptance, Lord’s novel encourages deeply emotional reactions from autistic reviewers because it uses stereotypes as plot tools, rather than expressing honest depictions of neurodivergent existence. Entz explains that “...this book hurt to read. I worked really hard to get through it because I wanted to be able to say something about it, but in the end I just wanted to cry really hard for all the Davids out there.” Entz’s reaction is important, especially in the context of what the publishing industry and book consumers might learn by listening to neurodiverse peoples’ response to neurodiverse works. Many within the community of neurodiverse readers have, for instance, spoken out against Haddon’s offensive normalization of Christopher’s verbal and physical abuse from his parents, and his characterization as dangerous: there are multiple occasions on which Christopher’s thoughts toward stabbing, violence, and death are foregrounded. Yet despite the stereotypical characterization of autistic people, Haddon’s novel is still renowned. It has been adapted for the stage and film; first premiering in 2012 at the National Theatre, and recently returning to London’s Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre on a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary tour which ran from November 2021 to January 2022 (“Curious Incident”). Film rights were sold to Warner Brothers Studio, and to their credit, casting calls in 2019 sought to encourage autistic teen actors to submit for the role

(Stathopoulos). However, it is uncertain whether the film's casting will follow through with employing a neurodivergent actor, and whether it will closely portray Haddon's problematic version of autism. As Haddon's version which may "give readers negative, incorrect, and in some cases abusive ideas about autistic people," and as such, should not be recommended to "autistic people or their families or friends, or to anyone else, *especially* not as a good representation of autism" (Bartmess).

Both Haddon's and Lord's novels are harmful in their portrayals of neurodiverse people. Because they are *New York Times* bestsellers rather than books forgotten in the far corners of a dusty library, their characterizations carry public weight. Both books are in *every* library, on every recommendation list, and are probably the token disabled books in every classroom. While I am not looking to ban these books, they simply do not need to remain the primary canonical choices after more than a decade and a half in circulation. And Haddon's novel does not need another adaptation. There are many narratives by and about neurodivergent people that do not reiterate perceptions that flatten neurodivergence down to misguided impressions; their voices should be uplifted instead.

### **New Canon of Counternarratives**

As only few dichotomous depictions of neurodiverse characters circulate in popularized literary reiterations, the neurodiversity spectrum remains underrepresented. There are so few options that the gargantuan canonical boulder of the bestsellers vastly outweigh the few new books, mere pebbles tossed on the other end of the scale. Onlookers, typically from the publishing industry whose view of the misrepresentation is blocked by the popular stones, are left asking: *Why are you throwing things? We already have these books. We do not need yours.*

Neurodivergent writers' voices and embodied perspectives nevertheless continue to counter that dominant version. With each new narrative they replace the dominant discordant portrayal of the neurodivergent child with an amended version, one that reclaims that child as a person, someone who is accepted and included and loved. Their counternarratives offer readers new points of access into neurodiverse realities. Counternarratives are required to inhabit marginalized spaces (qtd. in Broderick and Ne'eman 469) as Smith asserts, because ability discourse is centered in positivist science. There is irony inherent in positioning narratives by those who actually embody the experience as *counter* while those who are essentially tourists lay claim to the dominant characterization. For a canon of neurodiverse literature to develop, counternarratives voiced by neurodiverse creators will be the ones to enact the change.

Even now, in attending to the relatively few neurodiverse-authored texts in circulation it is possible to see how they counter the unwanted othering of those by neurotypicals. Instead of the tokenistic tropes seen in works by Lord and Haddon, stories by neurodiverse authors inscribe their characters' divergence so that it runs parallel to the narrative. Middle grade prose and graphic novels by and about neurodiverse people—such as *The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family* (2021) by Sarah Kaput and *Just Roll with It* (2021) by Veronica Agarwal and Lee Durfey-Lavoie—center neurodivergence and uplift realistic experiences of acceptance and love.

Neurodiverse acceptance and embracement, as opposed to mere tolerance, is exemplified through Kapit's autistic dual protagonists, Lara and Caroline, and their dad who has ADHD. They share Kapit's Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish background, which Kapit presents simply as a matter of fact. Their characterizations as Jews and as autistic are just aspects of who they are and how they are situated in the social fabric. Kapit's novel also destigmatizes ableist stereotypes of autism and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): Caroline simply uses a digital tablet when speaking. In Lord's *Rules*, however, when a secondary static character, Jason, uses a print communication book often throughout the novel, the authorial narrative voices comments that Jason cannot talk (Lord 20, 21, 25, 196). In so doing, Jason is depicted as lacking and AAC is negatively framed. In contrast, Kapit portrays Caroline as a well-rounded, thoughtful middle schooler who challenges the assumption that disabled people who do not speak using "mouth-words" are also unthinking. Kapit explains the ignorance of the "rather basic fact" that Caroline's lack of "mouth-words" does not equate to a "lack of thoughts" (452). The only time Kapit mentions that Caroline cannot talk is when she herself tells Lara that using AAC does not mean she cannot also be a detective (147). Not only is Caroline's communication style validated, but it is accepted alongside her and Lara's autistic identity. Kapit positions Caroline and Lara as characters with agency whose decisions and perspectives matter in the story. This positioning allows neurodivergent and neurotypical readers to embrace divergence as elements of identity and characterization. They see people who happen to be neurodivergent, but they are also people with full intellectual and emotional lives, people with stories to tell. That's also the case with Agarwal's and Durfey-Lavoie's graphic novel *Just Roll with It*.

Neurodivergence in *Just Roll with It* is embraced without stereotyping or tropes. The protagonist, Maggie—like illustrator, Agarwal—navigates obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and anxiety. Unlike neurotypical-authored novels, Maggie's neurodivergence and emotions are validated in the story. Agarwal wanted the novel to "highlight the aspects of OCD that aren't talked about as often" beyond just "counting objects, cleaning things, or turning lights on and off multiple times" (Gonzalez). Though these are common real-world experiences, and they are depicted in the story, Agarwal knows OCD is more complex and wanted to bring that understanding to the forefront (Gonzalez). As author and illustrator, both Agarwal and Durfey-Lavoie used the graphic novel form to express Maggie's feelings of overwhelm and anxiousness. Through the images on each page, Agarwal displays sensations she has personally experienced and graphically conveys those understandings to her readers. When learning to work through her emotions, Maggie is shown surrounded by dark, black muck. The backgrounds are textured, almost dizzy, offering a visceral response to the unfeeling neurodivergent trope. Maggie's parents work to understand and support her experiences, while encouraging her to try therapy. It is the antithesis of the burdensome depiction of occupational therapy in *Rules*.

*Just Roll with It* also provides intersectional BIPOC queer representation as both Maggie's sister, Eli, and her best friend Clara's moms are in queer relationships. The neurodivergent and queer positioning mirror Kapit's novel as they are simply matter-of-fact elements in the character's lives. In

contrast to Lord and Haddon's canonical works, none of the neurodivergent-authored novels situate divergence as something to overcome. And they do not feed into the savant dichotomy. These works instead express the in-betweens and previously ignored experiences of neurodivergent children. While the characters all do deal with difficulties, the reaction and response to these difficulties are navigated by characters who are loving *and* well-loved by those around them.

Neurodiverse creators retelling their embodied experiences reflect the love and understanding that neurodivergent children deserve. Like Maggie, Lara and Caroline are allowed to express their feelings and individuality, but they each also express love for their sister in exposition and dialogue. Their mother, Ima, (which is Hebrew for mother, but rendered without additional explanation), reminds them that their father loves them regardless of bad situations, and emphasizes that the whole family loves them too (Kapit 2086-2088). Kapit's representation of well-loved, and wanted, neurodiverse kids is in stark contrast to Lord's novel which uses "love" often in relation to items and activities, but never once toward David nor Catherine. Christopher's father expresses love to him in Haddon's novel, but only as attached to a lecture about losing his temper so Christopher does not get hurt (Haddon 1137-1140). Lord and Haddon's version of love is questionable, as it is made clear that their narratives do not embrace or care for their divergent characters.

Neurodiverse fiction narratives from creators like Kapit, Agarwal, and Durfey-Lavoie, offer spaces of welcomed acceptance that work to actively "defy the 'othering'" of neurodiverse young readers (Horning et al.) and to also act as positive catalysts that uplift acceptance and destigmatization. As Kapit explained on the *Spectrumly Speaking* podcast (hosted by autism self-advocate Haley Moss), she feels that not everyone is "necessarily capable of recognizing a stereotype when it comes across." She hopes to see this improve as publishing includes more diversity within and among its autistic characters, explaining that she would like to see "more LGBTQ characters, more autistic characters of color, and other autistic people from marginalized backgrounds" (Moss). Because canon representation of neurodiversity is often written by White creators, about White characters, there is an additional layer of racial and ethnic diversity necessary within neurodiverse middle grade books.

There is a growing demand for books by neurodivergent authors, and neurodivergent authors themselves are highlighting the options and demonstrating how the future may look. Sally J. Pla, award-winning autistic author of *The Someday Birds* (2017) and *Stanley Will Probably be Fine* (2018), works alongside educators, librarians, and book publishers to promote mental health and neurodiversity representation in children's literature. She co-founded *A Novel Mind* which houses the largest searchable database of children's and young adult literature—with nearly 1,100 traditionally published works—on the subject. It aims to be comprehensive and "aggregate lots of possibilities," then allowing the user to "winnow, explore, focus, or curate" as they wish (A Novel Mind). Though most titles have not been vetted for quality, there are selections within the database marked as Staff Recommended to "raise up novels that heal, help, dispel stigma, and accurately inform—to help young people discover stories where they can see, and find, themselves" (A Novel Mind). Notably, neither *Rules* nor *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are included in Pla's database.

Neurodiverse creators continue to challenge the publishing industry's fraught mis- and underrepresentation through offering their vulnerability and lived experience on the page. Their counternarratives share the necessary acceptance, embrace, and love of neurodivergence and holds neurodiverse people as central to the conversation. While the existing canon is primarily comprised of neurotypical's best guesses at what it means to be divergent—all the while reiterating the burdensome othering and unwantedness—the need is strong to recreate the canon as filled with works which are *by*, *for*, and *about* neurodiverse people.

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## The One Who Returns to Omelas

*Allene Nichols*

*In an article written shortly after Ursula LeGuin's death, Victoria Brownworth writes that "Women and gender non-conforming individuals were highlighted by Le Guin, whose name is often the sole female one on lists of the best/greatest science fiction/fantasy writers of the 20th century. Hers is the work that included people—the majority of people—who had been excluded from the genre since its inception" (<https://lambdaliterary.org/2018/01/ursula-le-guin/>). As a genre writer and a woman, LeGuin is often excluded from literature courses in spite of the brilliance of her writing. Her short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," is a masterful philosophical treatise told as a high fantasy story. My short story, "The One Who Returns to Omelas" is a response to Ursula Le Guin's. When I first read her story of the miserable child, mistreated and enclosed in a closet so that the society could thrive, I wondered where were the people who, in spite of their fears, would go to great lengths to free a suffering child? And how could we walk away from this story and leave the child in misery? This story is my attempt to get justice for the child. As I used Le Guin's own words and sentences, changing them only enough to set the mood and tell the story of the child, now an adult, returning to Omelas, I found no rebels, just a little girl and a butterfly, and a deeply damaged adult who confronts its former persecutors in the only way it can. The story came about as I analyzed the grammatical units of LeGuin's story in order to teach it to an applied linguistics class.*

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows scattering, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, dark-towered by the swollen sea. The rigging of the boats in the harbor sagged with age. In the streets between houses with plain tin roofs and faded walls, between old gardens overgrown with moss and under avenues of trees, past decaying parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet women carrying their babies as they walked. All moved quickly toward the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields, as if seeking relief from the gloom that crept between the buildings. On the field, young men and women, attired in worn green riding cloaks, flirted restlessly as they adorned their horses' saddles with fading roses and daffodils. The horses flared their noses and pranced, always just out of range of their masters' and mistresses' whips. Wealthy citizens made bets on the winners of the race and the destitute crept near their feet, hoping, perhaps, that a spare coin would slip from those wasted fingers. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. A figure creeps slowly down the fifteenth peak, balancing itself heavily on a thick cane. The body is so bent that it would hardly seem human but for the determination that seems to propel it forward. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great clanging of the bells.



How to describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were like citizens of everywhere, only perhaps more so. They were happy or sad, based on their circumstances, lived and died based on how kindly the tides of fortune treated them. Yet a stranger might have noted that this way of living seemed new to them, as if they'd been startled from a sweet dream into a world whose rules escaped them. They had a president, although he seemed unsure of what he was supposed to do and spent most days in his office, staring at his expensive shoes or tossing memos at the trash bin while imagining athletic glory. What distinguished the citizens of Omelas from other villages and made them seem perpetually surprised by their circumstances was a sort of desperate nostalgia. This nostalgia sang in the breezes that wafted first past the factories on the east side of town, picking up the smells of coal and chemicals, and then settled sullenly over the faces of the town's citizens. One might glance this desperation at the most unexpected of times. A man starts to kick a drunk in the street and then stops for a moment, a faraway look in his eyes. A woman gives birth while the town elders look on, brimming with a desperate hope that she has given their nostalgia direction. She and her husband look afraid. As soon as they are able, the couple with their newborn slip away.

If we are to understand the nostalgia of the citizens of Omelas, we must find a particular room. While the beauty and the ugliness of the town are ambiguous, as if each quality, ugliness and beauty, is vying for control, this room is not ambiguous. It is ugly. It lies in a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes. It has one door and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. Aside from the brooms and the bucket, the room is empty. It is the emptiness that matters to the townspeople. There once was a child here, simple-minded and cowering, who sometimes begged to be let out. They all knew it was there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them came to see it, others were content merely to know it was there. They all knew that it had to be there. Some of them understood why, and some did not, but they all understood that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depended wholly on the child's abominable misery.

The morning is fading and the children and the horses are getting restless, waiting for the trumpet sound to call them to the race. It does not come. It is as if all of the adults are waiting for something. They are perhaps a bit more restive, a bit harsher with noisy children, their eyes moving ceaselessly over the crowd.

Meanwhile, the creature has breached the gates of the city. It is easy, really, for the gatekeepers are old men, and who would not back down to their worst nightmare, the twisted being who shapes all of their nightmares? The creature is dressed in rags, its eyes covered with cataracts, its limbs shaking,

drool sliding from the corner of its mouth. The guards' fear is more primal, even, than fear of a nightmare, for people are always most afraid of the form of their own shame, especially when they don't recognize it.

It looks at the guards without any sign of recognition and moves steadily forward, leaning heavily on the cane, dragging one foot behind it. Behind its back, one of the guards spits. Another mutters under his breath and turns away. The third, who once played the flute, clutches reflexively at his pocket as if the instrument were still there. As if he could bring back a summer's day when joy abounded and no horror walked the streets.

The creature continues to move steadily toward the Green Field, and the people there, half frozen in some horrified panorama, feel their hearts beating in their ears as the crickets take up an incessant buzz that replaces the tune of the silenced trombones. Even the young children have stopped wiggling and hang limply from their parents' hands. A few of the youngest have dropped to the ground and play listlessly with blades of grass. The air has gone stale. Some of the elders feel the need to cough growing in their lungs, but they sense that coughing would somehow disturb the tenor of the moment, perhaps bring the horror that everyone fears. And so they stifle their impulses as best as they can.

At long last, the creature enters the field. Neither its posture nor its gait show that it realizes the existence of the people that surround it. Nor does it respond to their solemnity. In the still air, with silence surrounding it like thunder, the creature moves to the center of the field. Slowly, bending its limbs painfully, it sits. For several long minutes, nothing happens. Then the creature slowly reaches down and runs a gnarled hand over the grass.

Finally, something moves at the back of the crowd. A small woman in a yellow cloak, her hands clasped in front of her, shuffles forward. At times, people sway slightly to allow her to pass. At others, she must push against them and struggle through the small spaces between their stolid bodies. Slowly, all heads turn to follow her. Slowly, she emerges from the crowd and approaches the figure. She kneels stiffly in front of it, lifting her clasped hands. The creature pulls back its hood, revealing a pock-marked and distorted face, a few teeth clinging to a ragged jaw. The cloudy eyes stare stupidly at the woman. Slowly, so as not to frighten the creature, the woman opens her hands as if to release something. But there is nothing there. For a split second, recognition flickers in the creature's eyes.

To understand what the creature remembers, we must go back to that small room, and to the small body once imprisoned there. It was a spring day, and a little girl, hopeful in a brilliant yellow frock, prodded by her friends, walked hesitantly into the room. Being smaller than the other children, and less afraid, she was often expected to lead the way. Did she know the danger she would bring to the village? Probably not, at least not completely. But she had heard the warnings and knew that the child's suffering must continue. She was not brave enough, or foolish enough, to express her sympathy aloud. She was not old enough to walk away. So she walked into the room, knelt in front of the suffering child, and released a butterfly from her clasped hands.

Suddenly, the creature smiles.

By coincidence, a puff of wind blows away the stale air and injects the smell of salt and water. Yet the crowd stays still, stunned by the grotesque smile, which is so close to human and yet so inhuman. The old woman stands and walks slowly toward the village, her back to the gaping crowd.

Once the old woman disappears, the creature turns dully toward the crowd. Perhaps it sees their darkened eyes and the heavy lines around their mouths. With no sense of irony, it pities them.

Slowly, it rises. It turns, walks through the silent crowd, and moves off, toward the mountains. At last, someone cries out and the entire crowd, the mayor, the ministers, the horse traders, mothers, children, dancers, riders, everyone, comes alive. The trumpets blare. The children mount their horses. Only a few elders continue to think about the two figures, about the past, about the day that the child in the small room found the door open and crawled out. Even on the open street, nobody tried to restrain it or return it. They turned from it in revulsion, refused to recognize it at all. A few people, ones who left long ago and only return once a year for the festival, smile secret smiles. They have visited the creature in its mountain haunt, where shepherds and travelers leave food for it, and the mountain children dance to make it smile. Omelas may be a grim place, but the place to which the creature returns is ringed with laughter.

Yet in Omelas itself, something that used to happen begins to happen again. The ones who remember tell the story of the child who became the creature. Perhaps the young ones have heard it before. But now, having been on the Green Field that afternoon, they know that the story is no metaphor or fairy tale. One or two of the adolescent girls or boys does not go home to weep or rage at the betrayal of their elders, does not, in fact, go home at all. Later, a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of Omelas. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas. And the one who returns? On most days, far from Omelas, it breathes the crisp mountain air.

# Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Canon: Rethinking American Literature with Community College Students

*Melissa Dennihy*

Today's American college students comprise the most racially and ethnically diverse generation of students in US history (Fry and Parker). These students are also pursuing higher education during times of monumental civil and political progress and tumultuous unrest. Many came of age during historic events such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the establishment of DACA, the legalization of same-sex marriage, the Mexican/American border crisis and family separations, the Obama administration, and the Trump administration. Many are politically active: they have participated in movements, marches, and other forms of political organizing, from the Black Lives Matter movement and protests at Standing Rock, to the School Strike for Climate Justice and the March For Our Lives, to the Women's March. As young people across the country became increasingly involved in protest movements, the summer of 2020 marked "the largest protest movement for racial justice in our country's history" (Hannah-Jones, xxvii). At the time of this writing, America remains alight with the fire of protest and calls for social and racial justice, and college students are a central part of this ongoing struggle for progress.

These students need and deserve an education that acknowledges and grapples with the experiences they are having in the real world: while marching in the streets, protesting political and racial injustices, and fearing and fighting for their lives. Culturally responsive pedagogy, I argue in this essay, is an approach which honors students' real-world experiences while equipping them with the knowledge, perspectives, and tools necessary to do the work of justice and dismantle hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the real world. Though culturally responsive pedagogy, hereafter referred to as CRP, can be effectively applied to any course in any discipline, this essay focuses on how I use CRP in my American literature courses at a community college to center conversations about justice, "crash the canon," and ensure that students' diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences are reflected in the literature we study and the history we explore.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, a leading scholar of CRP,<sup>1</sup> describes it as "a teaching practice that explicitly engages questions of equity and justice" and a pedagogy which "recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity... becom[ing] subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects" (74, 76). In designing my American literature course, I thought a great deal about how to "explicitly engag[e] questions of equity and

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<sup>1</sup> While I use the term *culturally responsive pedagogy*, Ladson-Billings refers to this pedagogical approach as *culturally relevant pedagogy* and, in later scholarship on the topic, as *culturally sustaining pedagogy*. Other leading scholars on the topic, such as Geneva Gay, use the term *culturally responsive teaching*. Throughout this essay, I use "culturally responsive pedagogy" to refer to a culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining approach to teaching and learning which has been developed collectively through the work of scholarship by folks like Ladson-Billings and Gay.

justice”; “reposition” marginalized students “into a place of normativity”; and help students become “subjects” rather than “mere objects” in the instructional process. In doing so, I was forced to carefully consider how—or if—I wanted to teach traditional canonical works, as well as how to present the concept of literary canonicity to students. In the introduction to *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, Marc Shell and Werner Sollors discuss how the American literary canon has been constructed and naturalized into what they call a “familiar story.” As they write, “the professional study of literature of the United States... has produced a familiar story... among its protagonists are Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway” (1). Shell and Sollors add that “starting with the civil rights movement in the 1960s and growing with multicultural and gender scholarship of the 1980s, the story has been expanded to make room for figures like Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child, Kate Chopin, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston” (1). Within the literary canon, and in many literature classrooms across the US, the first set of writers, from Mather to Hemingway—all of whom, notably, are white—remain the “protagonists,” while writers of color like Douglass, Hughes, and Hurston are still treated as minor “figures” which scholars and instructors have “ma[d]e room for.” This in and of itself is something to be questioned and critiqued. Yet, equally concerning is the fact that the list of names stops here. Is no more room to be made? Are no more writers to be added to the canon, our classrooms, and our American story? What of Toni Morrison, whose *Beloved* is arguably the most important novel of the twentieth century; or Alice Walker, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* became a classic so adored by readers that it was adapted into a Steven Spielberg film and Broadway play? When will the canon expand to “make room for” writers such as Ralph Ellison, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, Jhumpa Lahiri, Louise Erdrich, and Joy Harjo? How should the story of American literature change in light of all that has transpired in the nearly one hundred years since authors such as Hughes and Hurston were writing?

In asking these questions while designing my American literature course, I also thought a good deal about the students that would take my course. I teach community college students in Queens, New York—one of the most racially and linguistically diverse counties in the US—and the majority of my students are people of color. I wanted to use CRP to ensure my course better incorporated and reflected the lives, identities, knowledges, and experiences of these students. I sought to use Geneva Gay’s guiding principles for CRP as I chose course texts and designed the assignment I’ll discuss throughout this essay. According to Gay, CRP seeks to engage students’ cultural and linguistic knowledges, experiences, practices, and perspectives; make space for students’ voices; and educate students not just intellectually but also socially, emotionally, and politically; it “teaches students to know and praise their own and one another’s cultural heritages” and “builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities” (32, 31). I wanted to use CRP to ask students to actively work with and make choices about literature, rather than reading and responding to a set of teacher-required texts. I also wanted students to have opportunities to learn about writers and works relevant to their own lives, identities, and experiences. As such, I designed a final assignment which asks students to construct their own versions

of an American literature course and select the accompanying texts for that course. After spending the semester studying a diverse range of American writers, texts, historical eras, and literary and cultural movements, students were given several weeks at the end of the term to find and read works they might include in their own American literature courses. This assignment allows students to “crash the canon” by redefining it in ways that better account for their own lives, identities, interests, experiences, and backgrounds. It also inverts the traditional literary survey course so that students do not merely encounter the canon as defined by their professor and other literary scholars, but have a chance to construct it themselves, as readers and members of a rapidly evolving, increasingly diverse society. They become creators, rather than consumers, of the canon—and when students are empowered to create their own versions of the canon, they prove eager to draw upon their racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. At an institution where the majority of students are multilingual and/or people of color, definitions of and approaches to American literature take on new forms when students assume the authority to crash the canon.

Before discussing the work students produced for this assignment, a brief discussion of the assignment’s logistics may be helpful. The assignment begins by acknowledging the vastness of American literature and the myriad ways we might define the field. I remind students that, throughout the semester, we have explored two central questions: what *is* American literature and who decides this? We have studied the field through various genres, approaches, and frameworks and seen how storytelling and canonicity are both shaped by facets of identity such as the race, gender, and language of the writer and/or characters in the text. We have also discussed the various ways one might define “America,” “American,” “literature,” and “American literature.” After reflecting on these prior conversations, each student designs their own American literature course and chooses the readings for this course. They are encouraged to explore readings and topics relevant to their personal, cultural, and academic interests, while including enough variety to study American literature in multiple social and cultural contexts. Students are asked to include two to three readings from our course syllabus (no more or less) and a minimum of five texts we did not read in our course, for a total of seven minimum texts in their course. They are also asked to include at least three different literary genres. After choosing their course texts and designing a “syllabus,” students write a five-page project rationale for their course and its readings.

Since designing this assignment in 2015, I have used it (while continuing to modify and refine it) in over a dozen different sections of my course. In each section, the texts, topics, themes, and time periods that students include in their projects vary considerably, but three clear trends have emerged. First, when students design American literature courses, they “crash the canon” by decentering white writers in favor of a much more multiracial set of authors. In particular, students center Black writers and voices, consistently calling attention to our nation’s ongoing public reckoning with its history of slavery and racism—which is, as Clint Smith writes, “a history that, [until recently,] many had previously been unwilling to acknowledge” (4-5). Second, the multiracial canon that students create also refuses monolingualism and the privileging of standardized English, instead highlighting and celebrating the diversity of languages and dialects in which our nation’s stories are told. Lastly, this

student-constructed canon emphasizes text's relationship to sound and images, making more room for multimodal works of literature, acknowledging the changing nature of literacy, and resisting the privileging of any one form of literacy within the study of literature.

### **The Canon and Our Nation's Racial Reckoning**

Men like me and my brothers filmed what we  
Planted for proof we existed before  
Too late, sped the video to see blossoms  
Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems  
Where the world ends, everything cut down.  
*John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.*

- Jericho Brown, "The Tradition"

In *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith writes that "Blackness is not peripheral to the American project; it is the foundation upon which the country was built" (271-72). Given this, how should the American canon be reconstructed so that Blackness is no longer peripheral, but instead foundational, to this canon? The canon still overwhelmingly centers the voices, histories, and experiences of white people (particularly white, upper-class, cisgender men) while silencing and obfuscating the voices, histories, and experiences of people of color, particularly Black people. Our media, popular culture, political discourse, museums, monuments, and public schools all frequently do the same. Today's college students are increasingly aware of the ways these sources collaboratively work to obfuscate and rewrite Black history and silence Black voices. This is a wrong they seek to correct when designing their American literature courses and developing their own conceptualizations of the literary canon. Cognizant of the ways they were denied opportunities to learn the full depth and breadth of Black American history, students center this history in their courses and often make Black voices the predominant ones in their projects.

In particular, students choose readings that focus on the experiences of enslaved people and the impact of slavery on future generations of Black Americans and on American society more broadly. Works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* are popular choices. Students have included Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and other texts that look frankly at the history of violence against Black people in the Jim Crow South. Many are interested in Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* and similar texts exploring how modern-day institutions, such as the penal system, work to keep Black people imprisoned and disenfranchised over a century after slavery was abolished in the US.

Police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement are also central topics students address. Among the many texts students have included on these topics are Jericho Brown's "The Tradition" and "Bullet Points," Ross Gay's "A Small Needful Fact," Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, and Asha Bandele and Parris Cullors's *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. These

works and others like them offer unflinching looks at the violence, racism, and corruption that characterize police brutality, while simultaneously celebrating and memorializing Black lives, including the lives of those who died at the hands of police officers. In “Bullet Points,” Jericho Brown writes “I will not shoot myself / In the head, and I will not shoot myself / In the back, and I will not hang myself / With a trashbag... I promise if you hear / Of me dead anywhere near / A cop, then that cop killed me.” In “A Small Needful Fact,” Ross Gay reminds us that “Eric Garner worked / for some time for the Parks and Rec. / Horticultural Department, which means, / perhaps, that with his very large hands, / perhaps, in all likelihood, / he put gently into the earth / some plants which, most likely / some of them, in all likelihood, / continue to grow.” When students include these texts in their courses, they are bearing witness to the systemic murder of Black people in this country, engaging directly with questions of racial justice, and connecting the literature they read in the classroom to the issues that impact them in the neighborhoods, communities, and country where they live. This is culturally relevant pedagogy, a pedagogy that “explicitly engages questions of... justice” (Ladson-Billings 74) and “builds bridges of meaningfulness between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities” (Gay 31). This pedagogy allows students to question and critique how the canon disproportionately centers certain names and figures while others go all but unmentioned. One student noted that as a K-12 student, they encountered certain names over and over again: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson in history courses; Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain in literature courses. “These names are important,” the student wrote in their project rationale, “but so are other names like George Floyd and Trayvon Martin. They should be memorialized in our history and our canon, too.”

### **What the Canon Sounds Like: Multilingual American Literature**

So when my Professor comes on the block and says, “Hello”  
 I stop him and say “Nooooo...”  
 You’re being inarticulate... the proper way is to say ‘what’s good’”  
 - Jamila Lyiscott, “Three Ways to Speak English”

In addition to decentering whiteness in favor of a much more multiracial American canon, students also decenter standardized English and create a more multilingual canon. Their courses have included works written fully or partly in Black English, Spanish, Spanglish, Yiddish, Korean, Konglish, Japanese, Arabic, Jamaican Patois, and Chinglish, among other languages and dialects. Texts such as Michelle Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart*, Firoozeh Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi*, and Jamila Lyiscott’s “Three Ways to Speak English” are among the many examples students have chosen. One student critiqued literary scholar Morris Dickstein’s definition of American literature as “the body of written works produced in the English language in the United States,” noting that “not everyone in America can speak English well” and the country has no official language. This student argued that American literature can be “written in any language” and is not determined by the language(s) a writer uses but whether the content is “about an American experience.” Another student noted that linguistic diversity has always existed in the nation and its literature, writing, “for some people to consider a work American literature it must be written in Standard English, but throughout this course we will see many well-known and



well-written stories and essays that do not use perfect English but so-called ‘broken’ English.” Especially among students raised in homes and neighborhoods where standardized English is not the dominant language or dialect, works written in other Englishes and languages other than English are seen as rightly deserving of and overdue a place in the American literary canon.

Because many students have only been assigned standardized English-language texts in past courses, I make a point to discuss with students before beginning this project how and why standardized English—referred to by some language scholars as “White English Vernacular” (Young 90) or “White mainstream English” (Alim and Smitherman 20)—has been *standardized* as such—in other words, how it has been *made* standard by schools, universities, the media, and other institutions. In her work on the politics of language, Martha Cutter defines Standard English as “the grammatically correct language of ‘consensus’ normally taught in [US] schools,” adding that she prefers the term “Standardized English,” which I also use throughout this essay, since it more clearly “denote[s] that something has been done to this language to make it the standard, to make it ‘proper’” (265). Talking with students about how one form of English became the standardized language is a form of CRP itself, since, as Gay notes, one of the key practices of CRP is to work together with students to “critically question normative schooling practices, content, and assessment” (31). Once students are equipped with the history and context to understand and critique the dominance of standardized English in academia and American literature, they are often eager to “crash the canon” by including works written in other Englishes and languages other than English.

As students encounter, read, and write about multilingual and multidialectal texts, they begin to rethink what American literature is, who writes it, who reads it, and what languages it can be written in. Some are also better able to recognize the validity and worthiness of their own languages and dialects as ones which can be used in academic, scholarly, and creative contexts. As one student wrote about Jamila Lyiscott’s spoken word piece “Three Ways to Speak English,” “Being articulate is to have multiple means of speaking the same language, rather than being explicitly skilled with one. Lyiscott explains, ‘That’s why I put ‘tri-lingual’ on my last job application ... I can say ‘What’s good,’ ‘Whatagwan,’ and of course, ‘Hello’ ... Because I’m articulate’ ... Rather than fearfully admonishing the Englishes she uses on her application, Lyiscott treats them as sacrosanct parts of her personality, and embraces them in her professional life as she does in other aspects of her life.” This student argued that including Lyiscott’s piece in the canon is important because it celebrates the value of multilingualism and multidialectalism not only in literature, but in all contexts of everyday life.

In *Teaching To Transgress*, bell hooks scathingly critiques the fact that “in academic circles, both in the sphere of teaching and that of writing, there has been little effort made to utilize [B]lack vernacular—or, for that matter, any language other than standard English” (171). Pointing to the importance of including languages other than standardized English in classrooms—and, by extension, the literary canon—hooks argues that “the rupture of standard English... enables rebellion and resistance,” “transforming the oppressor’s language, making a culture of resistance,” and “creat[ing] an intimate speech that c[an] say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English. The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it

also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—*different ways of thinking and knowing that [a]re crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview*” (171, emphasis added). When the canon includes multilingual literature, it is not just language itself that is diversified (though this is itself a worthy and important goal). Ways of *thinking and knowing* are also diversified, and a broader range of worldviews is presented to readers. This allows literary study to move from an abstract, academic activity to a more meaningful practice with real implications for students’ lived sociocultural and political experiences. Embracing this idea, students fill their final projects with literature written in a range of languages and dialects, collectively prompting us to reconsider what the canon sounds like.

### **More Than Words: Multimodal Literature**

Another notable way students “crash the canon” is by expanding the boundaries of what we define as “literature” and “texts.” Students’ courses are overwhelmingly multimodal and include comics and graphic works, spoken word pieces, songs (particularly rap and hip-hop), films, television episodes, audiobooks, music videos, and social media posts and trends. Students will frequently include the audiobook version of a text, explaining why they think a particular story needs to be heard. They are also especially interested in multimodal adaptations of traditional literary works, such as novels that have been adapted into graphic texts and films.

Music plays an especially significant part in students’ courses, with many arguing that the boundaries between music and literature are blurred and that the canon ought to be expanded to include more artistic forms. Students point out that Bob Dylan and Kendrick Lamar alike are Pulitzer Prize-winning songwriters, and students have included songs by these writers as well as songwriters from Crosby, Stills, and Nash and Neil Diamond to Lauryn Hill, Tupac Shakur, J. Cole, and Nas. Some students have noted parallels between protest messages in folk music of the civil rights era and calls for social and racial justice in contemporary rap and hip-hop. Students also find interesting connections between music and literary texts; for example, one student paired Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A’Changing” with Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, using the former to contextualize generational conflicts portrayed in the latter.

When students include music, film, and television in their courses, they express thoughtful reasons for wanting to study these works alongside traditional literary texts. Some argue that films and songs serve as vehicles through which literature becomes more accessible. One student suggested that film and television help to “spread American literature to a wider audience,” adding that many Americans read literary works in anticipation of or after seeing film or television adaptations (the popularity of recent book-to-film adaptations such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Passing*, *Little Women*, *Hidden Figures*, and *Just Mercy* speaks to this point). The careful consideration students give to how films, songs, and other artistic works can be included in the canon suggests their interest in how literature works in complement with other artistic and creative forms to tell the (hi)stories of America and its people.

Students also frequently express interest in authors who are active on social media and texts that were originally published on social media. Several have argued that hashtags such as #UndocuJoy, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter are texts that can be studied as part of the American canon. Many are familiar with the #TeachLivingPoets hashtag and interested in writers who engage with their readers on social media platforms. This, like so much of my students' work for this assignment, indicates their desire to bring literature into conversation with other aspects of their real-world experiences, and to make connections between academic texts and cultural and political contexts.

\* \* \*

Admittedly, striving to make my course curriculum more diverse and inclusive, and to help students re-think what they have been taught about literature as we “crash the canon” together, has not been without challenges. While many students are eager to crash the canon, some voice concerns about the importance of reading “real literature” by the writers who “really matter” (often those same “protagonists” from the “familiar story” of American literature discussed at the start of this essay). This should, perhaps, not be too surprising. As Michele Elam writes, “the literary canon—what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ literature, what texts should be validated and taught or not taught in schools. . . is related to the racial politics of literacy and cultural education,” “literacy is not just the acquisition of language but also the internalization of cultural and racial norms” (28). Some students seem to have internalized certain cultural and racial norms to such an extent that they hesitate to consider works outside of the traditional canon as worth reading.

Such concerns, however, have proven to be teachable moments in which we discuss as a class how our educational experiences have conditioned us to think of certain writers and texts as more valuable or worthy of our attention than others. As bell hooks writes, “occasionally students feel concerned when a class departs from [their expected norms about education]. I remind them that they can have a lifetime of classes that reflect conventional norms” (203). In discussing the traditional literary canon and how our exposure to it may cause us to “internaliz[e]” certain “cultural and racial norms,” students and I begin to see more clearly the ways we all—myself included—have been through a “lifetime of classes that reflect conventional norms.” These moments of unlearning—of challenging ourselves and one another to question, critically examine, and rethink what we have been taught about and through the literary canon—are some of the most important forms of learning we partake in together, and are characteristic of what is possible when culturally relevant pedagogy is applied in the classroom.

Using CRP to “crash the canon” with students has resulted in the construction of a new canon in my classrooms, one that looks quite different from the traditional canon: it is more multiracial, multilingual, and multimodal, making room for a much wider range of voices and texts that more fully account for our nation's complex history and current realities. Revising my curriculum in this way also seems to have had a significant impact on students. Some have expressed that completing this assignment and getting to construct the canon has given them a sense of “ownership over” and “inclusion in” the American story. And why should they not feel such a sense of ownership and belonging? The American story is, after all, their story.

## Index: “Crashing the Canon” Reading List:

### Selected Texts Chosen by Students in my American Literature Courses

- “America” by Neil Diamond  
“The Ballot or the Bullet” by Malcolm X  
*Beloved* Toni Morrison  
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison  
“Bullet Points” by Jericho Brown  
“Change” by J. Cole  
*Citizen 13660* by Mine Okubo  
*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker  
*Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner  
*Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* by Firoozeh Dumas  
*Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok  
*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas  
“The History of Iniquity” by Lauryn Hill  
*How Does It Feel to Be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi  
“How It Feels To Be Colored Me” by Zora Neale Hurston  
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou  
“I, Too” by Langston Hughes  
“I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free” by Nina Simone  
“If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” by James Baldwin  
“Immigrants in Our Own Land” by Jimmy Santiago Baca  
*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot  
*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson  
*Kindred* by Octavia Butler  
*Lemonade* by Beyoncé Knowles  
*Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid  
*Maus* by Art Spiegelman  
“Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan  
“My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” by Jose Antonio Vargas  
*The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri  
“Nasty Woman” by Nina Mariah Donovan  
“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes  
“Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, and Nash  
“Panther Power” by Tupac Shakur  
“Remember” by Joy Harjo  
*The Rose That Grew From Concrete* by Tupac Shakur  
“A Small Needful Fact” by Ross Gay  
“Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday  
“Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes  
*They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei  
“This Is America” by Childish Gambino  
“The Tradition” by Jericho Brown  
“The Times They Are A-Changing” by Bob Dylan  
“Three Ways to Speak English” by Jamila Lyiscott  
“Twelve Million Black Voices” by Richard Wright  
“UndocuJoy” by Yosimar Reyes  
*When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* by Asha Bandele and Patrisse Cullors  
“White America” by Eminem  
“won’t you celebrate with me” by Lucille Clifton  
“Wrote My Way Out” by Nas, Dave East, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Aloe Blacc

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## Collision

*Christina M. Rau*

An amateur astronomer—

one of those backyard look up at the moonlight  
types with a mega telescope who has parties  
so everyone can check out constellations up close  
and who volunteers at the planetarium twice a week

has captured the moment—

on film on video on digital the only way  
to hold time in place so it cannot escape

a space rock collided with Jupiter—

as when worlds collide, when atoms  
bang around, when cars hit head on,  
when elbows smash into each other,  
only here is godlike, it's a cataclysm  
on a celestial scale

The debris—

all space is full of junk

struck the gas giant

creating a flash of light—

impact taken aback, the spark  
evidencing friction, the connection  
between materials dark and materials  
weighty and the angular momentum  
attempting to answer the koan: what happens  
when an irresistible force confronts  
an immovable object, and the answer  
lies in the lens of an amateur's eyes.

[all lines flush with the margin are taken from an msn.com news article 9/17/21]

# Neosophist Critical Pedagogy and Aesthetic-Rhetorical Teaching: Cultivating Critical-Imaginative Response in the Chicana Literature Classroom

*Rubén R. Mendoza*

This article provides examples of critical teaching practices in my community college Chicana Literature classroom that rely on incorporation of non-canonical works. Such non-canonical works, positioned outside not just the canon of U.S. literature, but the canon of Chicana literature itself, include Chicana feminist, queer Chicana feminist, and surrealist avant-garde texts. The article demonstrates how my approach helps students to develop self-reflexive critical stances toward dominant normative cultural formations and to open alternative critical-imaginative modes through engagement with non-canonical literatures. These teaching practices are framed and informed by a rhetoric methodology centered on modern critical pedagogy and theorization and practices of the ancient Sophists. The first in the West to formally theorize pedagogy, the Sophists developed a self-reflexive approach to rhetoric and pedagogy that was aesthetics-oriented, bodily centered, ludic, experientialist, and collaborative. As predominantly members of a marginalized, second-class citizenry known as “*mētics*,” foreigners drawn to the city from outlying areas by forces of imperialism,<sup>1</sup> the Sophists aimed at inculcating a self-reflexive, deconstructive critical stance in the context of sociopolitical power differentials, particularly in relation to the prevailing dominant *nomos* (normative sociocultural convention, custom, tradition, and law). My application of this rhetoric methodology to cultivation of arts-based, bodily focused critical “neosophist” pedagogy is in line with a general Rhetoric Studies neosophist aesthetic turn of the past forty years through the work of rhetoricians such as Susan Jarratt and Debra Hawhee. This pedagogy conceptualizes cognition and meaning as collaboratively constructed and bodily based, and the body as sentient, or Hawhee’s “mind-body complex” in the context of the Sophists (87). In addition to Sophist and neosophist theorization, my approach draws on the modern critical pedagogy of L.S. Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, and Augusto Boal. Thus reflective of both ancient Sophist and modern critical pedagogies, this is an experientialist approach that seeks to develop critical self-reflexivity toward one’s own subjectivity and its formational relationship to one’s surrounding *nomos*. In the specific context of teaching Chicana Literature at an urban HSI community college, my argument is that placing non-canonical works in meta-critical, self-reflexive dialogue with canonical works within such neosophist critical pedagogical frameworks can open potentials for students to develop self-reflexive critical stances toward more general prevailing sociocultural conventions. At the same time, such critical dialogue can facilitate student fluency with dominant conventions of academia dialectically, through validation and incorporation of their own (“non-canonical”) epistemological and ontological frameworks in dialogue with dominant (“canonical”) frameworks of academic discourse. While the argument is developed here in the specific context of Chicana literature, it is generalizable. This same approach is one that I have applied, for example, in many other literature courses and in interdisciplinary history, sociology, and cultural studies courses.

The curriculum for my Chicana Literature course includes some canonical works as a foundational starting point. However, it primarily focuses on texts that are experimental, genre-challenging, and queer- and feminist-oriented, and that are typically peripheral to the canon of Chicana/o/x literature—which itself has continued to persistently be positioned as peripheral to the broader canon of U.S. literature. Furthermore, where canonical works are covered, it is through a self-reflexive critical lens that foregrounds and interrogates their status *as* canonical. For example, once we begin examining literature, students first read canonical texts from the 1960s/70s Chicano Movement that include Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ epic poem, “I Am Joaquin,” and the 1969 Chicano Movement manifesto, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, composed mostly by students at the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver, Colorado. The canonical status of both texts is contextualized by their literary and political significance to the Movement and their reflection of the Movement’s nationalist ideologies. This includes not just attention to the positive empowerment these works enacted for audiences, but critical examination of patriarchal, sexist language and ideology in both works, which demonstrates broader problems within the Movement’s nationalism. What emerges is a complex understanding of how establishing necessary political unity through nationalist discourse in the face of external discrimination and oppression often involves harmful exclusionary frameworks and practices that lead to internal discrimination and oppression from within. Students thus develop self-reflexive critical understanding of such works not simply as canonical to Chicana Literature, but as instrumental in establishing both literary canons and more general sociocultural conventions of cultural nationalism. Development of such a foundation is vital for understanding the literature and culture of the Chicano Movement era and for fully appreciating the political and cultural significance of how *non*-canonical works subsequently disrupted and challenged these formations.

However, before we examine these canonical works and lay this foundation, the first literature-centered lecture in the course focuses on the concept of literary canons in general and then in terms more particular to U.S. and Chicana literatures. The lecture first defines the term canon, then draws attention to the contingency of any given canon by placing the word in quotation marks and deconstructing it. Students are led through discussion of how all literary canons are established through deliberate choices (typically by, and reflective of, those in power). The lecture/discussion focuses their attention on the power structures that such choices therefore reflect and impose/maintain. I then explain how I as an instructor have developed the course’s largely non-canonical curriculum in light of these formations. From the beginning, with “canon” as a starting point, I thus make transparent for students not just the choices I have made in relation to broader choices that have constructed multiple specific canons which bear on Chicana literature, but that specific choices have been made in the first place.

This initial establishment of a self-reflexive stance vis-à-vis canon formation, power differentials, and normative sociocultural structures, is an important foundation for the critical pedagogy the remainder of the course implements. From initial discussion of canon formation, we then expand the self-reflexivity by looking at various approaches to analyzing Chicana literature. Before



students ever look at any literature, we thus extend the opening framework of transparency with a similar meta-critical examination of literary theorization. On one level, students are provided with appropriate analytical frameworks. On another level, they develop critical understanding of such approaches as further examples of how literary canons are both formed and challenged through rhetorical mechanisms of academic discourse. Throughout, I continue to emphasize contingency and transparency, so that students understand various literary approaches in a meta-critical way that demystifies not just the canonical genre conventions of literary forms, but academic theorization and discourse *about* those forms. Student understanding of literary canon formation thus extends to meta-critical awareness of how literary analysis plays a role in maintaining literary canons and in establishing its own “canon” of academic discourse. Through a scaffolding approach in which modeling plays a central role, I lead students early on toward an understanding of how literary analysts structure their critiques according to the prevailing *nomos* of literary analysis understood as a rhetorical genre that is simply one set of contingencies among many of prevailing sociocultural conventions.

Once we have examined the canonical Chicano Movement works noted above, the course then shifts to a focus on predominantly Chicana feminist authors in an examination of issues of space and place in Chicana literature. This shift builds on earlier sociohistorical-geospatial context in the course (e.g., the U.S./Mexico War; Chicano Movement rhetoric around the mythic Chicano homeland of Aztlan), as students turn to reading Raúl Homero Villa’s *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. However, despite the new material and focus, the same self-reflexive critical orientation is maintained. Students are instructed to pay (rhetorical) attention not just to what Villa says, but to *how* he approaches literature—the vocabulary he uses and the rhetorical and ideological moves his analysis makes. In reading Villa, they are called on to identify and explain such moves using specific examples. At the same time, students are led through lecture materials and exercises that focus attention on their own experiences of urban space. Their attention thus is directed meta-cognitively and dialogically both to content and form in Villa’s analysis, and to their own experience. Villa’s text analyzes space and place in works by Chicana feminist writers Gloria Álvarez, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Helena María Viramontes, among others. In his analysis, he demonstrates how these authors challenge ideological formations in earlier canonical works, including the heterosexism and patriarchy of nationalist works noted above. Using some of the same literary works that Villa analyzes, while assigning several others that Villa does not examine, I then have students discuss the works in groups before individually addressing an essay prompt on these three Chicana authors. Students must analyze how these authors connect Chicana feminism to their examinations of urban spatial oppression and inequity (e.g., gentrification and displacement of Chicana/Latina populations due to redevelopment), as seen in the gender politics and “woman family” of Cervantes’ “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” for example. The assignments thus set up a juxtapositional interplay of literary texts, some of which students can read analyses of in Villa’s work, and some of which they must develop their own analyses of while in conversation with Villa. While students are able to draw on some of Villa’s analysis directly, in other cases, they must construct their own analyses indirectly and dialogically. At the same time, they must make connections among all three juxtaposed authors that Villa himself makes only indirectly, if at all. As students develop and revise their work,

they gain writing facility through repeated practice, which they self-reflexively understand as situated within and in dialogue with a broader realm of “canonical” academic discourse conventions.

For many of these students, literary analysis discourse is an unfamiliar rhetorical terrain on which their experience has often inculcated a self-image as incompetent and lacking fluency. Through modeling and scaffolding, the exercises outlined here therefore function meta-cognitively to help students develop familiarity and facility in engaging the *nomos* of literary analysis discourse with texts that speak to and reflect their own experiences while challenging canonical patriarchal nationalist formations with non-canonical Chicana feminist literature. The connection to students’ own embodied experiences of community space and place through the juxtaposition of canonical and non-canonical works creates space for their own epistemological and ontological formations within and on par with academic discourse and literary canonical formations. Juan Bruce-Novoa provides an example of the liberatory, transformative potential in connecting aesthetics to community that is particularly salient here. He theorizes Chicana Literature as an aesthetic space that can “transform [readers], sending them back to the social world with a new vision and a capacity to change the world” (124). Through engagement with the space of literature that aesthetically speaks to their own experiences, “[r]eaders extend the reach of that space and expand its influence when they fulfill themselves as the products of their reading of literature” (124). Bruce-Novoa thus connects Chicana literary space to the space of Chicana community in a discourse of intertwined, reciprocal subjectivity and social transformation centered on a “social praxis” shaped by readers’ aesthetic experience, as Chicana literature plays a transformative role in shaping the agentive ability of Chicana readers to respond to their own lives. As with my work incorporating students’ experiences into their engagement with literature about space and place, and literary analysis of such literature, what Bruce-Novoa articulates is a social praxis informed by imaginative engagement with the aesthetics of literary space.

On one level, Bruce-Novoa’s argument for literary aesthetics as vital for liberatory responses to dominant sociocultural formations mirrors the Sophist focus on poetics in formulating critical responses to *nomos* sociocultural convention. In addition to applying literary interpretation to poetry, the Sophists examined poetry as a source of aesthetic techniques and approaches in their critical rhetorical and teaching practices for real-world engagement. From a modern critical pedagogy angle, Bruce-Novoa also resonates with the kind of sociocultural model of intertwined, reciprocally informing “scientific” knowledge and “everyday” knowledge articulated by Soviet critical pedagogue, L.S. Vygotsky. In his mid-twentieth century work, Vygotsky theorized a pedagogical intertwining of “scientific” knowledge and “practical” or “everyday” knowledge with his central model of a “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD). Vygotsky’s pedagogy understood psychological development as processual and social. Focusing on “the social formation of mind” (Daniels *Introduction* 7) in child and adolescent development and education, Vygotsky’s interdisciplinary relational theory resonates with Sophist pedagogy’s critical attention to *nomos* enculturation through sociocultural channels. As Daniels outlines, the three interpretive models that have emerged around Vygotsky’s socio-relational ZPD are “scaffolding,” “cultural,” and “collectivist” or “societal” (*Introduction* 6). As socio-relational, all three ZPD models must be understood not just individually, but as intertwined, reciprocal

dimensions of a larger, holistic learning process. In the “scaffolding” model, probably the most widely applied, lessons build on each other in a process of increasing difficulty similar to some of what I have outlined previously. Here, the teacher determines what a student can achieve on their own and what they can achieve only with the assistance of an “expert.” The space between these stages represents the ZPD “zone” in which the educator must facilitate effective mediation as students draw on previously mastered tasks while mimicking approaches to more difficult tasks in order to eventually perform those tasks alone. My assignment of Villa’s analysis in relation to works by Álvarez, Cervantes, and Viramontes, demonstrates application of this “scaffolding” model. As they develop their own analyses of these authors, students are rhetorically analyzing and mimicking the modeling of Villa’s analysis of these same authors. The “cultural” and “collectivist”/“societal” interpretations of the ZPD resonate more directly with Bruce-Novoa’s theorization of how Chicana literature can function for readers. The “cultural” model focuses on the previously noted space between what Vygotsky calls “scientific” and “everyday” concepts. As Daniels puts it, “a mature concept is achieved when the scientific and everyday versions have merged” (*Introduction 6*). Here, the “gap” is between students’ grasps of formal, systematic knowledge (e.g., critical literary analysis; dominant canons), and the everyday, practical knowledge they have acquired themselves through lived experience with/in (*nomos*) sociocultural systems. The aim is to bridge this gap by facilitating space for each epistemological realm to inform and shape the other. Finally, the “collectivist”/“societal” model focuses on how the learning process connects to social change, centering on the gap between individual actions and social activity (Daniels *Introduction 6*). According to this model, student processes of individual pedagogical transformation are linked to processes of social transformation in their collaborative work and in their ability to connect their own transformation to potential social transformation outside the classroom.

Vygotsky’s development of a specifically relational model was grounded in an effort to counter the prevailing exploitative *nomos* of alienating capitalist modes of social relations and the educational institutions through which they were (and are still) transmitted. Vygotsky’s pedagogical approaches therefore aimed to counter what he understood through a Marxist lens as the debilitating atomization and isolation of capitalist modes of education and living. His pedagogy was oriented specifically to disadvantaged children from a concern with how capitalist exploitation results in what he describes as “the impossibility of a free and full development of full human potential,” and “the corruption and distortion of the human personality and its subjection to unsuitable, one-sided development” (*Reader 176*). His ZPD therefore does not merely emphasize collaborative learning; it seeks to integrate all aspects of a student’s life in the learning process in order to counter alienating modes of education. Addressing similar issues in the context of colonialism and imperialism, Brazilian critical pedagogue Paulo Freire famously critiques the Western banking model of (capitalist) education as a colonizing force that objectifies students by “depositing” alien material into them in order to mold them into a compliant, unquestioning, and exploitable citizenry. Freire’s model therefore centers education on the student’s material reality with a decolonial, praxical process that fuses reflection and action in a dialectic similar to Vygotsky’s fusing of “scientific knowledge” and “everyday,” practical knowledge. Central to Freire’s approach is a socio-relational model similar to Vygotsky’s, in which learning is

staged through mediational collaboration and facilitation, rather than unidirectional depositing of information from teacher to students.

The next set of assignments and exercises in my literature course reflects similar concepts and aims with an underlying framework of collaborative learning, as we expand on the post-Chicano Movement feminist focus on space and place to turn to the non-canonical queer Chicana feminist writings of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. In order to contextualize the significance of these authors and their works as non-canonical, I begin this part of the course with lecture discussion on the development of Chicana Feminism and Queer Chicana Feminism in relation to the Chicano Movement and to dominant Second Wave Feminism. Students thus first learn how the Queer Chicana Feminism of Moraga and Anzaldúa developed on the periphery of two “canonical” sociocultural formations that excluded them from multiple angles. As both authors explicitly discuss in their writing, they found themselves and their experiences excluded both by the Chicano Movement, with its often pronounced sexism and homophobia, and by Second Wave feminism, which was dominated by white, heterosexual, upper middle/upper class, and well-educated women, who often excluded, ignored, dismissed, and denied the concerns and involvement of working class women, queer women, and women of color. In this discussion, notions of canonical and non-canonical are once again reframed to help students understand how the radically non-canonical works of Moraga and Anzaldúa developed from the intersectionality of challenges and disruptions to multiple dominant political and sociocultural formations. This understanding is further expanded by an examination of how those works in turn functioned to develop a new, unique strand of queer Chicana feminist-of-color oppositional consciousness and practice in conversation with similar peripheral movements such as Third World Feminism and Black Feminist Womanism.

Once students have developed this foundational understanding, they read selections from Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso por Sus Labios*, published in 1983, followed by the first seven chapters of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987. Both works have since become canonical not just in Chicanx literature, but in a wide array of fields including Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, and Postcolonial Studies, among others. However, at the time of their publication in the 1980s, they represented a radical departure from and challenge to prevailing literary and scholarly canonical formations. Both works self-reflexively engage and disrupt multiple canonical formations through blending of Spanish and English, and radical, innovative blending of various genres and canonical forms. The collaborative aspects here involve a group assignment for Anzaldúa’s text. Students are divided into groups, and each group is assigned one chapter from the first part of Anzaldúa’s book that they must design and present a group lecture on. These lectures must lead other students through chapters they potentially have not read. The exercise thus is one in collaborative learning and knowledge production. It emphasizes Vygotsky’s reciprocal, relational nature of learning on multiple levels of group definition and structure, as students participate directly and collaboratively in mediating and bridging the gaps of multiple ZPDs (“scientific” and “everyday” knowledge; “collectivist”/“societal”). In Vygotskian terms, knowledge is not located in any one person, but rather, is “distributed among individuals,...is socially

constructed through collaborative efforts to achieve shared objectives in cultural surroundings, and is processed between individuals and tools and artefacts provided by the culture” (Salomon qtd. in Daniels *Vygotsky* 70). In similar fashion, the Sophists located knowledge production and learning in the social. Susan Jarratt explains, for example, how the Sophists’ rhetorical attention to community-specific discourse and its use, “concentrated on the power of language in shaping human group behavior...as an instrument of social action in the *polis*” (11) and “[l]ocat[ed] the source of knowledge about reality in the conversation of a social group” (9). With the Anzaldúa assignment, students must collectively build knowledge of their chapter in order to present and teach it. Furthermore, as a classroom of groups, students then collectively piece together their knowledge of the larger work. They therefore are not just positioned as sources of knowledge; their participation and presence are *vital* for the entire group, as they meta-cognitively see themselves as *integral* to production of knowledge and to everyone’s learning process (and everyone else as integral to their own).

However, it is important to note that this is not simply a group work exercise typical of many U.S. classrooms—one whose primary function, for example, is to prepare students for corporate-world collaboration. As a non-canonical text that articulates radical politics of identity formation, history, and sociocultural experience along multiple vectors including race, gender, and sexuality, Anzaldúa’s text deconstructs dominant binary-based ideological formations with her queer Chicana feminist theorization of *mestiza* consciousness. This consciousness arises from the “cultural collision” of the *mestiza*’s position of racial and cultural mixing, through which “[t]he ambivalence from the clash of voices results in...a plural personality” (100-01). From this radically collaborative position, “the new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions...[and] ambiguity” (101). The meta-critical collaboration at work here, then, is one of developing radically deconstructive stances toward the ideological frameworks of dominant *nomos*.

This project’s collaboration and its radically deconstructive, non-canonical framework lays the foundation for my literature course’s next shift, which includes avant-garde, surrealist works, and a final creative group project. In a Vygotskian study of collaboration in literacy development that helps to contextualize this next set of assignments, John-Steiner and Meehan provide insight into the transformative potential of collaborative pedagogical practices that specifically incorporate creativity. John-Steiner and Meehan state that, “Knowledge...is both reconstructed and co-constructed in the course of dialogic interaction. It involves agentive individuals who...actively restructure their knowledge both with each other and within themselves” (35). Drawing on Vygotsky, they note that his conceptualization of the collaborative “construction of the new” involved a multilayered synthesis that occurred “as the result of interpersonal interaction but also of intrapersonal interaction,” the latter of which he saw as “the interlacing of different psychological functions such as thought and imagination” (44). Quoting Vygotsky, John-Steiner and Meehan write:

“A true understanding of reality is not possible without a certain element of imagination, without a departure from reality, from those immediate concrete holistic impressions by means of which reality is presented in the elementary acts of our consciousness.... [T]he solution of a

problem demands the participation of realistic thinking in the process of imagination...they act in unity.” (44)

The Vygotskian focus here on imaginative synthesis as both interpersonal and intrapersonal expands notions of collaboration and its transformational and pedagogical potential. Furthermore, echoing the Sophists’ aesthetic orientation in their creative, ludic approach to reality and to language, Vygotsky’s theorization helps to illuminate how such interpersonal and intrapersonal syntheses can intersect productively and holistically toward deeper understanding through creativity.

In line with similar concerns centered on critical-imaginative capacities and skills, the last few major exercises in my course therefore draw prior collaborative work together with a focus on imaginative reflection and creative practice. Drawing together Vygotskian and Sophist theorization of creativity in pedagogy, and the similarly oriented Theater of the Oppressed approaches of Brazilian critical pedagogue, Augusto Boal, the third and fourth major exercises are primarily preparatory for the final creative group project. Through a sophistic experientialist emphasis on collaboratively connecting creative reflection and practice to somatic experience, they aim to facilitate shifts toward imaginative modes that engage the unconscious—the pre-cognitive, somatic, and affective, or what fall under designations of the “non-rational” in neosophist studies of Sophist focus on the “mind-body complex.” In this context, “non-rational” is best understood not as “irrational,” but as articulating alternative notions of rationality based on the embodied intelligences of an integrated “mind-body” complex of the sentient body. To start, I first present material on Surrealism. This material highlights the Surrealist aesthetic of disrupting routine, everyday habits, and canonical formations in the art world by accessing the unconscious, the absurd, and nonverbal registers, often through practices involving juxtaposition and contradiction. On the surface, this material provides context for understanding the aesthetics of the next reading, experimental Chicano artist and writer Harry Gamboa Jr.’s contemporary book of avant-garde short fiction, *Rider*. As with previous assignments, Gamboa’s work is contextualized within a framework of canonical versus non-canonical works: Its radical experimentation using absurdism and other estrangement techniques is connected to art and literary movements that have similarly staged radical deconstructions of prevailing *nomos* formations and their attendant canons. This includes Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, and Gamboa’s own groundbreaking work as a founder of the 1970s/80s Chicano avant-garde art collective, ASCO. The work I do here is not simply intellectual and historical, however; as noted, I am also preparing students for subsequent engagement in creative practices themselves that involve Boalian Theater of the Oppressed performance exercises. The idea is to move from meta-critical awareness of how non-canonical works challenge and disrupt canonical formations to students’ direct engagement in critical deconstructive creative practices themselves. This movement to a more experientialist approach is initiated by a specific reading assignment, which requires students to ride the bus/train while reading Gamboa’s *Rider*. *Rider* comprises absurdist, Surrealist-inflected stories about riding public transportation in Los Angeles. As they read the book while riding public transportation in Los Angeles themselves, students are asked to pay careful attention to all the sensory information on the bus and in the city and to make notes of their perceptions.

In a Jungian analysis of “transformative learning” pedagogical practices that incorporate creativity, Darrell Dobson outlines several “experiential activities” that help to articulate the aims of this particular assignment. According to Dobson, these activities “promote integration, the third phase of transformative learning, the emergence of a new conscious attitude” (152). Dobson’s focus on creativity’s role in development of holistic consciousness speaks to the bodily centered sophistic shift to imaginative engagement that I seek to facilitate. He notes that, “[t]his is not merely a change in an intellectual stance... It is holistic in nature, and so also involves the emotions, intuition, body, ethics, aesthetics and spirit” (152). Vygotsky, Freire, Boal, and others, describe a similar kind of holistic, integrative transformational process in experientialist terms that often emphasize the transformative potential of defamiliarization and estrangement. In the case of Gamboa’s text, the intellectual activity of reading his absurdist stories about riding L.A. buses and trains dialectically oscillates with students’ careful attention to their embodied sensory and perceptual experience of themselves, their immediate surroundings, and the surroundings through which they traverse, as they themselves ride L.A. buses and trains. This dialectical juxtaposition thus stages possibilities for defamiliarization and estrangement, and therefore development of critical consciousness, through bodily experience. For Paolo Freire, the power of experientialist pedagogy rests specifically in its ability to raise consciousness by instigating disruptive defamiliarization and cognitive dissonance through facilitation of a praxical dialectic via mediational objects that function to estrange. As Freire notes, “[l]iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors” (67). Similarly, Augusto Boal describes how the first “unmasking” stages of his decolonial Theater of the Oppressed technologies “are designed to ‘undo’ the muscular structure of the participants. That is, to take them apart, to study and analyze them. Not to weaken or destroy them, but to raise them to the level of consciousness” (128). In both cases, the aim is to catalyze potential consciousness transformation through experiential learning centered on defamiliarization and estrangement.

After the *Rider* assignment, journal entries are used to stimulate discussion. This is then followed by my facilitation of a Boalian Theater of the Oppressed workshop in which I play the role of Boal’s “Joker” in leading students through a series of performance “games” (*Boal Games*). These games are designed to further heighten kinesthetic awareness, sensory perception, and connection to embodied experience. As with the Gamboa bus-riding assignment, the mode I employ here echoes the Sophists’ experientialist centering of pedagogy on embodied practice. In Sophist pedagogy, the inherently experientialist nature of training in embodied critical-imaginative *mētis* (a cunning trickster intelligence of tactical improvisation that seeks to make the most of every moment as a form of tactical resistance) and *kairos* (the skillful, improvisatory intelligence of the opportune moment—of performing the most effective response to circumstances always in flux) necessarily involved “non-rational” bodily engagement with contingent situations. As with the Sophists, the experientialist dimension of the Boalian pedagogy here reflects how embodied intelligences are necessarily developed through practice that requires bodily participation in-the-moment. As Hawhee notes: “[N]o system of knowledge can teach kairotic response; rather such response emerges out of repeated encounters with difference—different opponents in different positions at different times and places” (148). Providing

further insight into the mechanisms of my Boalian experientialist embodied learning approaches, Susan Congram discusses similar arts-informed approaches to learning that occur in practices of “embodying,” or “taking in and living what we learn and believe...listening to the messages of the body—the gut feel, intuition, a deep sense—and being informed by those messages” (174). As Congram argues, this kind of learning “involves the body and engages learning through experience” (174). It “is...about students...learning how to listen to their own emotional and physiological inner world in response to the outer world” (174).

In preparation for the group creative project, my use of Theater of the Oppressed exercises aims at engagement with such *kairos*- and *mētis*- oriented skills through kinetic exercises. These exercises involve embodied learning through experience, engagement with critical-imaginative modes, and critical attention to normative *nomos* identity and behavior formations. Following several general warm-up exercises, I engage students in more conceptually substantive games. In one salient example, “Machine of Rhythms,” students must imagine they are making a “Conformity Machine” together. In this scenario, one student first goes into the middle of the room and imagines they are a moving part of a machine made up of paired, repeated motions and vocalized sounds that the student must perform in a rhythmic fashion. Students perform a motion-sound that reflects a social role, a repetitive action, or a daily ritual. Other students then enter the Conformity Machine by making their own unique mechanical, rhythmic motion, along with a sound to go with the motion. Each repeats their own action and sound as students continue to enter the machine. As students enter into the machine and position themselves in relation to others, they must observe the motions and gestures of others in order to fit their own motion-sound into it. Here, the aim is to heighten a sense of sociocultural awareness along two axes that intersect at the point of embodied performance. On one hand, in a Vygotskian mode, I am highlighting students’ subjectivity, identity, and learning, as conditioned and relational. Students engage in a collaborative, creative game of constructing a “machine” through performance that provides them insight into the fundamentally social and embodied nature of their subjectivity. At the same time, in a Freiran/Boalian mode, and echoing Sophist entraining in a self-reflexive critical stance toward *nomos*, I am facilitating critical awareness of how that self-construction and performance are shaped according to sociocultural norms of *conformity*. In playing with this conformity and their participation in it, they engage it in a manner that not only raises consciousness of, but interrogates and destabilizes, the conditioning of their everyday life performances. This point culminates with my gradually speeding up the “rhythm” to an unsustainable pace that ultimately breaks and falls into chaotic disarray amidst much laughter. Students thus experientially gain critical deconstructive insight into how this conformity is not immutable, but rather, is a site of malleability, contestation, and potential transformation. In sophistic terms, they practice at ludic engagement with their subjectivities and with the *nomos* from which they are formed as part of a contingent reality that is always contestable and in flux. This ludic connection of students’ performance games to their own subjectivities demonstrates a valuation of fantasy play as an important liberatory activity at any developmental stage. The point is to inculcate a performative, creative sense of subjectivity specifically through engagement with latent childhood abilities to play. Facilitating such experiential connections to embodiment therefore necessarily arises from ludic, collaborative transformation of the classroom



space. Throughout the Theater of the Oppressed workshop, the classroom is lively, fun, and filled with laughter. The room typically becomes charged with energy as students more fully abandon themselves to play.<sup>2</sup> When students leave, there is a sense of them “spilling” out into the world with carnivalesque excess and festivity. Through such embodied pedagogy and experientialist focus on active perception, observation, and analysis in this and the preceding *Rider* exercise, students thus engage in collaborative learning that feeds directly into their final group creative project and the social engagement with embodied creativity it requires.

In this final project, students work together to create a literary product, which they present as groups at the end of the course. Suggested options for the project include fotonovelas, zines, videos, performance, or other media. In addition to reflecting an aesthetic synthesis of the theory, literature, and concepts we have covered over the course, the group project must somehow challenge, push, and expand the canon of Chicana literature. Students must also connect the work to their own lives, experiences, and communities. Beyond these requirements, they are given free rein to work in a creative mode. The assignment thus provides students opportunities to build on creative exercises and knowledge they have developed together as they synthesize course information and sources. Through a collaborative, creative mode, students serve as the facilitators of epistemological synthesis in aesthetically connecting literary texts, literary analyses, and everyday lived experiences. The results have included fotonovela zines centered on issues in students’ neighborhoods, collections of poetry and other written works focused on students’ cultural experiences, and performances about identity.

As demonstrated, my neosophist critical pedagogy stages dialectical engagements between canonical and non-canonical formations to help students develop the critical distance and embodied intelligences necessary for operating in an imaginative, ludic mode oriented toward critical self-reflexive stances vis-à-vis prevailing *nomos*. This is a mode of subjectivity that, rather than falling back into comfortable interpretive “canonical” containment of the world and its regimes of *nomos* consensus reality, instead actively opens onto multiple possibilities. Using sophisticated aesthetic rhetoric and modern critical pedagogies to stage critical self-reflexive engagement with canonical and non-canonical works can help students develop facility with literature and dominant modes of literary analysis in a way that informs everyday practices. At the same time, such pedagogical practices open spaces for students to bring to bear the experiences and knowledge bases of their everyday lives on their understanding and experience of literature. Fostering a reciprocal and creative interaction between the two through a focus on works that challenge and disrupt multiple canonical formations on multiple levels can result in the kind of experientialist, collaborative, embodied learning that I argue for. In such a critical pedagogical mode, the collaborative, experiential learning experience of bridging juxtaposed realms serves to generate potential critical transformation with a rhetorical and pedagogical model that interweaves the resources and potentials of various sites at the intersecting agentive point of students themselves.

## Notes

1. “Mētics” had some limited legislative rights, but always from an unequal and disenfranchised position. Marginalized, mētics were very concerned with the pedagogically normalizing and conditioning mechanisms of *nomos* enculturation.

2. It is important to note that I structure my course so that the Theater of the Oppressed workshop is one of the last activities; a certain level of trust must be established and maintained over time for students to more fully engage in such exercises.

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## ***A Moving Practice: How the Writing Workshop Can Mobilize Black Rhetorical Devices***

Chy Sprauve

My work seeks to recover the pedagogical practices of Black literacy teachers (like Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson and activist Kwame Ture, also known as Stokely Carmichael) who worked in the Sea Island Citizenship Schools and in educational spaces during Mississippi Freedom Summer. I contend that the work of these teachers has influenced contemporary “student-centered” pedagogical models and critical pedagogy work in the field of Writing Studies—however, this work has not been centered in mainstream conversations about liberatory pedagogies in the field.

I propose that the work of these Black teacher-activists should be understood as guideposts in our push towards pedagogies centered in social justice. I argue that we can celebrate the work of these teachers by developing writing workshops, which are by nature mobile (because one can implement them in different spaces) and less constrained by the bounds of the conventional classroom. I center the “mobility” of the workshop because some scholars in the field of Writing Studies have argued that Black rhetorical practices are rendered “immobile” in the academic space while the practice of “white” rhetorical procedures secure professional and scholastic advancement. Scholars Kristen L. Scott and Jamila Kareem contend that “the racial property of whiteness holds the most authority over literacy mobility in education-oriented enterprises because whiteness is thought to represent the lifelong success and influence that inspires institutional education” (174). The workshops I propose we employ invite writing instructors to interrogate their teaching approaches, specifically as it relates to language requirements and writing assignment accessibility.

The Sea Island Citizenship Schools was the brainchild of Esau Jenkins, a South Carolina native and local activist, who ran the schools along with activist Myles Horton and educator Septima Clark (a member of the NAACP and one of the few somewhat prominent women who worked with the SCLC, conceptualized by Martin Luther King Jr., among others), as well as Bernice Robinson, a local hairdresser. The schools were developed to teach people rudimentary reading and writing comprehension skills so that they could advocate for their right to vote, which was, to say the least, a downright dangerous prospect in the 1940’s U.S. South. Rhea Estelle Lathan, assistant professor of English Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University, says of the advent of Freedom Schools: “[its] inception...was directly motivated by the understanding, in the gospel sense, that the power to break free of segregation’s intellectual straightjacket lay in overcoming oppressive tradition through literacy” (29). Voting was also a way for Black people to claim their space in the body politic and it was a way for Black people to realize self-determination via literacy, which was one pathway to self-realization.

Robert Lake, in his article “Sailing with Septima: A Curricular Journey Through the Jim Crow South,” asserts that teachers in the Sea Island Citizenship Schools

stressed the efficacy of fitting the curriculum to the desires, interests, and experiences of the student. *Like the ever-changing conditions of the sea, a student-centered curriculum had to be navigated in accordance with both personal knowledge of the individual and the cultural and historical conditions of the time* (64; emphasis added).

There is a *flexibility or elasticity* in the pedagogy Lake describes—the work of Clark was not fixed and used in every classroom space—rather, it was understood by Clark and her colleagues that pedagogical approaches must adapt themselves to the needs of the immediate community. This is one of the ways in which the literacy pedagogy of Clark and her peers challenge unresponsive practices that fix learning communities in unproductive ways.

Clark, according to Lake, believed that instructor-centered instruction was “irrelevant and obsolete,” and that while she knew that her curriculum was primarily developed to secure voting rights for Black people, she felt it also had to aim for “broader social, political, and economic change.” Clark was able to accomplish her goal by “remaining grounded in people’s everyday lives and being flexible enough to incorporate new developments in the movement itself” (qtd. in Lake 61). These schools were also formulated to “teach adult students how they could challenge [w]hite supremacy through the ballot, address problems in their community, and assume local leadership roles in the process” (qtd. in Lake 61). The pedagogical work of Clark and her peers addressed not only the literacy needs and desires of the students, but also, to an extent, their social and political needs. These educators understood that their students not only sought to develop reading and writing skills, but also perhaps sought ways to reimagine their communities, impacted by the racially and economically oppressive policies of Jim Crow, in ways that were affirming and transformative.

Though there had been other schools focused on basic literacy skills for Black adults during this period, many of the attendees felt infantilized and talked down to. Bernice Robinson, another educator at the Sea Island Citizenship Schools, learned while teaching at the schools that “you don’t tell people [students] what to do. *You let them tell you what they want done and then you have to have in your mind certain things that you feel they need to do. And so you get their thoughts and wind your thoughts around...*” (Levine 405; emphasis added). The phrase “wind your thoughts around” is salient for me here. For Robinson, it seems that the needs articulated by students were at the core of the teaching objectives, and the desires of the instructor were “wound around” that core.

Authors of the book *Lessons From Freedom Summer: Ordinary People Building Extraordinary Movements* argue that Clark developed a pedagogical approach rooted in “problem-posing,” activism, and the centering of learners – which “was the precursor to the now famous ‘Freedom School Curriculum’” (qtd. in Lake 371) while Susan Kates, Associate Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma writes in her article, “Literacy, Voting Rights, and the Citizenship Schools in the South” that “[t]he history of the Citizenship Schools has been seriously neglected in literacy studies; this is unfortunate because we have much to learn about influential U.S. literacy campaigns from other times and other contexts” (481). The work done in the Sea Island schools had a ripple effect and inspired generations of teachers who desired to engage students in deeper, more powerful ways.

Foundational to the philosophy of those who ran the Freedom Schools in Mississippi (the curriculum of which was heavily impacted by the work of teachers in the Sea Island Citizenship Schools) during the summer of 1964 (including SNCC<sup>2</sup> and CORE<sup>3</sup>) was the implementation of reflection in the classroom. Asking students questions about who they were and what they wanted to learn was essential for the success of the classroom experience for coordinators.

Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture), member of SNCC and a teacher at Mississippi Freedom Summer, asked students in his Speech class to question their desire to learn “proper English.” Scholar Stephen Schneider contends that “Carmichael’s class focused students’ attention first and foremost on *the political relationships that Standard American English [SAE] establishes and the tensions between these relationships and the goals of language users*” (63; emphasis added). What I believe is important here is that Carmichael does not ignore the political nature of language – because, as we know, language is not neutral or benign. Instead of obscuring this fact, he brings it to the attention of the students, and he engages their reactions and responses. Carmichael wrote AAVE (African American Vernacular English) phrases on the left side of a chalkboard and SAE phrases on the right side. He asked the students which sentences on the board were correct. When the students almost invariably said that the sentence on the “right” side of the column was the “correct” side, Carmichael would ask them why, and a debate would ensue. According to Schneider, “Carmichael’s opening questions not only opened up the difference between the two sets of sentences *but also highlighted the power accorded ‘correct English’*” (53). Carmichael wanted education for Black students to be empowering and celebratory of the Black experience as well accessible, by underscoring the essentiality of AAVE, a language his students already had direct access to.

Carmichael, along with the other organizers of the schools, was centering knowledges that had *already been developed* by the Black communities he was teaching in. According to scholar Jaclyn Hilberg,

[T]he Freedom Schools participated in the African American tradition of what Shirley Wilson Logan calls “free floating literacy.” Borrowing the term from Ralph Ellison, Logan explains: “African Americans who found themselves in environments that limited their ability to develop English literacy *created their own opportunities to do so*, although the pursuit of other liberties was frequently their primary concern [emphasis added]” (qtd. in Hilberg 283).

The pedagogical work of Black teachers and students is “free-floating” as a response to the *historically limiting* policies of slavery, Jim Crow, and other modernized carceral formations. The “free-floating” nature of Black literacy pedagogies lends itself to *a kind of mobility*, which can perhaps respond to the framing of Blackness in the literacy space as limiting and immobile. Also, this kind of pedagogy *acknowledges* the languages and practices its users *already have access to* and does not foreclose the use and celebration of those languages and practices. This kind of mobile pedagogical work inspires my

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<sup>2</sup> Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

<sup>3</sup> Congress of Racial Equality.

construction of a workshop (introduced in the last few pages of this document) that addresses our ideas about writing, immobility, and race.

In the book *Mobility Work in Composition*, John Scenters-Zapico, professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at California State University, writes that the work (and the people who do the work) done in Composition departments is seen as temporary. As a writing program administrator (WPA), his requests for additional tutors, online equipment and training were not addressed, because, according to Scenters-Zapico, “[t]hey may have imagined that *the ‘needs’ of the University Writing Center (UWC) were temporary and therefore could be ignored*, unlike the need for, say, a medieval literature or accounting professor, since these...are believed to be stable, *part of the enduring landscape of the institution* [emphasis added]...” (59) How does this perception of Composition in educational institutions interact with the instructors and administrators who implement the curricula? Scenters-Zapico contends that “some institutions seem to work very hard to keep us in stasis (per what we can accomplish institutionally), and on the other hand, by keeping us fixed, they can also create frictional working conditions. Stasis becomes the norm” (54). This, according to Scenters-Zapico, runs counter to *movement*. I offer the workshop, again, as a small intervention into this dynamic. (More on this in a moment.)

In the article “(T)racing Race: Mapping Power in Racial Property Across Institutionalized Writing Standards and Urban Literacy Sponsorship Networks,” scholars Jamila Kareem and Khristen L. Scott argue that literacy is a moveable object; it is *property*. They argue that while racialized literacies are rendered *immobile* in the space of the academy / classroom (and in certain life-spaces), literacies read as “white” are *mobile* (and grant “opportunity” in professionalized spaces, like the academy). According to Kareem and Scott, Black literacies are seen as immobile in the space of the academy (and institutions at-large) because “blackness-controlled literacy mobility” has limited support in institutions that recognize the authority of dominant (read: white) literacy mobility (177). Calley Moratta, scholar in the Literacies and Composition program at Utah Valley University, writes that “writing in the university is a White property right” and argues that white supremacy is “maintained” because we view writing as white-owned (164). This reality obviously also has implications for the ways composition instructors (and instructors *in general*) teach and evaluate student writing. On a related note, the notion of Blackness as corporeal (and therefore, in many ways, *immobile*) has been theorized and written about<sup>4</sup> since Blackness became a racial(ized) category. In the article “Languaging 101,” Lucas Corcoran, professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, writes that students with racially marginalized identities, even if they use standardized Englishes (like SAE<sup>5</sup>), do not benefit from its usage as they attempt to move “up a social or professional ladder,” if you will. Because of their status as minoritized students, they “still face profound institutional exclusion based on the perceptions of the white listening subject” (59). Kareem and Scott believe we would do well to understand literacy as something we *have or possess*, rather than simply a thing we *practice* because then we might be better

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<sup>4</sup> A good literary examination of this dynamic is Richard Wright’s *Native Son* or *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine. In non-fiction, refer to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>5</sup> Standardized American English.

able to understand how we *trade literacies controlled by whiteness* for certain social and cultural capital (174).

What I think is useful about workshops—though their employment will not change how literacies controlled by whiteness are valued in institutions—are simply their *mobile* nature. In the article “BuskerFest: The Struggle for Space in Public Rhetorical Education,” scholar Mary Ann Cain writes that the “privatization of public space” makes creating transformative public space difficult and that neo-liberalism evacuates spaces where people can discuss what they need and what their dreams and objectives are (121). I mention this here because workshops can occur in any space, while many classrooms (but not all) exist in institutionally-controlled areas (although we can and should obviously make room for events and happenings in the classroom that disrupt the sometimes siloed-off nature of it). Workshops are temporary, but in this case, its temporal nature is a neutral quality (unlike in composition departments, where according to Scenters-Zapico, funding does not get allocated to its programs due to the perception of composition work as “temporary”). Workshops tend to be collaborative, as participants tend to discuss their own positions and produce their own work inside of it; workshops may be able to incorporate various literacies within it, although the dominant literacy structure will still exist inside of it; and finally, workshops can move from place to place. They can occur at any time and can be implemented in any space. In “Mobility Through Everyday Things,” scholar Ashanka Kumari writes that “Scenters-[Zapico]...moves us to consider *the dynamic nature of events as contingent and emergent*. Mobility work does not assume a stable beginning to events but rather sees them as fluid and able to be transformed. Contingent and emergent events lie on the points of stability that make up complex interactions...mobility work builds on points and positions [emphasis added]” (196). Although the dynamic Kumari describes exists in any space, the space of the workshop is perhaps less burdened by the performance of professionalization, at least in some cases, because it is not quite seen as class or lecture (and because it can happen outside of a formalized educational space altogether) and there is no numerical or letter grade. We know that the rules of engagement are different depending on the space we occupy.<sup>6</sup> The space of the workshop, due mainly to its portability, can invite us to reflect on the different ways we engage writing and academic work depending on the place and can ask us to build spaces that *acknowledge* dominant literacy modes, punitive writing practices typically rooted in anti-Blackness (as described above) and by extension, the political project of governance, as well as creating communities that *respond* to these formations. It may also illuminate the project of making the educational institution into what scholar Timothy Johnson calls a “non-place.” Non-places are areas where “communal action” and “personal positionality” are emptied, and occupants of these areas are rendered solitary and undifferentiated. This allows for *easier supervision, as well as readability*, of the occupants on the part of the institution (Johnson 168). Because, again, workshops are typically seen as at least somewhat less formal than classroom spaces,

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<sup>6</sup> “Mobility work in composition studies—as this collection demonstrates—is intricately tied to physical and perceived realities of place. Our bodies, our composing processes, rhetorical capacities, and identities move from one place to the next, often finding ourselves, discourses, actions, and identities constrained by the perceived appropriate practices of a given site.” (Patrick Danner, “Social Movement Friction and Meaningful Spaces,” Bruce Horner et al., eds., *Mobility Work in Composition* (Utah State University Press, 2021), 189.)



depending on how workshop activities are implemented, participants tend to develop protracted discussions about different topics, generally feeling somewhat comfortable sharing their perspectives – the workshop is most definitely *a place*.

What is also important about workshops is the real-time feedback participants receive from one another. Of course, we receive real-time feedback in plenty of social situations, including the classroom, but because of the mutability of the workshop (regarding content and design), these interactions feel much more organic (though not strictly so) and sometimes pleasurable in that the pressure to share ideas is less controlled by the specter of grade-based assessment and the somewhat informal structure of the workshop allows for more conversational and intimate exchanges between participants. Scenters-Zapico writes that “the complex movement and interaction of *people and objects in mobility* stresses that *each mobility is a distinct enactment*” (61; emphasis added). Because the workshop, unlike the classroom, does not *have* to be regulated by institutional bodies (though the workshop is obviously not free from surveillance or disciplinary motivations), the “distinct enactment” of each workshop is felt more acutely.

Workshops can also help us practice spatial acknowledgement: we can ask, in a workshop, “what are the conditions we set up here?” We can write a response to this prompt and then discuss it. Workshops can help us to look at the *immovability* of literacies controlled by Blackness (an act of acknowledgement), help us to write in more expansive ways (as writing rules tend to be relaxed in the space of the workshop) and collectively meditate on and strategize around formations that impact our ability to take up space in other places (including the “non-space” of the institution). I invite us to imagine writing in the classroom and elsewhere as a ritual practice that can come alive in the form of a workshop, which has a performative and emotive aspect to it and creates “micro moments,” which Mary Ann Cain argues is the place for public space-making.

The “micro moments” that Cain describes are perhaps not more likely to occur in workshops as opposed to classrooms, but the less formal nature of the workshop that I describe below expects such moments, as evidenced by the prompt in the first block of the workshop which asks participants to draw a writing assignment and the final reflective activity. These prompts can encourage participants to make space for moments that express connection and engender “distinct enactments” that allow for intimacy<sup>7</sup> in spaces (like the academy) that often do not encourage these kinds of affective exchanges.

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<sup>7</sup> I have found, for instance, that students sharing drawings they created with others can be an act of vulnerability, which can develop feelings of intimacy in the classroom, while collective reflection prompts can develop feelings of connection among participants.

Breaking Down Boundaries Around the Writing Process (Agenda) (length: 1 hr. 30 min)

1. **Block 1:** “Instruction Writing” activity + discussion (**17 min**)
2. **Block 2:** Close Reading Quotes activity + discussion (**35 min**)
3. **Block 3:** Accessibility Reflection activity + discussion (**25 min**)
4. Reflection Essay (**10 min**)
5. Resources / Wrap-Up (**3 min**)

1. Block 1:

*Draw or describe an inaccessible writing assignment you received.*

**PROMPTS:**

- Describe the language of the writing assignment.
- What was inaccessible about the instruction?
- How could have the writing assignment been clearer / accessible?
- How did the language of the writing assignment directive act as a barrier to your writing process? **5 min to write / draw, 12 min to discuss**

There is *no obligation* to share your drawings or discuss them. If there is silence in the group, this is completely acceptable. ☺

2. Block 2:

*Choose a pair of quotes to analyze. Take five (5) min to read the quotes, fifteen (15) minutes to answer one (1) or two (2) questions about them, and fifteen (15) minutes to discuss.*

Possible Questions to Ask (feel free to develop your own questions):

- Discuss the POV of the text.
- What does each pair of quotes say about the notion of discipline / punishment in the classroom?
- How is “the body” / embodiment examined in these quotes?
- What role does language and writing play in how we view others (according to the quotes)?
- Are there links between the legibility of the body and the “ability” to write? If so, what are they?

Quotes:

**A:** “The killing of Black bodies and spirits is an actual program, practiced by our culture, that results in the ending of their physical life. This *social death* and *social life* is what structures the micro interactions between Black students and their teachers that are situated within the overall society” (Rose 27).

**A2:** “I substitute taught at my old school regularly that year, and I got a reputation for being strict and mean. I learned about my reputation from the librarian who had supervised the yearbook staff that I was a member of just a few short years before. She shared this with me as a

kind of congratulations. Toward the end of the year, the principal even asked if I might be interested in something more permanent. In this way, I was encouraged to take pride in my ability to keep students in line, and to this day I still believe that I was applauded because of my ability to discipline and intimidate more than my ability to teach” (Bartlett 105).

**B:** “These racialized Black bodies are ejected from the active life of the citizen subject—a body that ironically is forced to survive as a social corpse, neither inside nor outside our democratic society. Therefore, ejection of Black bodies from schooling allows them to be stored in surplus to be used later for prison labor, low-wage menial labor work, or as soldiers in the military-industrial complex” (Rose 27).

**B2:** “Furthermore, the increased presence of non-normative bodies in university settings does not necessarily indicate that the habitual scripts are changing along with the demographics. Many teachers, then, find themselves in the difficult position of trying to enact an ‘appropriate’ pedagogical performance with a body that is read, consciously or not, as ‘inappropriate’ in academic contexts. This knee-jerk reading is one of the reasons why viewing teaching and writing as performance is so crucial. A performance lens invites, if not requires, teachers and students to question assumptions about non-normative bodies in academic contexts and beyond” (Bartlett 110).

**C:** The 2020 CCCC Special Committee on Composing a CCCC Statement on Anti-Black Racism and Black Linguistic Justice, Or, Why We Can’t Breathe! contends that

[t]he language of Black students has been monitored, dismissed, demonized—and taught from the positioning that using standard English and academic language means success. Since these terms’ early inception, schools have upheld linguistic ideologies that continue to marginalize Black students. Socially constructed terms like academic language and standard English are rooted in white supremacy, whiteness, and anti-Blackness and contribute to anti-Black policies (e.g., English only) that are codified and enacted to privilege white linguistic and cultural norms while deeming Black Language inferior (“This Ain’t Another Statement!”)

**C2:** “According to researcher Sarah D’Eloia [this was written in 1975 for context], [Students’] decision to enter college and their perseverance in pursuing their degrees indicate *a desire to participate in mainstream American culture*, of which the standard written dialect is clearly a major component. To refuse or to fail to offer students the language competencies necessary for them to hold themselves forth as educated Americans *is to deceive them about what they have obtained in their struggle to complete their educations and to deceive them about their economic and social prospects afterwards* (9; emphasis added).

3. Block 3:

- A. What do you think of when you think about “accessibility”? Take **5 min** to write down keywords. After you make the list of keywords, think about your course assignment guideline language. Is your language / writing accessible?
- B. What presumptions, if any, are you making about the access to digital writing tools your students have? How have your presumptions affected the development of assignment guidelines and directives? How have they impacted your students’ ability to produce work, if at all? Take **5 min** to reflect on this. Discuss A + B as group for **15 min**.
- C. *Further reflection:* Develop an assignment guideline that requires three phases of writing resources – assignment A with the least number of resources required (perhaps an “analog” assignment); assignment B that requires a moderate amount of access (perhaps a computer with internet access) and an assignment (assignment C) that requires the most resources: time, digital writing tools, perhaps travel). Upon completion, think about how these assignments interact with one another and how they might affect the ability of your students to complete them.

4. Reflection Essay / **10 min**

- x What’s one thing that felt confronting or challenging?
- x What are you motivated to practice / implement after this workshop?

5. Resources + Additional Reading<sup>8</sup>

In the first block, I wanted participants to access a memory they themselves had around inaccessible assignment instructions. “Inaccessibility” could be tied to, for example, the *language* of the assignment or the kind / number of *resources required to complete* the assignment. Hopefully, by examining the constructs of assignment instructions, we can begin to identify how the process of writing can be closed off for students.

The quotes I include in the second block address the links between Blackness, punishment, and language. The reason I chose these quotes is to underscore the historical relationship Blackness has with the classroom (institution / state). If, as Ebony Rose, scholar in Educational Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues in quotes A and B that Black people are “ejected from the active life of the citizen-subject,” this necessarily *must* color, for Rose, the interactions between Black

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<sup>8</sup> Here I typically would include resources I’ve cited in the workshop and / or any additional activities, but for our purposes here, this section will serve as an expository space where I expound on the concepts and ideas included in the workshop above.

students and their teachers, because the classroom is a society – and all the things that play out in larger society *can and do* play out in the society of the classroom. Rose goes on to argue in quote B that due to racial capitalism, Black bodies (Rose uses the term “bodies” instead of “people,” I think, to push the point that Black people exist outside citizenship in the U.S.) get “ejected” from school (due often to “disciplinary” reasons) and then *inducted* into low-wage work, the military-industrial complex, and / or the prison system.<sup>9</sup>

In the third block, participants are asked to consider what “accessibility” means to them. I want the participants to think of how accessibility has differential implications / impacts for their students. I include an actionable activity for the final piece of this section, because it is important to me that participants have an idea that they can hold on to as they are interrogating certain pedagogical practices. The third block is followed by a reflection essay, which gives participants time to reflect on their feelings about the workshop. It can also give the facilitator information on successful workshop sections and areas that may need further development.

The pedagogical work of Black literacy teachers like Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson of the Sea Island Citizenship Schools and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC (during Mississippi Freedom Summer) inspire the workshop activities I describe above in that all three educators center questions of access, language, and self-conception and identity in their classrooms. Their work was also *by nature mobile* due to the restrictive social and political environment for Black people in the South during these respective periods.

By implementing a workshop like this in the space of a classroom, instructors can model pedagogies that center the experience of the student – for example, in block one of the workshop, participants are asked to consider their *own* experience with writing assignments, and these experiences are the formative piece of the workshop section – in other words, without participants thinking through their own experience, the section cannot be completed. A workshop block like this imparts to students that their personal knowledge is important in creating responsive pedagogical practices. Throughout the workshop, participants are asked to center their own knowledges and experiences to craft practices that encourage instructors and learners to break down the barriers to learning, like inaccessible writing assignments that center, for instance, standardized language requirements. I argue that the workshop also models portability, or mobility, for students in that due to the less formal nature of the workshop, participants might feel more comfortable employing elements of it outside of the classroom, perhaps in their own social networks. Unlike a formalized classroom “lesson,” which requires “expertise” on the part of the person employing it, a workshop like this, that centers participant experience and knowledge, might seem more accessible (and thereby, *mobile*) by those who

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<sup>9</sup> See: Moriah Balingit, “Racial Disparities in School Discipline are Growing, Federal Data Show,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/racial-disparities-in-school-discipline-are-growing-federal-data-shows/2018/04/24/67b5d2b8-47e4-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/racial-disparities-in-school-discipline-are-growing-federal-data-shows/2018/04/24/67b5d2b8-47e4-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html)) and Eliza Shapiro, “Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/nyregion/school-segregation-new-york.html>.

are typically not seen to have “expertise,” like students. “Breaking down boundaries around the writing process,” as my workshop is titled, may also help us (instructors and students alike) to *break down the barriers to mobility in the writing classroom*, which can foreclose possibilities for social justice in our pedagogies.

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## Out of the Blue

*Christina M. Rau*

*for Ann Hodges*

The thing fell.  
Came straight through the roof  
out of the sky that lies above the sky  
burning up hot and fast  
hotter than those Alabama summer days.

Out there in rural landscape where people live  
as people who help out, take care, and also  
keep to themselves. She laid in her bed,  
minding her own. Meanwhile, the folks

outside as far as Georgia, as far as Mississippi  
caught a red streak, flashing quick.  
The most the residents of Sylacauga worry about:  
the occasional tornado, the off-chance lightning strike.  
This wasn't that. This was a ball of fire racing

in an arc across and then down. Could have been  
an airplane gone wrong. Could have been nuclear.  
From inside the house, could have been the chimney  
giving way, all the dust clouding up. It wasn't.

The thing fell out of the sky, crashed through  
shingle and wood, put a dent in the radio  
console, and grazed her side as she laid there.  
It rested on the floor, smoldering settling down.  
They were familiar with marble, not this kind of thing.

She couldn't sleep after the burn, not for a while,  
too alert, too perplexed, too amazed—  
this piece of universe billions of years old  
now in her possession, now part of her  
body's landscape, now part of her history.

This kind of thing doesn't happen here but it  
happens everywhere all the time. The dust



sparkling for quick moments, the nighttime  
swish of cloud, iron and nickel and silicon  
and oxygen, move through space undetected  
until they hit.

## So What Do the *Indians* Have to Tell Us About Civilization?

David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

Reviewed by Granville Ganter

Aboriginal voice and thought have rarely been taken seriously by Euro-westerners for the past 500 years, and so it is exciting to read a contemporary work of popular history that treats their contributions with such importance. The Big Book of 2021 was David Graeber and David Wengrow's, *The Dawn of Everything*, which challenged the idea that our agricultural civilizations inexorably emerged from hunter-gather simplicity, like a pollywog loses its tail and grows legs. In contrast to such a uniform evolutionary approach, the authors show that over the past 30,000 years (and probably even longer than that) *some* ancient peoples built fully functioning, large scale societies without authoritarian rule or mega-agricultural infrastructure. In their view of the past, Graeber and Wengrow see a variety of sophisticated political forms emerging in humankind's prehistory that are important alternatives to the modern day Nation-State. This argument was indeed *crashing the canon* of scholarly consensus about the necessity of Big Agriculture with evidence taken from indigenous peoples, who have been traditionally derided as mere hunter-gatherers.

The bold and iconoclastic book met with some very complementary reviews for its chutzpah, and also significant opposition. A common complaint is that Graeber's anarchist politics seem too wild for most mainstream academics who feel that the Nation-State is here to stay and thinking about past historical alternatives to it is really a moot point. Before his untimely death last year, Graeber was one of the propagandists of the Occupy movement. Graeber's impatience with the contemporary world order is also evident in much of his writings, such as his 2011 book, *Debt: the First 500 Years*, which argued that modern lending societies arose hand-in-glove with state-sponsored violence.

The second reason why Graeber and Wengrow have generated controversy, however, is the fact that they are thoughtful students of our Native past: they confront a long and bitter history of their fellow intellectuals putting down aboriginal thought and society as *premodern* at best, and not even capable of rating as *civilization* at worst. Seventeenth century western philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, down through Steven Pinker ask us, "*what, after all, can a band of wandering nomads teach us about the complexities of enlightened civil administration? Been there, done that!*" Although most open-minded academics are currently prepared to consider that indigenous peoples *may have* fostered a small tribe-based civil alterity worth learning about, all but a very small minority of mainstream intellectuals feel that early Native societies do NOT have much to teach us about building a better modernity.

Graeber and Wengrow disagree with their peers and marshal substantial evidence to show that thousands of years ago, many civilizations across the world experimented with large scale farming and centralized authority and decided it wasn't a good fit for human beings—even near the basin of Mesopotamia, the alleged birthplace of modern agriculture. They also show that in the Americas, within 100 years of contact with Europeans, Native diplomats had developed a sophisticated critique of European religious intolerance and political theory that they frequently voiced to anyone who would listen. As we know, few Euros did, and this sad and willful exclusionary tradition continues to our present day, often replayed in academic debate.

The principal story that Graeber and Wengrow dispute is the canonical tale that humankind inexorably transformed from hunter-gatherers to large scale farmers from the end of the last Ice Age onwards, from about 25-15,000 years ago to the present. They don't like the assumption that “nothing really happened” until 5000 BC (13). Rather, they show that a stunning variety of political formations characterize the alleged pre-history of humankind as we supplanted (or killed off) rival forms of hominids like the Neanderthals around 40,000 years ago. Sometimes complex egalitarian city organizations followed elite warrior cultures; sometimes the reverse occurred. Sometimes, as Cortes noted in his writing about pre-contact Mexico, Montezuma's royal kingdom existed alongside the completely different republican government of Tlaxcala to the south (332-353).

In some ways, this complex vision of the past shares common ground with other popular histories of human evolution by Jared Diamond and Yuval Harari. Harari's *Sapiens* goes at length to show that the slow emergence of *homo sapiens* was actually a very messy business involving the extinction of a variety of megafauna and, most significantly, a variety of other hominids. Diamond's well received *Guns, Germs and Steel* points out that different human societies of the past were clear responses to the problems of efficiently extracting protein sustenance. Where these authors differ from Graeber and Wengrow—and they are sometimes pilloried in the *Dawn of Everything*—is in their apparent validation of the bigger stories of technological determinism and the world transformation from hunter-gathering to agriculture.

The point of *The Dawn of Everything* is that humankind has been experimenting with radically different social organizations for many thousands of years before the Egyptian pyramids, and afterwards, too. Even during the same historical periods, groups who lived in proximity to each other chose very different social organizations. Graeber and Wengrow note that frequently ancient human groups differentiated themselves from their close neighbors in important ways. In their studies of tribes of the Pacific Northwest, for example, they show that during the same historical period, industrious northern Californian tribes defined themselves against groups to the north who held slaves; the Californians did not; the natives of the Pacific Northwest enjoyed lavish displays of wealth, the Californian tribes preferred to keep their surplus understated (178-208). The anthropological term they borrow from Gregory Bateson is *schismogenesis*, the way neighbors often define themselves in terms of their *differences* from the nearest social Other (57; 174). Style matters: people's technological expertise does not *necessarily* determine what their culture looks like or how it is organized.

Some of the most rewarding parts of *The Dawn of Everything* are the accounts of ancient cities, possibly democratic, that few people besides niche specialists know much about, such as in the Ukraine (Taljanky and Nebelivka); the Indus valley (Mohenjaro-daro and Harappa); and Mongolia (Taosi and Shima). The authors point out some of these cities appear to have had no center and none of the typical evidence of royalty or headmen.

Because the *Dawn of Everything* paints on such a big canvas, the book sometimes feels overstuffed. However, the organization is deliberate: they want to convey a sense of the weird eccentricities of history, its massive scope, and curious backwaters and dead-ends, and they hope that we will not continue buy into a tidy story of uniform human development where *homo sapiens* hunter-gatherers shuffled around in a pre-conscious stupor for 100,000 years, woke up, and started storing grain, and building some Real Civilizations with big buildings.

In their accounts of the early archeology of the Americas, where evidence of human occupation started much later than Africa and Eurasia, possibly about 30,000 years ago, they take us to the political structure of Teotihuacan *before* Montezuma (328-358); the huge city-complexes of Poverty Point, Louisiana, in 1600 BC; and Cahokia (east St. Louis, Missouri). For example, Cahokia, whose activity peaked around 1000 AD, was once a city with over 10,000 people, a size comparable to Boston at the American Revolution. Within a short period of time, it was abandoned and forgotten (apparently with great conviction), leaving only the huge pyramidal mounds of its ceremonial centers. As even Thomas Jefferson points out in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, remains of other Hopewell/Mississippian mound-builder cultures across North America (which still can be seen today from Ohio to Georgia) suggest that *something very different* long preceded the political organization of the eastern woodland Indians who met the Europeans after Columbus. In some cases the North Americans who built these cities did so far earlier than the Classic-era Maya and Inca. They clearly had formidable bureaucratic and technical skills, but the generations of Native societies that followed them *did not choose* to pursue their political example, and flourished nonetheless. Graeber and Wengrow ask us emphatically that perhaps it is less rewarding to look for evidence of the origins of the modern Nation-State than to look for its opposite (362). Some city-states, for example, did not need a bureaucratic elite, such as Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria in 6200 BC.

One of the sources that has provoked considerable controversy in reviews of the book are the words of the Wendat (Huron) chief, Kandiaronk, who played an important role at the end of the Beaver Wars around the Great Lakes in the 1680s and 90s. His words come to us courtesy of Baron Louis-Armand Lahontan, a French officer stationed on the Great Lakes from 1682-92, who knew Kandiaronk, and who published *A Dialogue Between the Author and Adario, a Noted Man Among the Savages* in 1703, a decade after his return to Europe. In this dialogue, a native chief with the pseudonym of “Adario” criticizes French Christianity, legal customs, and sexual mores, asking why the French Jesuits seem to vastly disagree with the disciples of Jesus Christ in other countries. Kandiaronk-Adario also insists that the French suffer from an intolerable state of *unfreedom*. Although the Haudenosaunee/Iroquois and Wendat/Hurons were known to brutally torture their captured

enemies during wartime, they were appalled by the way Euros beat their *own children* with lashes and sticks, cast people in prisons, and whose leaders were otherwise constantly telling them what to do under threat of even *more* punishment. These European behaviors struck them as inhuman. Graeber and Wengrow cite Kandiaronk's words at length to argue that within 100 years of contact, indigenous peoples had developed a solid critique of western Christianity and culture; and Natives clearly understood that their society had much greater freedom and appeal to the human spirit than the culture the Europeans were pushing on them in return.

Scholars have a right to be skeptical of Lahontan's 150-page puppet dialogue, as well as the problems of translation (Wendat to French to English). One is inclined to ask, along with David Bell, *how much of Kandiaronk's actual words are really in these records?* The obvious answer, for persnickety literature scholars, is "not much." But the goal here is not an appreciation of Kandiaronk's turns of phrase, but rather an acknowledgment of the arguments of native thought. Life-long students of Native culture in this area, such as Professor Barbara Mann (whose French-to-English translations Graeber and Wengrow use), know that almost everything Kandiaronk says about indigenous life in Lahontan's text has numerous confirmations in other accounts by Native informants and diplomats of the eastern woodlands: 1) their insistence on the importance of religious toleration; 2) the absence of legal or authoritarian coercion in Native daily life; and 3) most importantly, the *cultivation of a clear-minded attitude of thought and speech*---what Kandiaronk calls "repose of mind" (Lahontan 94; 148-166). From the Native vantage point, European psychology was so twisted by deceit and concealment that it seemed almost beyond repair. The maintenance of a *clear mind* in Haudenosaunee life is emphasized in their cosmology, the origin story of the League of the Longhouse, their condolence rituals, and their diplomatic oratory (Mohawk; Fenton; Ganter). Far from being unique, Kandiaronk's critique of Euroamerican life appears in the diplomatic and religious records kept by almost every European colonizer. These ideals were the glue of Native societies and they explain why many North American tribes were so successful "adopting" Euroamericans, who, after their violent capture, often preferred to remain among the Natives rather than return to a house in a city or to a plot on the frontier, with a grinding job, and a thousand cares and worries. Although reviewers such as Daniel Immerwahr have complained that the high conversion rates of captured Euroamericans by the First Nations have been misrepresented by Graeber and Wengrow, their evidence is formidable no matter how one wants to interpret it (see, for example, Joseph Heard's 1977 dissertation on the topic, pp. 12-14; 57; 299; 310-18; and the work of the mainstream ethnohistorian, James Axtell). While it is always important to ask where a text purporting to be Native words comes from, Graeber and Wengrow have ample reason to assert that Lahontan did not just make this stuff up as Indian *fakelore*---it conveys the Native intellectual position of 100 years' thought.

As Kandiaronk's cultural criticism shows, the great strength of Graeber and Wengrow's argument is that they remind us that *many paths* lead out from our alleged prehistory and it is worth thinking about alternatives to the current world order. Even though mainstream western academics like Francis Fukuyama, Ronald Inglehart, and Steven Pinker keep hawking the claim that Euro-western humankind has finally discovered the Best Possible World---democratic and tolerant social laws and an

individualist, rights-based capitalism—it would seem that such a claim is more like hopeful EuroAmerican propaganda of the past couple hundred years than an argument about what new political forms our future may bring. Aside from talk of the changes to be wrought by impending global catastrophes—300 million years’ worth of oil vaporized by runaway capitalism over the past century and nowhere yet to put our growing piles of atomic waste—ancient Native peoples explored a variety of *usable pasts* we would do well to consider. And the importance of Graeber and Wengrow’s book is that it allows us to see historical evidence of these alternatives.

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## **“Emancipating the Imagination:” A Review of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’ *The Dark Fantastic***

**Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. (NYU Press, 2019).**

**Reviewed** by Stephanie Montalti.

“But are the cartographies of dreams truly universal? When we dream inside the storied worlds of printed and digital books,...television shows, movies, comics, graphic novels, online fandom communities, and fan ‘cons,’ do these worlds offer all kinds of people escape from the world as we know (2)? While fantasy seems the ideal genre for escape and imaginative exploration, Elizabeth Ebony Thomas,’ much-needed, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* considers how the Anglo-American tradition of fantasy marginalizes people of color. She coins the term, the “dark fantastic” to explore the way race affects our abilities to imagine and credits an “imagination gap,” on behalf of adults, for the lack of representation. Focusing specifically on dark girl characters in mainstream media, including Rue in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, Gwen in BBC’s *Merlin*, Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries*, and reimaginings of Hermione in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Thomas argues that these kinds of characters are often trapped in what she calls, the cycle of “the Dark Other.”

Building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory*, Thomas establishes key traits of “the Dark Other,” which takes the form of characters, themes, or shadows in fantasy. Through poetic language, Thomas balances explicit markers in fantasy with more ideological and theoretical presences, like the “shadow” of “the Dark Other.” Trapped in a cycle that casts the “Dark Other” as a spectacle, as violent, and as a haunting, these kinds of characters can only be freed from this cycle by “emancipating the imagination itself” (29). While Thomas devotes some attention to successful forms of emancipatory fantasy, her work serves as a launchpad for further analysis.

Thomas clearly structures Chapters Two – Five through a pattern of personal response, analysis of characters within the cycle of “the Dark Other,” fan and viewer responses, and the implications of counterstorytelling. For example, the greatest strength of Chapter Two, “Lamentations of a Mockingjay: The Hunger Games’ Rue and Racial Innocence in the Dark Fantastic,” is the way Thomas treats Rue as the focalizer of *The Hunger Games*. Imagining Panem through the eyes of “the Dark Other,” Thomas illuminates racial biases in the text and racist reactions to the movie adaptation; Twitter responses critique Amandla Stanberg’s, a multiracial actress, portrayal of Rue. Although the digital world proves cruel, Thomas accentuates the way fandoms and counterstories, such as by Antero Garcia and Marcelle Haddix, liberate dark characters like Rue.

This kind of counter storytelling, on the big screen and on fandom blogs, allows Black girls to be the main characters; Thomas explores the casting of Black actresses for *Merlin*’s rewriting of



Arthurian legend and for *The Vampire Diaries*. One of Thomas' strongest theoretical claims is her proposition for reimagining people of color in fantasy. Her final chapter, "Hermione is Black: A Postscript to Harry Potter and the Crisis of Infinite Dark Fantastic Worlds" builds on E. E. Thomas and A. Stornaiuolo's "Restorying the Self: Bending Toward Textual Justice" to consider how fantasy and dreaming might emancipate the "Dark Other." Some of her examples, gathered from digital counterstories, include staging a storyworld in an alternate time and place, narrating a familiar story through an alternate perspective, telling stories across media, collaborating, and diversifying a character's identity; Thomas transforms the unimaginable into a series of feasible and compelling steps.

Leading by example, *The Dark Fantastic* is a reflection on collaboration and the possibilities of multimedia. Thomas shows immense care and consideration for a history of scholars and authors working within Afrofuturism, fantasy, and Critical Race Theory to examine multiple connotations of "the fantastic;" scholars like Perry Nodelman have criticized children's and young adult scholars for failing to acknowledge critical traditions. Incorporating a diversity of voices to define the "dark fantastic" as both a "genre and social construct," Thomas also studies fan/viewer responses through ethnographic and autoethnographic methods. These viewer responses also take the form of "critical race counterstorytelling," which privileges the voices of people of color to "disrupt" and "challenge normative reality," to borrow Daniella Cook and Adrienne Dixson's vocabulary (10). The use of "I" in Thomas' analyses not only distinguishes her narrative voice, but it also foregrounds the real-world implications of representation in fantasy; she references the Black Lives Matter movements and the Black Girls' Literacy Collective. Lastly, her balance of theory with media analysis is accessible and clearly structured, inviting readers of all backgrounds to enter the realm of the "dark fantastic."

My main critique of Thomas' thesis is that it is predicated on the idea that readers of color may not be able to immerse themselves in fantasy. While Thomas makes a strong claim that characters of color are often ill-represented or trapped in a cycle, she notes that "There has not been much sustained scholarly conversation about how kids and teens of color are affected by their representation in books, movies, comics, and online" (7). I commend Thomas' comparisons between media studies and personal experience; however, this connection is yet to be established. Studies have shown that representation is important to children's interests and relationships to literacy; however, as Thomas explains, this field is under-researched, and more relevant to Thomas' study, it is unclear how youth might respond to representation in fantasy. Fantasy literature often obscures the racial traits of characters, as Thomas notes in reference to Collins' Katniss, and invites readers to fill in descriptive details through purposeful ambiguity. A longer study could investigate youth responses through qualitative analysis, and could differentiate these responses by genre. In addition, Thomas opens doors for more comparisons between books, blogs, social media, movies, and television shows; I specifically am curious about the differences between these forms under the umbrella of multimodal analysis.

Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination From Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* is a valuable contribution to young adult literature, fantasy studies, and race studies. Thomas underplays her own contributions to literary and media studies and her works' relevance to education.

Not only are her theoretical conclusions enlightening, but her methodological choices and selections of media are original. I imagine more studies to consider how mainstream fantasy represents characters of color and more examples of liberated dark characters. By bringing fandoms, blogs, and popular movies to the forefront of critical scholarship, Thomas also implicitly challenges the notion of a youth literature canon. I know that my own re-readings of popular literature will forever be enhanced by Thomas' terminology and I am optimistic that reading fantasy through race will garner as much necessary attention as Thomas' sampling of mainstream media.

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