Reading into Creativity:
New Approaches in Concept and Practice

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. While some open-access journals charge a publication fee for authors to submit, *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal that is accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions that offer theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

For more information and to submit manuscripts, please visit www.journaldialogue.org or email the editors, A. S. CohenMiller, Editor-in-Chief, or Kurt Depner, Managing Editor at editors@journaldialogue.org.

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Embracing Changes and Creativity in Popular Culture and Pedagogy

The triumph of life is expressed by creation - Henri Bergson

Everyday we confront changes and find ways to adapt and thrive. In our fifth year of publication, we at *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are entering a new phase, one where we are embracing change and adapting to better serve the growing communities interested in popular culture and pedagogy. These changes affect not only those working for *Dialogue* but the audiences that engage with us: you all are part of the larger *Dialogue* community.

Thus, before introducing this issue, we would like to let you know about three major changes you will notice. First, to allow for a quicker peer review process and publication, we are moving our publication schedules from one or two large issues a year, to publishing smaller issues three times a year. Articles are regularly indexed in Google Scholar and available on Academia.edu, making each author's work more accessible and useful for a wide audience.

Second, in order to better promote scholarship at the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy, we are happy to introduce *Musings on Pedagogy and Practice,* a new blog, which will feature posts throughout the year. In these posts, we want to hear about your teaching with popular culture, how you are using popular culture texts to promote understanding, to reach your students or colleagues. How have you been challenged in your pedagogical practice? What did you expect to work but found hiccups in implementing? We want to hear the stories and your suggestions for others. While much pedagogical practice takes place within a traditional classroom, we also encourage you to write about informal learning environments or theoretical essays at the broadly defined intersection of pedagogy and practice.

Third, we have grown our editorial staff. We would like to introduce you to our growing *Dialogue* community including the following people:

- Rob Galin, Copy Editor
- Kelli Bippert, Educational Resources Editor
- Karina Vado, Book Review Editor
- Assem Amantay, Assistant Editor

In addition to the expansion of our editorial board, we have seen a tremendous growth in our number of peer reviewers, who you can find listed in the Advisory & Editorial Board. If you are not yet a reviewer, but are interested in becoming one, please reach out to us.

Just as there have been changes that have supported expanding the reach of *Dialogue*, we are pleased to announce the newest publication, volume 5, issue 2 in which we have brought together articles on creativity and the ways in which they bring together new approaches in concept and practice for popular culture pedagogy.

Marijel "Maggie" Melo and Antonnet Johnson present an insightful new approach to teaching technical writing for college students that supports students' knowledges and diverse background. In their article, Melo and Johnson describe their project-based, experiential learning assignment where students developed and led the class through an "escape room." As such, the authors deconstruct the assignment, explaining how students demonstrated "embodied learning" and collaboration, focusing on technical communication for different audiences. Then adding to new approaches, Julie Stewart, Tom Clark, and Marilyn Clark use a provocative episode of *South Park* to spark discussion about literary analysis. Using such an approach, they discuss how they worked to engage first generation students in visual culture and media studies.

In addition to creative new approaches within the classroom, others examined ways to work with students and teachers to teach diversity including awareness, relatability, and understanding of others. In their study, Marcos Atuna, Janis Harmon, Roxanne Henkin, Karen Wood, and Kyle Kester examine perceptions of secondary school students and future high school teachers to the Stonewall Awards, which honor literature highlighting the LGBTQ experience, and found ways to promote diversity "for developing deeper understandings of others."

Lastly, Hannah Ianniello writes about a new perspective within literature about jazz, specifically focused on Rafi Zabor's, *The Bear Comes Home.* She discusses the spectrum of views from the development of jazz as solitary, as collaborative, and as violent. Drawing on concepts of insider-outsiderness and identity, Ianniello provides new insight into the depiction of music-making.

Across these four articles, the authors have challenged us to think about teaching, learning, and creativity with new approaches. We see these articles and the newest changes at *Dialogue* as a step towards further embracing emerging works in popular culture and pedagogy. We hope you enjoy these articles and consider expanding your participation in the *Dialogue* community.

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Teaching Technical Writing through Designing and Running Escape Rooms

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ABSTRACT

While many instructors recognize how the integration of popular culture and student interests can enhance student engagement and learning, this pedagogical approach remains rare in technical writing courses. In this article, we provide an end-to-end outline of an escape room project assigned to junior and senior level undergraduates, including an overview of our pedagogical rationale, institutional context, instructional materials, and synthesis of work produced by students. By collaborating on a range of technical documentation, students learn through experience that can be leveraged beyond the classroom and in their professional pursuits. Moreover, we aim to provide teachers with an example of how they might develop and support non-traditional approaches to technical writing in ways that integrate possibilities for embodied learning, experiential knowledge development, and creative, critical thinking without compromising complexity or rigor.

Keywords: Technical communication, technical writing, project-based learning, experiential learning, popular culture, escape rooms, critical pedagogy

What do *Harry Potter*, a deserted island, or a space station have to do with the teaching of technical communication? These themes emerged from a collaborative project in which students designed and ran escape rooms. An escape room is "a live-action team-based game where players discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in one or more rooms in order to accomplish a specific goal (usually escaping from the room) in a limited amount of time" (Nicholson 2015). For example, a zombie apocalypse themed escape room could require teams to find a vaccine in order to save the human species. To fulfill this objective (and escape), participants must solve a series of puzzles to unlock doors and locate the clues that ultimately lead them to the vaccine. In this paper, we deconstruct the "escape room" as a user-driven experience founded on the successful development and execution of technical documentation. In addition to providing an overview of the assignment prompt, related lesson plans, and technical documentation created from this project, we show how such work facilitates embodied learning, encourages collaboration, and brings notions of composing for an audience to life. Moreover, we argue that this project makes visible the presence of professional and technical communication in unexpected places and values student knowledges and strengths by creating space for engaging with multiple composing practices.

In this article, we provide an end-to-end account of the development and overall execution of this technical writing project. Before delving into the assignment specifics, we outline the pedagogical rationale undergirding our approach. To further contextualize this project, we outline the course and its objectives, and briefly discuss the student population at our institution (University of Arizona). We then provide an overview of the escape room assignment requirements, the resources and funding that facilitated the project, and the deliverables produced for this project. After introducing the project details, we discuss a team's escape room project to illustrate the assignment's manifestation in student work. We end this article on the topic of assessment and ways to move forward with assignment best practices and challenges in mind. Ultimately, we hope this article serves as a resource for other instructors to use or leverage in their technical writing courses.

Why escape rooms?

While the study of popular culture or popular texts in the classroom may be more common than a few decades ago, professional and technical writing courses engage with such texts infrequently (aside from case studies emerging from accessible examples). Historical binaries aligning popular culture to "low" culture are likely still at work, undergirding cultural understanding of technical communication as necessarily dry, plain, and serious—writing done in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The connection between popular culture and technical communication is also perhaps less obvious to instructors, students, and practitioners. However, the increased student engagement that often comes with integrating popular culture led us to brainstorming ways of developing a project that would simultaneously allow students to draw from personal interests, build on technical communication concepts through practice, and develop project management skills. Escape rooms are not the only means by which this work can be done, but as a burgeoning cultural trend focused on creating an immersive, user-centered experience, they connect well with key concepts in technical communication (Hagerty).

At face value the thought of designing and running an escape room for a technical writing class may seem odd (students expressed this sentiment candidly at the beginning of the project). However, students quickly learned to connect the complexities surrounding the design of an effective escape room to its technical documentation. An escape room, as described to students, embodies the coming together of effectively written technical documentation. From the development of puzzles to the careful staging of props and materials in a room, every detail of the escape room is accounted for and deliberate. Throughout this experience, students further developed their skills writing documents such as proposals, technical instructions, process mapping, and usability tests. The growing popularity and prevalence of escape rooms across the country allowed this assignment to be both generative (in terms of re-envisioning technical documentation) and helped students

cultivate personal interest and relevance by embracing creative processes.

As teachers, we see ourselves as facilitators of student learning and work to disrupt traditional teacher-student power dynamics. We work to foster opportunities for students to better see the connection between concepts and practices by engaging in experiential learning. It's through the students' experience collaborating, troubleshooting, and designing technical instructions that foundational concepts such as usability, design thinking, and audience awareness come to life. Moreover, when taking on supportive, facilitative roles by decentralizing our positions as the main source of learning, we leave space for students to choose meaningful learning experiences that they could further cultivate in their professional, personal, and academic lives (Dewey 39). Students build from their own knowledges, exchange their ideas, make their own decisions about when and what assistance is needed, and articulate and clarify concerns about their responsibilities within the project. Students even select and negotiate individual roles within the team, which are used to assess their work. Particularly through the adoption of different roles within the group, this project embraces the idea that each student is an embodied actor, "a culturally shaped agent who performs in different sites and from varying statuses" (Henry 19). Such experiences, as Dewey contends, provide students with skills to leverage in their future endeavors (6).

Making work relevant to the personal and/or professional pursuits of students is one of the more challenging aspects of teaching, generally, and these decision-making processes can illuminate those connections for students. Instructors have successfully created professional relevance in technical communication courses by adding field-related components to specific assignments. Thus, assignments are adapted to each student's future profession or industry through research. For instance, students have conducted genre analyses of technical writing examples from within their field, or have applied technical writing principles and concepts to the development of audience-targeted guides to their profession. Certainly such assignments are valuable means of creating relevance for the professional lives and interests of students and can be used to strengthen disciplinary knowledge in addition to teaching technical communication. However, in our experience, they make it challenging for students to move away from an over-emphasis on being 'correct' in the instructor's eyes. Formal education is, to some degree, responsible for this; children quickly learn that there are correct and incorrect answers, that doing well is not about creativity or complication, but about abiding by the rules and stipulations of educational institutions (and the society it reflects and (re)produces).

As rhetoric and composition scholars, our approach to teaching technical communication often draws from scholarship that troubles the distinction between language and experience. We approach technical communication with the belief that "to experience is to craft experience symbolically, that things are what we make them because we manipulate strategies of understanding and meaning, that is, we act rhetorically" (Brummett, "Preface" xvii). James A. Berlin's influential work on social-epistemic rhetoric and ideology also draws attention to the way language structures experiences, arguing that "language never acts as a referent to an external, extralinguistically verifiable thing-in-itself" (Berlin 92). As pedagogues, we are often immersed in environments where the complexities of language are a given. The escape room project affords students the chance to witness how users experience their writing, an aspect of the assignment that students found particularly valuable and that also moved the project's focus to real end-users. Ultimately, the escape room assignment allows students to see first-hand that communication *is* experience.

Technical Communication at the University of Arizona

To help contextualize this assignment, we will first provide a brief overview of the course, learning objectives, and student population. Often taken by a range of students—mostly in the sciences—to fulfill a professional, technical, or upper-division writing requirement, Technical Writing at the University of Arizona regularly reaches maximum enrollment in both fall and spring semesters. At some institutions, Technical Communication courses are taught by instructors in a given college or program (e.g., Engineering instructors

teaching technical communication specific to their field); however, at the University of Arizona (UA), professional and technical writing courses are within the Writing Program.

One of the primary markers of this course is its diverse student population. A majority of the students who take this course are juniors and seniors whose majors typically fall within the following UA colleges: College of Medicine, College of Engineering, College of Science, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and College of Public Health. The population mirrors and reproduces the association between technical writing and STEM. However, at the UA, Technical Communication is not offered as a discipline-based course. That is, there are no sections of the course dedicated to serving students in particular colleges or programs (e.g., Technical Communication for Engineers); so, the curricular foci are intended to be applicable to the diverse population of students enrolled.

The overarching goal of the course is to prepare students for conducting additional research and writing in future technical settings. The curriculum emphasizes a rhetorical framework for communication in order to help students learn to make critically aware choices about writing, design, and speaking based on context, purpose, and audience. Such work includes consideration of multiple modes of communication. Much like other composition courses, students can demonstrate understanding of audience-based consideration, but their engagement with choices related to audiences—or users—often falls flat because it relies on imagined audiences. Students are also well aware that their writing will not go beyond their peers and instructors. Other project-based components like service-learning in which students partner with local organizations to develop needed technical documents are often more successful because the guidelines are stipulated by a real audience/client.

Assignment Development and Description

The escape room project addresses some of the aforementioned issues. Students were presented with a project overview as well as a list of five project roles (each with designated responsibilities and deliverables) and a list of deliverables to which all members of the team were required to contribute (see Appendix A). As a team, their first collaborative effort was to reach consensus regarding project role assignments. To do so, they discussed the project roles and responsibilities, individual work styles, their backgrounds, and strengths and weaknesses related to the project. From the project's inception, we knew students would need to attend an escape room as the experience would be key to developing a deeper understanding of their objective as escape room designers and technical communicators. Moreover, working through an escape room together would serve as a team-building experience in which students worked toward a common goal outside of the classroom space[1]. Using their experience as research, in addition to conducting additional research on escape rooms in popular culture, students developed themes for their projects, drafted proposals, and crafted the remainder of the required documentation for their rooms. The keystone, of course, was running the escape rooms. In total, there were nine teams, each comprised of four to five students. With each team allotted two hours for setup, execution, and break down, the escape rooms ran over the course of four days. Teams dedicated a significant amount of their setup time towards meticulously setting up each puzzle. For example, as shown in Image 1, each puzzle was comprised of carefully chosen props.

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1   We partnered with a nearby escape room business, Fox in a Box, and negotiated an educational discount. The company garnered additional exposure to the student population by agreeing to support the project via discounted rates, and the UA Writing Program increased visibility of student-engagement with local organizations. We then sought additional funding through our institution to offset the cost of attendance for students in our classes. We were each awarded a Faculty-Student Interaction grant by the Office of Student Affairs at the UA, which was instrumental to making the project affordable to our students. In hopes to strike a balance between developing students' strengths and providing a challenging and rigorous project, we created this assignment in order to foster both. Allowing students to work from their strengths provided them with an entry point into navigating the complexities associated with developing technical documentation.

Image 1 - Participants solving a puzzle in a "Final Exams" themed escape room

While this project has many strengths, the primary reasons we believe it was a particularly compelling experience are: 1) it demonstrates the connection between professional and technical communication to everyday products and activities by allowing students to move between the foundational written documentation and its implication for products and experiences (e.g., puzzles, anticipating user movement through the room), and 2) more than other collaborative projects we've integrated into previous composition courses, this project provides opportunities for group members to draw on their strengths beyond academic and professional writing[2]. For example, as seen in Image 2, a student leveraged her passion for DIY costume play (cosplay) into the prop making process for her group's *Harry Potter* themed escape room.

Image 2 - A set of wands made of chopsticks and gauze for a *Harry Potter* themed escape room

Of course, the documentation is significant and important, but it serves more as a point of departure for the experience that emerges from it. Because of this, students who are big picture or more visual thinkers—those who might struggle with detailed writing like the budget section—can contribute in ways that value their strengths (e.g., creating props, developing a narrative and theme, creating maps of the space). Additionally, the complexity of this project allows detail-oriented and deadline-driven students to take the reins on project

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2   The project allowed us to strike a balance between developing students' existing strengths and their burgeoning technical writing ability. Composing technical documentation is difficult, thus allowing students the ability to engage with an assignment that both challenges and complements their existing skill sets was critical to us as pedagogues.

management components, such as developing strong file-naming conventions, creating a workflow for the team, and even organizing and documenting team meetings and tasks[3]. Since each component of this project relies so heavily on other pieces, the collaborative processes we witnessed were more engaged and less compartmentalized. That is, none of the projects—despite individual role assignments—manifested as a result of the typical "divide and conquer" approach we often see.

In sum, the assignment facilitates collaborating across majors and course sections, provides opportunities to engage in multiple modes of communication, draws on student interests and strengths to support different backgrounds and ways of learning and knowing, and incorporates writing for a real audience who they know fairly-well (their peers!). By culminating in participant-based experiences (i.e., the escape room events), this project also makes visible the ways technical documentation functions by showing that technical documentation *does* something: structures and influences many of the objects and spaces with which we interact every day. In the following section, we illustrate these benefits with detailed discussion of an example project.

"Man of Mystery: A Serial Killer Escape Room"

As mentioned, students chose a variety of escape room themes such as *Harry Potter*, a space station, and a deserted island. In this section, we focus on an escape room experience that was inspired by the numerous clown-related crimes cropping up throughout the United States in 2016. The project team based their narrative on a killer clown who captured a group of bystanders (i.e. escape room participants) and locked them in an undisclosed location (the *iSpace*). Each project member set up the room with technical documentation in hand. The project team, like the other teams in this unit, produced a robust set of documents to guide the end-to-end development and execution of their escape room. From the very beginning (brainstorming stages) to the end (after the project team takes down and cleans up the room), students designed their technical documentation to assist them with the execution of their escape room. The "Man of Mystery: A Serial Killer Escape Room" used several documents to set up their room. For instance, they created a digital bird's eye view of the *iSpace* to indicate the location of puzzles, hints, and major props. This helped streamline the setup process for the escape room by providing all team members with a user-friendly visual reference.

Once the room was set up, the group grabbed a few other documents: the rules for the escape room, and an introductory welcome spiel to orient participants to the experience. The user-driven experience (i.e., escape room) commenced with a short, opening video introducing the theme. The killer clown greeted participants via live stream: "You have one hour to escape alive." Creating urgency for participants to escape, he ended the video by stabbing an inflated balloon with a butcher knife as the live stream concluded and circus music eerily filled the dim, red-lit room. As seen in Image 3, participants tentatively navigated the abandoned carnival amidst a sea of inflated balloons, streamers, and other circus paraphernalia, as the project team made their way to a backroom.

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3   The examples given are not intended to imply that these are the only two types of learners nor that these skills are mutually exclusive. Rather, we merely aim to illustrate with some examples how the project leverages the ways of learning and individual strengths of a variety of students.

Image 3 - Participants arriving into the "Man of Mystery: A Serial Killer Escape Room"

As the team watched the participants via camera, they laid out their hints, puzzle technical instructions, and a small pile of blank printer paper to write ad hoc hints for participants. As time elapsed, clown images appeared on the *iSpace*'s video wall, reminding participants to be mindful of time (e.g. "You have 45 minutes left") or offering puzzle hints.

These examples demonstrate multiple compositions (visual, audio-visual, textual). Moreover, while the technical documents work together, the complexity of the project's many aspects required students to draft documentation with specific *and* multiple audiences in mind. In the documentation mentioned above, the map was used primarily by their team during event setup; the rules were used by both team members (who read them aloud) and by participants (who were expected to fully understand them upon delivery), and the were given to participants when stuck on a puzzle. As the hour had nearly elapsed, the clown emerged from the back room with a last clue for participants—a key to unlock a box with a blacklight flashlight. They hurriedly tried to decode the black-lit numbers lining the walls, but unable to work quickly enough, their fates were sealed. Appearing once more, the killer clown, claiming his new set of victims, exclaimed, "You've failed to escape."

The project team turned the lights on, and both participants and organizers erupted with laughter and questions about solving the challenging puzzles. The project team ended the night by taking photos of the escape room to include in their project summary—a document that introduces their team's portfolio of technical documentation for the assignment. From the inception to the actual execution of their escape room, the project team was able to use their technical documentation as a workflow to guide them throughout the unit.

This project team's escape room exemplifies one of the major strengths of this project assignment: the connection of professional and technical communication to everyday products and activities. This escape room wasn't *based on* technical documentation; rather, the escape room experience and the technical documentation were one and the same. The escape room as an "everyday" popular experience proved to be the compilation of technical documents working together. The "Man of Mystery: A Serial Killer Escape Room" team was deliberate with the decisions and details of their room. From the specific number of balloons in the room (48 total) to the labeling of each drawer on a library's card catalog, each element of the escape room was envisioned with a specific function to fulfill. The latter was evident, as we observed the team run their escape from the beginning to the end.

Project Assessment

Because anxieties about grades are often distracting, they may interfere with student engagement. This is particularly apparent when students are being asked to engage in new processes or projects; concerns about doing well often overshadow the creative possibilities. Anticipating this, we were as transparent and attentive as possible when it came to how these projects would be assessed. This process included developing and introducing detailed rubrics when the assignment was first introduced. The assignment sheet, as mentioned, goes over the project roles and the deliverables required per role, while the rubric breaks down and assigns a numerical value to the deliverables and other responsibilities each project member takes on (see Appendix B for an example). As mentioned earlier, students self-selected and agreed upon the distribution of project roles outlined on the assignment sheet: user-experience design manager (escape room video narration emphasis), user-experience design manager (escape room theming emphasis), project manager, deliverables specialist, and logistics manager. Starting with self-selection, we felt, was important because it allowed students to reflect on their skillsets, interests, and weaknesses prior to placing them into project teams; once in teams, coming to an agreement regarding roles and responsibilities required articulating their rationale for selecting specific roles as well as required the flexibility to think in terms of the overall strength of the group.

In hopes of mitigating concerns about equal workload and productivity within the group, we assessed both individual and collaborative work. That is, for each project member's role, we designed a rubric (five total) with 70 points allotted to individual contributions and 30 points allocated to the escape room experience (please refer to Appendix B). The rubric is partitioned into three main headers: "Escape Room Execution" (30 points), "Puzzle Technical Documentation" (10 points), and section specific to their chosen role (60 points). Because the assignment required several documents, the rubrics also featured due dates for each deliverable and were referenced several times throughout the unit. Referring back to the rubric at different stages provided opportunities for students to gain clarification and reinforced our assessment criteria.

Success in this project requires team members to work together—even if assessed individually. We were careful with the design of the project roles and their respective rubrics because we did not want to inadvertently encourage the development of a disjointed escape room experience. To successfully execute the responsibilities of a given position, each individual was required to work closely with other team members. For example, in order for the deliverables specialist to complete the project proposal, they needed to consult team members regarding the escape room theme, puzzle ideas, and research.

The rubrics were an important aspect of this assignment because they allowed dialogue surrounding grading to emerge throughout the unit. As much as possible we leveraged rubrics to lessen the mystique and uncertainty of grades. We encouraged students to iteratively re-do their work throughout the unit if they were unsatisfied with how they scored in a certain part of the rubric. While grading for major assignments conventionally happens at the end of the assignment (and often around the final product created), the grading was ongoing and was frequently communicated to students with feedback. By the time the unit ended, much of the rubric was complete—an added perk for instructors who are usually left with a pile of assignments to grade at the end of a project.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

We solicited feedback on the project during an in-class large group debriefing, which occurred at our first class meeting after they ran their escape rooms. Additionally, we conducted individual exit interviews to gather more specific feedback and offer opportunities for students who may not feel comfortable sharing in a large group to speak about their experiences. Moreover, dedicating time to hearing and engaging student feedback regarding the assignment demonstrates the value of student knowledges in ways that disrupt the banking concept of education. Students were also able to discuss (privately) any issues they had with group members during the project.

Our students valued the opportunity to engage in a fun, creative, and unique project in our classes. This was unsurprising given the level of commitment, dedication, and engagement we witnessed throughout the project. One student expressed frustration with seeing the connection between the work we were doing and the concept of technical communication, but several other students rebutted that concern by expressing the parallels they saw and by advocating for the project to continue in future courses. The greatest limitations to this kind of project are costs: additional time for instructors and students to meet beyond scheduled classes for running the rooms, locating and scheduling space for the rooms, time spent crowd-sourcing or crafting materials for the room or money spent purchasing them, and the financial cost of attending escape rooms for foundational introduction to the assignment. Despite these potential obstacles, we believe the benefits far outweigh the challenges. When we asked our students directly whether this project should be assigned in future courses (with revisions based on feedback from them) or whether we should discontinue it, only one student suggested scrapping it. More powerful than the number of students who were strongly in favor of the assignment was the fact that no students failed to respond.

We understand that unique challenges may arise in different institutional contexts, but we encourage the blending of popular culture and critical pedagogy in the technical writing classroom. Pushing against the notion that technical communication is solely utilized in—and reserved for—environments considered "serious" opens the door for more innovative, interdisciplinary course projects. Such projects, by expanding traditionally valued notions of composition and technical communication, encourage the kind of creative thinking and collaboration that happens across departments and organizations in industry. Thus, we hope that by sharing our pedagogical rationales and our experiences with teaching technical communication through the escape room project, we encourage instructors to work together and think creatively about approaching technical communication from a perspective that appreciates its complexity and nuance.

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APPENDIX A: ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW AND ROLES

Unit III: Technical Documentation to Support a User-Driven Experience

Project Overview

For this project, you will work collaboratively to research, design, construct, and run an escape room experience. An escape room is "a physical adventure game in which players are locked in a **room** and have to use elements of the **room** to solve a series of puzzles and **escape** within a set time limit"[4]. Part of this process entails writing and compiling the escape room's accompanying technical documentation (detailed below). Because this project has many components, you will negotiate and select roles for each team member based on the descriptions below. If you are in a team of four instead of five, we will negotiate how to divide the responsibilities.

Logistics/Operations Manager	
Responsibilities	**Deliverables**
• Plans and manages logistical/operational components of the escape room. • Ensures safety and protection of users and space (this isn't legal liability; it's just being thoughtful about the implementation) • Serves as operational expert in terms of developing the puzzles in accordance to the space. This means taking responsibility for materials needed and space required for the puzzles (in context of the iSpace).	• Conducts and shares research on escape rooms with team (a document that synthesizes sources and information on escape rooms). • Writes and delivers the introductory script/spiel to participants. • Create the rules for escape room attendees (conduct, moving things, materials that are off limits, etc.)

User Experience Managers (Two per team)	
Responsibilities	**Deliverables**
• Develops overarching narrative/story of the escape room • Integrates escape room theme across deliverables (e.g., puzzles, props, video, etc.) • Ensures puzzles and escape room follows a storyline trajectory (clear beginning, middle, and end)	• Storylines, films, edits, and renders narrative video (no longer than 90 seconds in length) to be shown to participants • Develops layout/plan of the escape room (works with logistics) and creates map of escape room with locations of puzzles and props clearly illustrated • Outlines intended sensory experiences (props, music, lighting, etc.). Consider, for example, how you will bring your theme to life through these elements.

Deliverables Specialist	
Responsibilities	**Deliverables**

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4   From "Escape Room" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escape_room

• Organizes team's documentation/deliverables (e.g. Google drive folder) • Stores all documentation in a central location for team and instructor to view and access • Streamlines all documents to ensure consistency in branding and formatting	• Writes project proposal • Compiles all team documentation into a well-organized, easy-to-navigate final project portfolio • Creates a technical document template and formats all documentation accordingly • Prepares team documentation (including project manager's project summary) into a project portfolio.

Project Manager	
Responsibilities	**Deliverables**
• Oversees team communications, meetings (agendas and notes), and deadlines • Reports any problems and provides project status updates • Discerns how to acquire props and materials (budget)	• Writes project overview/summary • Creates meeting agendas and records meeting minutes during team meetings • Records workflow and team assignments through a project management program (e.g. Trello, Asana, etc.) • Conducts and completes needs assessment form on behalf of their project team

Team deliverables:

- Technical documentation for each puzzle (description of puzzle, solution, estimated time to solve, number of participants required to solve, associated hint(s), and any relevant visuals). Teams will be responsible for the creation of 4 - 5 puzzles.
- List of materials needed from iSpace/Library for day of event. Your group is responsible for conducting research on the materials/resources offered and available.

Due: Teams will be running their escape rooms on either December 5th or 6th.

All deliverables will be submitted before 11:59 PM on 12/6.

Student: Assessment Rubric   English 308, MELO

UNIT III: User-Driven Experiences – Designing and Running an Escape Room
Deliverables Specialist

	Excellent	Good	Needs Improvement	Unacceptable
Escape Room Execution (Collaboratively Assessed) (30 total)				
Escape room experience is immersive—does not require team intervention, participants have a clear understanding of how to interact within the escape room.	10	8	6	0
Project team seamlessly executes the escape room experience within the room (e.g. if a team member is an actor in the room) and behind the scenes (i.e. giving hints); escape room is set up, executed, and taken down within 2-hour time frame.	10	8	6	0
Conducted usability testing (dry run of the puzzles); made changes to puzzles in accordance to feedback received	10	8	6	0
Puzzle Technical Documentation (Individually Assessed) (10 total)				
Puzzle is presented as technical documentation (i.e. think of the technical instructions created during unit 1)	3	2	1	0
The puzzle technical instructions are presented/formatted on the team's template	3	2	1	0
Technical documentation utilizes conventions of successful instructional documents (i.e. reference the Unit I rubric for guidelines)	4	3	2	0
Deliverables Specialist (Individually Assessed) (60 total)				
Creates project proposal for escape room; includes key headers: • Summarize the project to include description of theme, plans for creating event, and which team members are taking on which roles • Identify the primary theme and narrative • Identify the location, space, and time of the event • Identify a timeline for the project • Identify materials and props needed	20	15	10	0
Collects all project documentation and organizes it into a project portfolio (save as PDF) that includes a cover page, table of contents, page numbers, headers; it is easy to navigate.	15	12	9	0
All documents are streamlined on the team's template and stored in a central location (Google Drive folder) for team to access	15	12	9	0
Creates and distributes a template for team to use for puzzle technical instructions and for other team documents	10	8	6	0
			GRAND TOTAL:	

Deconstructing *Proper Condom Use* as an Introduction to Literary Analysis[1]

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture figures in television, movies, comics, and video games have captured the imaginations of young people. The themes and characters of shows students watch regularly help shape their views on contemporary issues, especially as they compare their personal experiences with those portrayed on their favorite shows. This paper examines how Proper Condom Use, an episode of South Park, one of the most popular shows among young viewers, can be used as a springboard for in-class discussion of tools for literary analysis through an exposition of this episode's visual and aural humor, themes, characters, audience, and genre.

Our experience in exploring this episode with adult students confirms it is an excellent way of generating lively feedback, while also introducing students to concepts relevant literary analysis, including imagery, character, theme, genre, and audience.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Visual Culture; Media Studies; South Park; Literary Analysis; First Generation Students

Popular culture figures in television, movies, comics, video games and online videos have captured the imaginations of young people. The themes and characters of shows students watch regularly help shape their views on contemporary issues, especially as they compare their experiences with those portrayed on their favorite shows (Duff, 2002). Lisa Patel Stevens (2001) points out that it helps to create student engagement to use non-print materials as pedagogical artifacts as students regularly engage in dynamic multiliteracies through their personal media choices, the content of which constitutes part of their conversations with fellow students.

This paper demonstrates how we organize a class employing an episode from *South Park, Proper Condom Use*, (Parker & Stone, 2001) to introduce topics relevant to literary analysis as a platform for using similar frames in analyzing more complex media, in this case, classic short stories. Specifically, it describes an early in-class exercise designed to generate class discussion in weekend and evening classes at a Midwestern college.

These classes are populated largely by diverse adult students in their late twenties or early thirties, typically parents, pursuing associate degrees on a part time basis, including many who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. Some are enrolled in this class because it is a degree requirement, not out of a desire to read literature, which is perceived as an elite activity with little relevance to their own lives and aspirations.

Our challenge is to bridge that gap—to show students that the tools of literary analysis are accessible to them by introducing analytical literary frames in a novel way. In a sense, we begin with what Dwight McDonald (1962) would characterize as a "mass culture" artifact, an episode of *South Park,* as a bridge to more "high culture" short stories traditionally explored in literature classes. We especially focus demonstrating the importance of providing specific textual evidence to support arguments in analyzing short stories.

Our experience in exploring this episode with adult students--nearly all of whom report having seen one or more episodes of *South Park*, Comedy Central's most watched show—especially popular among the 18-49 age group, confirms it is an excellent way of generating lively feedback, while also introducing students to literary analysis tools, including imagery, character, theme, genre, and audience. (See Hull (2003); Stewart (2007); Vasudevan (2010). This exercise takes 60 - 75 minutes to complete, including showing the 22-minute episode.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

To stimulate discussion and establish a premise for later class analysis, prior to viewing the video, we ask students to recall the content and student reactions to sex education classes offered them in junior and senior high school. We then introduce the conflict at the center of *Proper Condom Use* (Parker & Stone, 2001), which concerns how, when, and through what agents sex education should take place. We tell students they will be analyzing *Proper Condom Use* as a literary text. To do so, we pause at intervals to ask them to answer questions about each segment that specifically highlight a means of examining literary texts in ways they will be using in analyzing the short stories we have assigned for subsequent analysis.

In this paper we summarize the plot of the episode, including representative dialogue, show where we stop the video, what questions we raise, and how we use this experience to prepare students for making similar analyses of the short stories they will be reading during the semester.

VISUAL AND AURAL HUMOR

We begin by asking students to identify visual and aural elements, the sights, sounds, colors, vocal inflections and actions (Nixon, 1999) that are key to *South Park's* comedy. In the opening scene Stan and Kyle

are burning a Jennifer Lopez doll with a magnifying glass, during which Stan yells, "Scream for me bitch." Cartman, the most controversial of the main characters, then shows them how to "milk a dog," a technique taught to him by mischievous fifth graders.

> *In-class question:* Specifically describe the sensory elements—what you saw and heard--central this scene. Explain how they highlight the transgressive nature of the children's behavior. As you watch the rest of the episode, consider how the opening scene foreshadows the children's subsequent actions.

> *Parallel analysis*: Read the first four paragraphs of both London's "To Build a Fire" and Crane's "The Open Boat" and explain how the description of colors, weather, and the environment reinforces the naturalistic themes of each story.

CHARACTER

We next introduce the concept of character, or persona, with definitions of protagonist and antagonist, which drive *South Park* stories. We ask students to identify traits of their favorite character and explain the role that character typically plays, including what makes that character interesting. We also ask whether this character is flat, displaying little change within or throughout episodes, or evolving, demonstrating growth and understanding. Students highlight that within the cartoon format of *South Park* characters typically remain largely flat, though they also point out that some characters admit to seeing the error of their ways at a particular episode's end.

> *In-class question:* With which character in *Proper Condom Use* do you most identify? What traits in this character's persona make them likeable, funny, or annoying? Describe actions and words from the episode that support your characterization.

> *Parallel analysis*: Describe Miss Brill's persona at the opening of the story and contrast it with her persona at the end. Cite specific passages that help explain the dramatic change in how she sees the world.

THEMES

Experience vs. Expertise

We show subsequent scenes and ask students to analyze how elements of plot, motivation, tone, and values highlight specific themes within the episode, all of which can be identified in one or another of the short stories we analyze in subsequent classes. For example, a major theme of *South Park* is parodying the reliance on expertise rather than trusting personal experience. When Stan "milks" the dog, and when Randy and Sharon, his parents, observe his behavior, they say they will ground him for 10 months. Yet they cannot bear to speak with Stan about sex: their notions about childhood innocence destroyed, they do not provide age-appropriate information. Instead, they call a PTA meeting, assuming sex education at school is a "safe space" between their children, their children's friends, and MTV--and that with comprehensive sex education, the children will subsequently engage in sexually responsible ways, and not in behaviors that lead to pregnancy and STDs.

> *Principal Victoria:* *Okay, parents. I know a lot of you want a chance to speak, but we have to talk one at a time.*

Sharon: Look, our kids are learning sexual things on the street and on television. There's no way we can stop it. The schools have to teach them sexual education at a younger age.

Principal Victoria: School policy has been to teach sexual education later. In fifth grade.

Mr. Tweek: It isn't soon enough!

Stuart: Yeah. Why, just this afternoon our son was caught beating off our dog.

Chef: Look, parents. Do you really want your children learning about sex? Part of the fun of being a kid is being naïve! Let them be kids for a while.

Ms. Choksondik: Naïve at what cost, Chef? Parents, we have to face facts: Children in America are having sex at younger and younger ages. STD's are affecting younger and younger kids all the time. The only way we can combat that is by educating children before they have sex.

Chef: The first thing that kids learn about sex shouldn't be some bitch-scare tactic about STD's.

Sheila: No, she's right! With all the teen pregnancies that are out today, I think my boy does need to know about sexual education. From the school. (Parker & Stone, 2001),

Students point out that this dialogue represents support for the view that common sense and experience lead to better decision-making than its opposite: relying on so-called experts. The parents forfeit their traditional roles of teaching their children about sex themselves based on their knowledge of their own children's readiness for such information and naively assume the *South Park* school teachers are better agents for this education.

Students volunteer that this proves to be a false assumption. Miss Choksondik, an advocate for teaching sex education to the fourth grade children whom parents may presume has been licensed by the state as an expert in the subject matters she teaches, admits she has had little sexual experience. Chef, who represents the voice of experience and a character who has a reputation for having sex with many women, serves as a foil to this groupthink, asserting, unsuccessfully at this point in the episode, that sex education should not be taught in schools, especially to 8-10 year-old children.

In-class questions: Can you relate to the experience the *South Park* children have when you look back at your reactions to sex education classes you took during your elementary and secondary education? Recall a specific conversation you had with a fellow student about one of your lessons. How did what you learned in the classroom compare with what you had learned from other sources? What were the differences?

Parallel analysis: Explore how the theme of experience vs. expertise is developed in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Why does John fail to understand the impact of his wife's postpartum depression on her feelings, thoughts, and behavior? How does his medical expertise inhibit his ability to come up with a more effective treatment plan? Explore the theme of experience vs. education in Walker's "Everyday Use." Identify the differences in how the mother and her well-educated daughter view the mother's possessions?

Scare tactics and unintended consequences

Another theme students highlight is the ineffectiveness of fear as a way of changing behavior. For example, when Wendy and Bebe indicate they believe the lessons will be fun, Miss Choksondick, responds with "scared straight" rhetoric. *"Fun, you think this is going to be fun! Well, let's start with our first lesson then, shall we? She writes SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES on the blackboard, asserting, That's right, because unless you get boys to wear condoms you can and will get a sexually transmitted disease from them! ...Gonorrhea, herpes, chlamydia, HPV, syphilis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, the list goes on and on* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

This scene satirizes sex education classes. The lessons are inappropriate for this age group: the scare tactics about negative consequences lead to fear of sex rather than a lifelong commitment to responsible sexual behavior, the program's stated purpose. This scene allows for a conversation on the effectiveness of fear appeals in reducing harmful behavior. Many students report having experienced similar fear appeals in high school about sex education, and about smoking, driving and texting, and drug use as well (Stewart, 2007).

A related theme is the role of unintended consequences. In her second presentation on sex education, Miss Choksondik stresses the traumas of pregnancy.

> *Alright girls. Yesterday we went over the myriad of diseases you can get from boys, but today we're going to talk about the most horrible thing they can give you of all. Pregnancy! That's right, since you girls have decided to be sexually active; teen-pregnancy is at an all-time high! You seem to think it's gonna be fun and neat to have a baby, well let's watch a little video shall we?* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

During a video a narrator intones, *"…later the contractions are happening closer together. Mom sure is in a lot of pain. Now we can see the crown of the baby's head, stretching the vaginal walls in ways never before thought possible by Mom. Finally, the miracle happens, and the baby is born. But mom's not done yet! She still has some afterbirth to push out of her"* (Parker & Stone, 2001). This terrifies the girls who later run away from the boys when they meet in the cafeteria.

Students observe the children have too little relevant experience to understand the materials being shared. Having learned about STDs and AIDS, fear replaces friendship, and their reaction is to reject the boys unless they wear condoms.

> **Wendy:** *Stay away from me Stan!*
>
> **Stan:** *Why?*
>
> **Wendy:** *Are you wearing a condom?*
>
> **Stan:** *A what?!?*
>
> **Girls:** *[all screaming loudly] AAAAAAAGGGHHHHHH!*
>
> **Bebe:** *Do any of you have your condoms on?*
>
> **Kyle:** *No.*
>
> **Girls:** *AAAAAAGGHHHHHHHH!*
>
> **Wendy:** *Don't you know that without wearing a condom you could get a disease?*
>
> **Kyle:** *Nun. Uh.*
>
> **Bebe:** *yeah huh. If you don't wear a condom, you're gonna get AIDS!*

> ***Wendy:*** *You guys have to wear condoms. Now, please, just, just go away. We don't want your AIDS.* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

The girls are terrified of having sex--and of boys in general. In response, the boys attempt to buy condoms at a drugstore. While the older pharmacist is hesitant to fulfil this request, his assistant explains, *"Kids are going to do what they do, and it's up to us to make sure they're protected. We just got in the new Gladiators for kids. 'Lil Mini's. They're specially designed for kids under 10, and they're only $5.95 for a box of fifty* (Parker & Stone, 2001)." When the boys attempt to wear the condoms, Butters supplies rubber bands to make the condoms "stay on." He exclaims, "*there isn't nothing' that's getting' in my wiener through this thing! And it's even got a little reservoir at the end so you can pee in it!"* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

The teachers find out about the condom purchases and almost gleefully agree to start teaching sex ed. to kindergarten students--oblivious to their part in motivating the girls to fear sex and pregnancy and then insisting that the boys purchase condoms.

These scenes are used to generate conversation about experiences students have had when they believe their voices were not heard at home or in the classroom. Students point out that the children do not seek these remedies. It is the parents who abdicate their responsibility to assess their children's readiness to talk about sex, ask them questions about their experience, or see if the children have questions for them.

Students laugh at the unintended consequences of the sex education program: This spoof of the promotion of sex education from kindergarten through high school results in the boys and girls coming into conflict, each believing the other to be responsible for spreading disease. They skirmish, with the girls protecting themselves behind a steel fortress and the boys, riding in battery operated cars, on the attack, using water guns to break through this defense. In this battle, Kenny, hiding in his jacket, dies, a *South Park* plot convention, when struck by a boomerang. His death shows that the children are not the idealized innocents of their parents' imaginations, another fruitful area for class discussion.

Nonetheless, while ignorant of carnal knowledge, the *South Park* children can be cruel and can experience fear, regret, anxiety, and especially in Kenny's case, be subject to repeated extreme violence—and students can reflect on bullying they experienced in school and the emotional stress it created.

Similarly, some students report that like the *South Park* parents, their parents seemed only dimly aware their children were experiencing negative emotions. This recognition serves as a source of the parents' feelings of inadequacy, resulting in their histrionic outrage and grief over evidence that their children are leaving the Garden and facing uncertain and terrifying consequences which the parents cannot control.

> ***In-class questions:*** Recall how fear appeals were used in school programs about sex, drugs, tobacco, and driving? As you remember student reactions to them, do you recall any unintended consequences, such as students mocking the presenter or the presentation? What did they say and what was the reaction to their comments?
>
> As a series, *South Park* suggests that parents don't really understand what's going on in their children's lives. Do you agree? Explain your answer with reference to your own school experiences, including bullying and being excluded from favored groups.
>
> ***Parallel analysis:*** Identify symbols in Jackson's "The Lottery" that contribute to the imagery the story uses to develop the atmosphere of fear that builds until the story's shocking resolution.
>
> What are the unintended consequences of the grandmother's actions in O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find?* Identify text from the story that supports your analysis.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is another prominent theme of *Proper Condom Use*. When Miss Choksondik and Mr. Mackey have unprotected sex, they are transgressing the lessons they promoted in the classroom. In fact, Miss Choksondick is so desperate for sexual contact, she offers Mr. Mackey a drink, strips naked, lowers her head off-screen, and is later portrayed with disheveled hair. Students point out that his illustrates the limitation of education as a predictor of behavior: while the teachers tell parents that sex education will lead their children to make responsible decisions, the teachers themselves fail to practice what they preach.

> **In-class prompts:** Did you observe teachers or administrators practicing some of the actions the school discouraged in students, such as speeding or smoking? Did this affect your perception of the credibility of what was being taught?
>
> **Parallel analysis:** Identify scenes in "Young Goodman Brown" where the protagonist increasingly grows disillusioned when he discovers the hypocrisy of adults he has known and trusted.

GENRE

We point out that this *South Park* episode, a monolog, which we teach is a convention of satire and burlesque, lampoons the idea that if evil influences are not headed off early, a social apocalypse will occur— and the naive hope that experts can fix all issues children face. The monolog is delivered by Chef, the voice of experience, in which he calls for rationality and truthfulness from parents.

> **Chef:** *Schools are teaching condom use to younger students each day. But sex isn't something that should be taught in textbooks and diagrams. Sex is emotional and spiritual. It needs to be taught by family. I know it can be hard, parents, but if you leave it up to the schools to teach sex, you don't know who they're learning it from. It could be from someone who doesn't know, someone who has a bad opinion of it, or even a complete pervert.*
>
> **Miss Choksondik:** *He's right. I never knew how special and personal sex was until just recently.*
>
> **Sharon:** *This whole mess started because we couldn't talk to our boys ourselves.*
>
> **Sheila:** *It's easier just to leave it up to the school, but it's just not a school subject.*
>
> **Principal Victoria:** *Then it's decided: no more condom classes in grade school.*
>
> **Stan:** *But Chef, when is the right age for us to start having sex?*
>
> **Chef:** *It's very simple, children. The right time to start having sex is…seventeen.*
>
> **Kyle:** *Seventeen?*
>
> **Sheila:** *So you mean seventeen as long as you're in love?*
>
> **Chef:** *Nope, just seventeen.*
>
> **Gerald:** *But what if you're not ready at seventeen?*

> **Chef:** *Seventeen! You're ready!*

> **Stan:** *Well, I guess we got a while to wait before we have to worry about sex and diseases, huh?* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

When the parents see the error of their ways, they show they can reflect on their actions and learn from experience. We point out viewers sympathize with them because they realize their behavior springs from a positive motive to protect their children from future harm, in Kenneth Burke's words, "a comic corrective" which serves as a relief valve from the tensions of the war between the girls and boys.

Consistent with *South Park's* transgressive nature, the episode ends with Cartman again "milking" the dog, indifferent to what he now knows is objectionable to the parents, as he finds it personally gratifying. Students point out this is another indication of a self-absorption and "will to power" that defines his character.

> **Discussion Prompt:** What purpose does the ending monologue, a convention of burlesque and of *South Park*, serve in this episode?

> **Parallel analysis:** Identify specific passages in Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" that reveal to the reader that the story is actually satire.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

After students have viewed the entire episode, we address the issue of audience analysis, asking students to identify what they find compelling in this episode and also how they see it appealing to other viewers (Duff, 2002). Students identify plot elements that support differing value sets. The scriptwriters present a traditional perspective of morality—that parents, not schools, be the primary sex education teachers. Yet they mock conventional moral values by showing characters in highly degrading situations that stretch the limits of what is acceptable on television. Chef presents a secular world view declaring the age seventeen is the right age to have sex--outside of love and marriage. Finally, they reflect a populist perspective that implies gaining carnal knowledge from older adolescents during puberty is preferable to teaching it to elementary school children before they have the experience or physical maturity to understand its role in human society.

> **In-class prompt:** Why do you believe *South Park* resonates so strongly with a young and primarily male audience? What plot elements and devices did you observe in *Proper Condom Use* that this demographic might find particularly amusing?

> **Parallel analysis:** Why do you believe "The Things They Carried" resonates so strongly with military combat veterans? What plot elements and devices did you observe that this demographic might find particularly compelling? Justify your reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Within *South Park's* ecosystem, the children remain ageless, indulging in the pleasures of childhood immaturity. They serve as outsiders, spectators to the futility of parents and others who try to impose adult burdens on them. Students laugh as they learn to identify specific evidence to support their analysis of the unintended consequences of the adults' decisions and share similar stories from their own experience.

Our students report that they like this way of introducing them to basic literary concepts. They also enjoy it because it offers them the opportunity to reflect within a familiar learning space on something they have experienced in their own lives: the use of fear appeals and worst case thinking intended to change young

adult behavior--whether it be warnings about underage and unprotected sex, as in *Proper Condom Use*, or tobacco, alcohol and marijuana abuse as in *South Park* episodes *Butt Out* and *My Future Self 'N' Me*. In short, this exercise allows students to reflect thoughtfully as they share stories about their own school experiences with fear appeals while teachers can introduce literary concepts and how to document claims with specific evidence in an easily understood and relatable format.

ENDNOTE

[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 2017.

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The Stonewall Books: LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Novels as Semiotic Beacons

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ABSTRACT

In a society where the LGBTQ community continues to feel the stings of prejudice and discrimination, a straightforward means of conveying accurate information about LGBTQ student lives is urgently needed. The Stonewall Awards, an annual literary prize for "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience" (American Library Association, 2016), has the potential to serve as an appropriate semiotic beacon for both the acceptance of LGBTQ students as well as LGBTQ self-affirmation. This study investigated the perceptions of secondary school students and future high school teachers toward two Stonewall Award-winning novels. The findings revealed obvious similarities as well as critical differences across reader group perceptions in regard to character actions and reactions to the issues confronting them. The realism (authenticity) and relatability evident in the young adult books used in the study hold implications for serving as fruitful guides for developing deeper understandings of others.

Keywords*: LGBTQ studies, young adult literature, Stonewall Awards, semiotics, realism, relatability, intersectionality

Now is a critical time in the perception of LGBTQ students in schools. With the accelerating advent of gay marriage across the globe, young adults can feel more appreciated as full members of their respective polities. Nevertheless, pejorative campaigns against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals in other civic matters make the case for significant prejudice and discrimination against the LGBTQ community (Kosciw et al., 2012). For today's LGBTQ young adults, this era of change, with all its whirlwind potential for civil rights victory, defeat, and many hazy outcomes in between, is no less frightening than earlier days. Scholars are generally in agreement that LGBTQ-themed young adult literature can serve to diminish the insecurity and fear which LGBTQ students feel in such a troubled world (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Gallo, 2004; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003; Reese, 1998; Vetter, 2010). Many studies have already been conducted on the interactions between LGBTQ-themed literature, reader personal characteristics, and LGBTQ well-being or inclusion (Hoffman, 1993); as well as on the interactions between LGBTQ-themed literature, the school environment, and LGBTQ well-being or inclusion (Friend, 1993; Crocco, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2012). However, in spite of several attempts to broadly characterize LGBTQ-themed young adult literature (Clark & Blackburn, 2014; Bach, 2015; Blackburn, Smith, & Nemeth, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015), we could find little scholarship which concerned itself explicitly with mechanisms for the streamlined dissemination of valuable ideas from these texts. Because young adult novels have the capacity to educate young adults about important social issues (Wolk, 2009), it is important to determine if and to what degree the same is true for LGBTQ-themed young adult novels. All students, teachers, and administrators could benefit from the identification of those features which best convey to new audiences the positive ideas to be found in LGBTQ-themed literature.

Specifically, we contend that literary prizes such as the Stonewall Awards have the potential for effective semiosis on a large societal scale. James English describes literary prizes as "the single best instrument for negotiating between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital" (10). Andrew Ford draws attention to the opposition even in antiquity between the social popularity of literary prize winners and the elite critical opinion of the same (2002). While this may bode poorly for literary prizes which seek to assess the 'artistic merit' of a work, it suggests a greater utility for those literary prizes that wish to establish a firm connection with societal concerns. As such, the recipients of the Stonewall Awards could be of chief import to a community in dire need of positive perception and public relations. To our knowledge, however, there has been very little investigation of the correlation between LGBTQ youth concerns and the content of Stonewall Award-winning young adult novels. Likewise, there do not appear to be any peer-reviewed evaluations of pre-service teacher responses to novels that purport to express aspects of LGBTQ life. Our research therefore focuses on the perceptions of two Stonewall Award-winning books among pre-service teachers and teenaged youth; these populations can provide valuable input on the utility of both this prize and LGBTQ-themed young adult literature in general.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Given our interest in determining if these Stonewall Award-winning novels can "bridge the gap" between LGBTQ populations and sexual majoritarian populations, we choose a framework that purposely cuts across critical difference; evidence of this difference may arise through the course of our research, but we are not making the assumption that it will inherently characterize the events and characters of these novels. As such, special attention should be paid to established conduits of meaning-making, conduits with strong literary and filmic traditions. Bicchieri (2006) has very simply described *norms* as the grammar of social interactions. Queer frameworks are important and helpful in many regards, but we feel that the identification requires a multifarious approach, at least one part of which must take into account the semiotic paradigms encouraging (or not) connections between communities.

We believe that a semiotic – or Peircean representative – approach holds the potential to shed further insights into what can make LGBTQ-themed young adult literature useful in sharing lived LGBTQ truths with a wider audience. The Peircean sign, with its constituent parts of representamen, object, and interpretant, provides the ideal framework to investigate the perceptions of interested readers of LGBTQ-themed young adult literature. According to this framework, a "sign" is a complex of meaning-making relationships (Atkin, 2010). Atkin said that the *representamen* refers to that part of the sign which is most salient for meaning-making, while the *object* refers to that part of the sign which constrains the scope of meaning-making. The *interpretant* is an understanding of the sign which the viewer perceives (Atkin). Peirce elaborated upon the interpretant further, describing immediate, dynamical, and final versions of these (1998). The immediate interpretant is that meaning which was intended to reside in the sign, while the dynamical interpretant refers to the initial reaction of the observer to the sign (Peirce). The final interpretant refers to a cognized/analytical reaction of the observer to the sign. Our survey questions attempt to connect this framework with the readers' experiences of the novels.

This Peircean semiotic framework offers complex hermeneutic and discursive markers, markers which other frameworks do not always necessarily affirm or accept. Chiasson (2002) argues that this framework is helpful in conceiving of educational experiences as both analyzable and interpretable, while also recognizing the potential for meaning-making to be both a solitary and a group process (Smith, 2005). We agree that "signs are relational entities" (Stables and Semetsky, 2014, p. 3); as such, we believe that a semiotic perspective remembers both similarity and difference across experience and meaning-making, thus providing further key insights into this field of research.

Indeed, the evolution and parameters of the Stonewall Book Awards process evinces the desire of its founders to serve as a "relational entity" between the LGBTQ community and the world-at-large. Although founded in the 1970s, 2010 saw the Stonewall Book Awards inaugurate a young adult-oriented division (Sanders and Mathis, 2012). The growth in the award considerations – from handfuls of books to over 800 in 1995 (Sanders and Mathis) – strengthens the claim that the Stonewall Books are representative of a broad range of LGBTQ experiences. Likewise, Sanders and Mathis wrote that the commitment to gender parity, regional parity, and racial/ethnic parity during judge selection may create more opportunities for semiosis across groups. The authors noted that the selection of judges from as many different library types as possible reveals an awareness of audience accessibility; the award is evidently designed to take readership trends and needs into account.

For these reasons, we felt that the Stonewall Book Awards might act as a proxy for both LGBTQ lived concerns and a bid for accessibility of these concerns to as many populations as possible. This is what it means to us to serve as a 'semiotic beacon'; if the novels are seen as both veridical to LGBTQ youth and effective in conveying key LGBTQ-oriented concepts to non-LGBTQ individuals, they are Peircean signs valuable for pedagogical purposes. Thus, if we can determine more carefully its reception amongst LGBTQ youth and pre-service teachers, we may shed light on whether the concerns in these books are legitimate. We may also better characterize just how pre-service teachers experience LGBTQ-oriented narratives. The semiotic frameworks experienced and constructed through these texts can help determine the utility of the Stonewall Book Awards – as well as consciously constructed LGBTQ media – towards the acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ students.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, we used a constant-comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to examine the responses of our participants to two young adult books that recently received the Stonewall Book Award

for Children's and Young Adult Literature. While we would have enjoyed having the resources to investigate responses to all the award-winning books since 2011, we felt that employing at least two novels could provide substantive, meaningful data. Because the aforementioned criteria for selection do not change from year to year, we saw less harm in choosing two books for what we hope will be a preliminary exploration amongst many equality and progress-oriented researchers. While we cannot generalize to all LGBTQ award-winning novels from our findings, we believe that they will provide much-needed insights for future investigation.

The two books were *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Saénz, 2012) – hereby abbreviated as just *Aristotle and Dante* – and *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013). We chose these books because they were similar in some important respects – recently published, close in length, and with significant romantic elements – while different in others – taking place in different environments and eras, with protagonists identifying as either questioning/lesbian (*Fat Angie*) or questioning/gay (*Aristotle and Dante*). In *Fat Angie*, the eponymous protagonist wrestled and ultimately accepted her love for her friend K.C. Romance. Throughout the novel, Angie bonded with her neighbor Jake, dealt with the demands of her mother and brother, experienced bullying at the hands of Stacy Ann, and dearly missed her military-serving sister. In *Aristotle and Dante*, the two eponymous Mexican-American characters lived through events with their families and at their schools, slowly coming to the mutual realization that they were in love.

Participants

The researchers, who were from two different states, applied stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), to select different groups who may find interest in the books and which could perhaps lead to comparisons in responses to the books, especially in light of the age difference of adolescents and preservice teachers. As a result, the participants for this study composed three different groups. One group was comprised of ten undergraduate students majoring in education. While not enrolled in any particular course, these preservice teachers volunteered to read both books. Members of an LGBTQ group, not associated with any school, formed the second group of volunteer participants. All the participants were LGBTQ youth, as befit the mission statement of the Texas LGBTQ youth group these teenagers attended: "The mission of [the youth group] is to provide a safe, non-judgmental, affirming place for LBGTQ young people to express and explore who they are through education, peer-support, advocacy and friendship" (Anonymous, 2016). The youth, all between the ages of 12 and 18, had a month to read the novels. Nine youth read Aristotle and Dante and four read Fat Angie. The last group of participants consisted of members of a ninth-grade English class in a high school located in a state along the East Coast. As part of a literature unit, the students could select which book they wanted to read. Fourteen selected Aristotle and Dante and seven read Fat Angie. These students were not required to read these books, but were simply given an opportunity to do so.

Data Collection and Analysis

All participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of eleven questions. The questions focused on several aspects of the readings, some of which addressed initial impressions, authenticity of the book, and relatability to the characters and events. Because we are interested in documenting and analyzing perceptions to discrete semiotic phenomena, we chose to use each individual response as our unit of analysis and not the collected responses of each participant. To that end, we often refer to 'responses' instead of 'participants' during our elaboration of the results and subsequent discussion.

There were 110 units of analysis each for *Aristotle and Dante* and *Fat Angie* for the pre-service teachers. The LGBTQ youth supplied 99 units of analysis for *Aristotle and Dante*, and 44 units of analysis for *Fat Angie*. The participants in the English class, in turn, supplied 168 units of analysis for *Aristotle and Dante*, and 84 units of analysis for *Fat Angie*. Then, using a constant comparative approach (Mertens, 2015), we analyzed the data in three phases.

Phase 1. In this initial phase, which involved the development of a coding system to form an analytic framework, we worked together examining the second question responses to establish a pattern for initial coding. We then individually read through one group's responses and began generating these initial codes. After coding the responses for one group, we came together again to compare our codes noting similarities and differences. We then discussed the differences at length and arrived at consensus. We followed this same pattern for the other two groups of participants.

Phase 2. At this point, we individually examined the agreed upon initial codes and engaged in more focused coding efforts resulting in the development of salient categorical themes for each participant group (Charmaz, 2006). We then came together to discuss the categories for that particular group and negotiated the final categories. The same process was used for the other two groups.

Phase 3. In this final phase, we examined these emerging themes across groups noting similarities and differences in their responses. At this point, we discussed at length the meaning of each category or theme and the use of appropriate language to clearly represent the category. For example, with *Fat Angie*, we determined that references to Angie's sister, Angie's mother, Angie's brother, and K.C.'s father could be condensed into a 'family relationships' category. Likewise, with *Aristotle and Dante*, we decided that references across groups to personal growth and self-development could be condensed into a 'bildungsroman' category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have chosen to present the responses in five categories. First are the similarities across books and groups, and then differences across the books, across ages, across sexual orientations and gender identities, and other subgroups.

Similarities Across Books and Groups

All groups found the events and characters of *Aristotle and Dante* relatable. One response revealed that "I was able to connect with each character written! The authors craft made every character relatable," while another stated that "I can definitely relate to trying to find yourself in the world; I can relate to trying to find out who you are." Many readers expressed an appreciation of the author as an engineer of characterization. They never lost sight of the fictional nature of the text, and therefore approved strongly of what they felt were attempts to engage them. The semiosis of mimicry factored into this appreciation; the characters were described well enough in their expressions and growth to allow the readers enjoy the novel.

One response shared the following about the novel's relatability:

> There were many things I connected to with Dante and Ari. Even though I am not a boy who likes boys, I have felt the strangeness in not thinking quite the same as my peers, having a family member incarcerated, and feeling out of place racially. These connections really drew me in to the characters.

As signs crafted by the author, Ari and Dante achieved a balance of more LGBTQ-oriented experiences and experiences common to other groups. Notably, the story retained appeal for pre-service teachers because of the latter, but not never lost sight of its LGBTQ focus – which readers of all groups positively acknowledged.

All groups revealed common semiotic touchstones in each of the novels. For the *Fat Angie* responses, K.C.'s purple heart tattoo made an impression (one response remarked that "the purple heart or K.C. Romance was everywhere"), while responses in *Aristotle and Dante* focused on the figurative potential of the novel's birds and dreams. Dreams, for example, "gave insight to how [Aristotle] was feeling about the events of his life or what might happen in the near future", and "were used to express Ari's fears". One youth contended that the dreams "confused [Aristotle] or helped him understand the things he was feeling", while another youth stated

that "Ari's dream also represented his loneliness". As evaluative tools for the characters (amongst themselves) and the readers (for understanding the characters), these dreams act – as with the relatability markers above – as semioses of reflective growth. Readers of all groups recognized the dreams as important messages to them, perhaps understanding the dreams to be a common cultural, and even psychological, touchstone for change; the predictive potential of counterfactual thought in general – in this case, dreams – is a key feature of all human thought (Epstude and Peetz, 2012).

Birds, on the other hand, "seemed like a metaphor for the trials Dante goes through in the book while trying to stay happy". One response stated the following:

> [The bird] symbolized both danger and hope. When Dante tried to save the bird in the middle of the road Ari jumped out to save him and got hit by a car, yet later in the book it mentions how they see birds singing and flying around being happy.

One response revealed that "Dante's emotional response to the shooting of the bird became important to a critical element in the story", while another shared this interpretation:

> Dante tries to rescue a sparrow with a broken wing only to be nearly struck by a car before Ari saves him, and Dante says that Mexicans are "like sparrows" in a letter to Ari. Ari has dreams about sparrows falling from the sky.

Other semiotic templates for further analysis and understanding in *Aristotle and Dante* were perceived elements of self-discovery. Readers remarked on how the novel served as personal evolutions for both characters (and themselves), with obvious moments of wrestling with and growing through adolescent issues: "I was able to relate to [Aristotle] the most... in terms of teenaged identity confusion. There were certainly times in my life where I felt no one in my family could understand the things I was feeling." As a semiotic marker, the developmental quality of the novel made connection with either of the LGBTQ protagonists likely: "I felt that I related more to Dante, because he actively searches to make sense of his feelings and where his life is going." Appreciation of particularity – in this case, the lives of sexual minorities – came about through the appreciation of a semiotically multifarious "coming of age."

Differences Across the Two Novels

The receptions and analyses of *Aristotle and Dante* differed substantially from *Fat Angie* in one respect: both youth and pre-service teachers nearly unilaterally stated a desire to recommend *Aristotle and Dante* to others. This response was similar in both passion and sense of urgency to recommend as many others we read:

> I actually called my sisters and told them to buy it immediately after finishing it. It was so well-done. It would be a shame not to share it.

> I would recommend this book, it had become one of my top favorite books. The book gives a detail filled setting and plot.

> Yes, Yes, Yes! A thousand times yes. It was the first really good LGBT book that I have read and it really focuses on the teenage struggle.

> Yes, because I believe in this book alone helped me change my opinion about homosexuality by showing the viewpoint of their mind.

Time and again, readers revealed an admiration for the craft within *Aristotle and Dante*. The philosopher W.V.O. Quine once spoke of a "web of belief" (1970), or the propensity for belief in one arena to be positively or negatively impacted by the belief in another arena. The author's carefully delineated semioses are, to the

readers, consistent with each other, which lends credence and relatability to the characters and their struggles.

While there were several responses expressing a desire to recommend *Fat Angie*, over a quarter either expressed misgivings about recommending – "not really, I found it very odd," "I would, however it wouldn't be at the top of the list" – or refused to do so: "No, because although it was a quick read, certain parts felt rushed and cliché," "I would not recommend this book. It actually left me with a bad taste." When responses did recommend Fat Angie, though, they focused on a perceived strong sense of realism:

> Yes, I believe that this book stays true to real life and is a great story. I would recommend this book to young adults as well as adults.

> I would absolutely recommend this book. I was moved by the characters and their interaction. The book deals with things that everyday teens face everyday and should be brought to light.

Hearkening back to Quine's "web of belief," it seems likely that the web seemed shaky or ill-formed to some of the *Fat Angie* readers. These readers found it hard to imagine the events transpiring matter-of-factly as they were portrayed. Liao and Szabo (2016, p. 3) define as "imaginative resistance" the breakdown of authorial authority, a lack of trust in phenomenological verisimilitude, and/or aesthetic questioning of a text. The responses we chronicle here reveal that some readers experienced this phenomenon enough to linger in the memory after finishing the book.

Generational Differences

As a whole, the pre-service teachers found the events of the two novels to be more realistic and/or authentic than did both groups of youth. All of the pre-service teachers found the content of *Aristotle and Dante* representative of teenage interaction and experiences, with many especially so:

> I was hooked by the first couple lines and I couldn't put it down. The way the author described how his summer started was so realistic and full of sarcasm and real teenage thoughts.

> It was intriguing and realistic. The characters were believable teenagers with quirky families and typical confusion.

The pre-service teachers also found *Fat Angie* realistic, although at least three of their responses took issue with particular details, such as the portrayal of military life or the intensity of the bullying that Angie faced. Even so, many pre-service teachers found the events of the novel to accurately reflect teenage life:

> The social interactions were typical to what is expected when a student is an outcast. It is sad to say that the majority of teenagers in this society are cruel when their peers don't fit into the norm, and this book highlights that in the interactions that "Fat Angie" has with her peers.

> The bullying and taunting in this book done by both the teens and the parents was scarily accurate, in my opinion.

Meanwhile, the teenagers were more ambivalent about the realism of *Fat Angie*, with half of the relevant North Carolina responses (and one-fifth of the relevant Texas responses) questioning the authenticity of the events:

> I don't think there are as many bullies in today's society as there were portrayed in the book. However, the reactions Angie had were very realistic.

One youth stated that "the bullying wasn't very realistic but the relationship Angie had with her mother was", while another revealed that "even at the end of the book, I didn't get a clear understanding of why the antagonist didn't like Angie". The intensity and circumstances of Angie's mistreatment were called into question various times. What the author felt was an alignment between *representamen* and object seemed not to be for some youth; the high school experience as object did not match the language and events shared in the novel.

Less than half of the germane pre-service teacher responses expressed this same doubt: "I would have liked more expansion on the main character finding out that Stacy Ann did not hate her just for being fat, but that it was deeper than that". Where the pre-service teachers differed from the youth again was in the attention, alluded to in the above quote, they paid to the characters' health, both through discussion of body issues and mental well-being. Twice as many more pre-service teacher responses than youth responses dealt with these two particular themes:

> The bodily fat references of Angie were recurrent throughout the book; her double chin, tight fitting uncomfortable clothing, sweating profusely, gasping for breath and her deprived hunger.

> The action of cutting is also something that I struggled with and experienced in high school when attempting to deal with emotions and situations I felt I couldn't handle.

Another feature wherein the pre-service teachers differed substantially from the youth was their recognition of pop cultural elements in *Fat Angie*. One pre-service teacher noted the "reoccurring references to songs, movies, comic books, and television shows but not all were symbolic to the storyline". Another remarked that "the pop culture references and awkward humour serve as comedy relief for the serious situations going on in the novel". While at least 14 pre-teacher responses referred to pop culture, none of the youth in either Texas or North Carolina commented on this aspect of the book. While the pop culture references appeared to interest and ultimately increase the credence in the "web of belief" for the pre-service teachers, this did not appear to be the case for the youth.

Differences Across Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Often, the commentaries of the LGBTQ Texan youth were opposed to both those of the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth. With *Fat Angie*, for example, the LGBTQ Texas youth remarked often upon the romance between the protagonist Angie and her eventual girlfriend K.C. One reader wanted the novel to "maybe have more cutesy fluffiness between K.C. and Angie? I mean it would give it that much more of a depth into how a lot of lgbt+ relationships are." Another reader revealed that it was "honestly really nice for me being a lesbian to read this fantasy book about my kind of lifestyle, other than the normal guy and girl love stories. This felt more real to me than those ever will."

With *Aristotle and Dante*, the LGBTQ youth were concerned with categorizing language, or language which labeled – whether negatively or positively – perspectives on and identities within LGBT life:

> I'm extremely curious as to why someone such as the author continually used the word transvestite to describe the person Aristotle's brother killed. Trans or transgender definitely would have been more appropriate.

> I would [recommend the book], with the added comment on the trans-centered violence toward the end. All in all, it's a good book in a queer library that too often focuses more on the sexuality than the characters and their stories.

One reader "would make Aristotle more openly transgender, and take out the mention of hate-crime towards

the trans girl," while another shared that "[the book] shows that [the] LGBT+ community is not weird or out of the ordinary, but can be very normal and assimilated to society's norms." Another response revealed that "my first impression was that it was very low-key queer, in a good way."

To a much greater degree – three times as often – as for the North Carolina youth, the LGBTQ Texas youth were dubious about the realism evinced in *Aristotle and Dante*, with some eventually finding veracity in the events and characters and others not:

> I question how realistic the parents were with their support. Yes, some parents are really supportive of their children and how they identify, but not all parents are that way. Alas, I question how both sets of parents are supportive of their sons.

> I believe it was somewhat accurate. The main characters, teenage boys, displayed more maturity and foresight than most teenage boys I have encountered, but taking into consideration the different time period, it was still a believable portrayal.

> It definitely didn't represent me personally but I do love the struggles of intersectionality addressed throughout the entire book. I do however feel the interactions were very real and very human and the internal struggle Aristotle faced with coming to his own fabulously gay conclusion was definitely as complex as it should be.

The latter quote points to a striking commonality that the LGBTQ Texas youth and the pre-service teachers shared: the recognition of intersectionality. Sociologists Hill Collins and Birge define intersectionality as "an analytic tool that sheds light on the complexity of people's lives within an equally complex social context" (2016, p.25). As a lens, intersectionality is concerned with understanding lives through "many axes [of social division] that work together and influence each other" (Birge and Collins, p. 2), as well as the "systems of power [that] intersect and coproduce one another to result in unequal material realities and the distinctive social experiences that characterise them" (Collins and Chepp, 2013, p. 60). In an intersectional framework, each 'axis' and/or 'system of power' corresponds to a social identity and/or label. While the status of Angie and K.C. as intersectionally female and lesbian are of note, we were struck by how both the LGBTQ Texas youth and the pre-service teachers lingered on the intersectionality of an LGBTQ identity and a Mexican-American identity:

> I feel like it tackles the internal turmoil any gay minority faces when they aren't white. He somehow felt broken ethnically because of his homosexuality, as if that invalidated him. It was definitely restated over and over again that he was a half-assed Mexican.

> I particularly enjoyed the fact that the boys truly inhabit what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as 'The Borderlands'. They are not only navigating the space between their Mexican Heritage and their American Culture, they also navigate their own sexual identity. It is clear that the two borderlands which they inhabit complicate the other.

The semiotic potential of *Aristotle and Dante* is enhanced by its intersectionally-enabled multiplicity of identities; with greater opportunities for personalized meaning-making through identity relation, the greater chance there seemed to be for both relatability and realism. Several times reader responses take note of and remark positively upon the combination of identities in this work. Almost uniformly, readers recommend *Aristotle and Dante*; while the recognition of intersectionality cannot be explicitly connected with this fact, these responses do suggest that intersectionality may be a strategy in a text that successfully – and perhaps most importantly, without strong opposition – reaches across personal histories and identities to inform.

Other Notable Differences

The North Carolina youth agreed on several occasions with the pre-service teachers in particular. Two abiding interests of just the North Carolina youth, however, were their desire to –in *Fat Angie* – replace Angie's girlfriend K.C. with her male friend Jake and their desire to either downplay or disagree with the LGBTQ presence in *Aristotle and Dante*. One reader simply stated that they prefer "KC and Angie… just be friends and Angie and Jake would date", while another reader connected the same thought with a stylized narrative: "I would have liked for Angie and Jake to date. It would have been your typical teenage relationship, but the cute kind that forms from long-time friends." One youth contends that "in this day we have seen (sic) that homosexuality has become semi-popular and more accepted"; in an earlier response, the same youth states that they "don't agree with homosexuality", and believed that it would make the novel "weird". Another youth reveals that they could not relate to the characters because they "don't find the same sex attractive."

Both the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth were preoccupied with the relationships of the two main characters in *Fat Angie*, Angie and K.C., with their families. In particular, the North Carolina youth, by a margin of 2 to 1 in relevant responses, wondered about Angie and her connection with her missing military sister. Both groups also reflected at length on Angie's relationship with her mother. One pre-service teacher stated that "the interactions with her mother exemplified that she had no parent figure to talk to or to even protect her from the cruelty of her environment". One pre-service teacher claims that "her mother expects 'perfection' and is far from perfect herself", while another shares that they "believe her not-to-be-bothered-mother was also something that was also connected back to how Angie viewed herself". One North Carolina youth reveals that "it was almost made out to be like their mom didn't actually care about Wang and Angie, she only cared about how other people viewed her children and their family."

This look at family and friendships often predicated the appeal of *Fat Angie*, at least for the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth. (The Texas LGBTQ youth responses focused more on the possibility and presence of romance – but even they recognized the family relationships in the novel, albeit to a lesser degree.) Reader responses expressed concern for Angie's turbulent family life, evaluated Angie's friendship with Jake, and often compared the relationships of the characters to their experiences with their own families. Pre-service teachers especially found these aspects of *Fat Angie* realistic and relatable; the variety in relationship types of *Fat Angie* drew the sustained semiotic attention of those who might choose these novels for students: namely, adults.

CONCLUSION

While the nation is on a trajectory of acceptance for gay and transgender youth and adults, there is still a major undercurrent of hatred present in our society. Providing literature with LGBTQ themes should not be a one-time event in a classroom (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Instead, it should be incorporated in a thematic unit in which the semiotic markers of acceptance, compassion, and caring are the major focus (Wood, Kissel & Miller, 2016). Stonewall Award-winning works are an excellent means for approaching this focus. In this way, all marginalized youth can see themselves in the literary characters and, with teacher instruction, empathy, and assistance, the examination and discussion of this literature has the potential to help all students understand one another more completely.

The intersectionality in some LGBTQ books like *Aristotle and Dante* may be a productive way to introduce texts like these into the classroom. One of the participants commented that although he was not gay, he understood being different because of his race and other issues in his life. Students, both gay and straight, can see semiotic connections between parts of their lives with parts of others that they might not have realized. Intersectionality may offer us a way to talk about these issues productively. Negotiating identities, power,

and relationships through the intersectionality framework may help students gain insight into themselves and others.

Certainly, the political reality encourages classroom teachers to avoid these issues, but the data is very clear. Our LGBTQ youth desperately need these books in their high school curriculum, and they are asking for them. While our future teachers may be hesitant to use LGBTQ texts, we must create spaces in our preservice programs to help them productively integrate these books into the literacy curriculum. Teachers, if supplied with novels that accurately convey – at least to LGBTQ youth – the LGBTQ youth experience, can teach all youth how to effectively signal – or make a Peircean sign – in a way that fosters LGBTQ-safe environments. The ways in which these novels successfully appeal to and resonate with LGBTQ youth can teach faculty and student peers how to enforce a better quality of life for these youth. It is through the study of literature on the topic of diversity, in all its forms, that we have a neutral vehicle by which to create "safe zones" for our youth, where students can feel free to be who they are without fear of disdain or reproach from peers (Henkin, 2011; Ratts et al., 2013). This is a most pressing challenge for us as teacher educators – one that needs to be addressed immediately.

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APPENDIX

1. Please state the name of the book that you have just finished reading.
2. What were your first impressions about the book? Why?
3. Were the interactions between characters in the book representative of the way teens/young adults that you know interact? Explain your response.
4. Were there any motifs (recurrent imagery, symbols, or structural elements) in the book you read? If so, what were they?
5. Were you able to personally connect with the feelings, emotions, and actions of the characters? If so, which ones, and why?
6. What are some events in the book that you felt might be especially helpful in informing the reader about the protagonist's struggles? Explain your response.
7. Were there any parts of the book that you question? Explain your response.
8. How realistic are the characters and the problems they are facing? How realistic are the reactions to the things that happen to them? Explain your responses.
9. If you could change one thing about the book to make it more realistic, what would it be? Why?
10. If you could change one thing about the book to make it more enjoyable, what would it be? Why?
11. Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why or why not?
12. Would this book make a good television show or movie? Why or why not?*

Constraining the (Im)possible: Improvisation and Violence in Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the role of jazz improvisation in the characterization of the protagonist in Rafi Zabor's 1998 jazz novel, *The Bear Comes Home*. I suggest that Zabor represents the process of improvisation to not only enhance the enigma of The Bear's ability as a jazz musician, but also to enhance his capacity towards violence.

Through the exploration of the actual process of improvisation in the research of Paul Berliner, Ingrid Monson and Alyn Shipton, Improvisation in a real jazz context is collaborative and exploratory. However, Zabor, like many other authors (such as Michael Ondaatje, James Baldwin and John Clellon Holmes) represent the process of improvisation as solitary, violent and explosive. Authors choose to represent this creative process as violent in order that they may use the music-making as an artistic response to dramatic events and violent occurrences in the characters' lives.

In addition, the figure of The Bear is a metaphor for characters (or musicians) who have led violent, suppressed and hidden lives. As he skulks in the shadows and avoids the authorities, he searches for a sense of self and tries to create human connections with those who help him. Music, and improvisation, seems to be the key to his identity and yet the music-making process often injures the people he cares about most, and forces him to question the essence of his impossible being. Improvisation, then, is a tool through which Zabor suggests that violence is inherent in both the creative process and the search for identity.

Keywords: Improvisation, violence, literature, jazz, Zabor, creativity, music, performance, outsider, suppression

The process of jazz improvisation live on stage is, at it's best, illustrative of the process of creating something new through the breaking down and reshaping of traditional ideas. Many authors, including Rafi Zabor, Michael Ondaatje and John Clellon Holmes, choose to represent this creative act as something akin to violence, even though the reality of music-making does not, in itself, seem to be an obviously violent or destructive process[1]. In addition, the context of violence that surrounds these representations of improvisatory performance highlights the contrast between music and violence while simultaneously suggesting the two elements are necessarily intertwined.

Although the number of novels specifically about jazz musicians is not large, jazz and literature have been intertwined since the early days of jazz – through novels, short stories and narrative poetry. Within this relatively small field, violence is a feature that recurs in various forms. However, the relationship between jazz and violence in literature is rarely recognised. This relationship is important for two reasons: it is a reflection of the history of the development of jazz; and is also emblematic of the artistic concern with the process of creation and the destruction or reconfiguration of conventional ideas.

This paper will explore the role of jazz improvisation in the characterization of the protagonist in Rafi Zabor's 1998 jazz novel, *The Bear Comes Home*. This surreal novel is is essentially the story of a talking, saxophone-playing bear in New York City, who decides he wants to become a jazz musician in order to define his identity. I suggest that Zabor represents the process of improvisation to not only enhance the enigma of The Bear's ability as a jazz musician, but also to enhance his capacity towards violence. Zabor's novel is by no means the only novel to explore the relationship between jazz and violence, yet nowhere is the character of the musician more explicitly represented as the violent outsider seeking his place within a modern society.

In order to examine the role of improvisation in Zabor's novel, it is necessary to reflect upon the type of jazz the characters within the novel play: free jazz, post-bop and fusion. Paul Berliner argues that these styles go some way towards an "ideological rejection of former jazz conventions" and blend other styles of music such as rock into the idiom (122). The jazz in this novel therefore not only breaks the conventions of music from a pre-jazz era, but further challenges early forms of jazz such as New Orleans jazz, swing and even bebop.

Most significant in Zabor's representation of the jazz musician, is the importance of improvisation. Philip Alperson argues that nearly all human activity is a form of improvisation, but that improvisation in the artistic sense is essentially "spontaneous achievement within the constraints of the possible'(274). What is compelling about Zabor's representation, however, is that he has done away with the "constraints of the possible" altogether, by presenting the jazz musician as a representative of the *im*possible: a talking, saxophone playing bear.

In his study into the meaning and method behind improvisation, *Thinking in Jazz*, Berliner suggests that it is a misconception that improvisation is *only* about performing with spontaneity and intuition (2). Yet many novels about jazz do imply that musical inspiration comes from intuition alone[2]. This creates a romanticised vision of the jazz musician, which often suits literary representations of these characters. However, in his comprehensive study, which involved interviewing and working with many jazz musicians throughout America, Berliner argues that there is, "in fact, a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that the improviser performs" (17). This is perhaps what Alperson means by the "constraints of the possible" in his definition of improvisation: the limitations of the instrument itself and the performer's skills will provide the boundary for the performance.

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1   Here, I refer to Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home* (1998), Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) and John Clellon Holmes *The Horn* (1958), as a small selection of novels that make reference to many types of violence in relation to jazz. This broader study of the relationship between jazz and violence in literature was the subject of my PhD thesis, *Drawn to the Slaughter: Violence in Narratives about Jazz Musicians*.

2   This can be seeing in Dorothy Baker's 1942 novel, *Young Man with a Horn*, charting the life of a man driven to excess by his commitment to his music, and Herbert Simmons" 1962 novel *Man Walking on Eggshells*, which also explores addiction and intuitive musical ability.

Yet, if Zabor's musician himself is impossible, then surely there are no constraints on the music. The Bear's jazz, because of its very unfeasibility, has the potential to have an impact in a way that no other musician has ever been able. Because he is a bear, he moves outside of the constraints of our human world – and so does his music. This renders him the ultimate artist: unrestricted, except by his own mind. Yet, still the question remains, why does Zabor represent him as a jazz musician? And perhaps more importantly, what is it about improvisation that is so important to this novel?

Like the majority of subjects in novels about jazz musicians, The Bear is a front-line player[3]. This means he is most often the leader of the band he performs with, and not only has the opportunity to express his individuality through the music, but does so by standing at the front of the stage. This is no coincidence. The role that improvisation plays in jazz provides Zabor with the means to give his bear a new form of communication, and The Bear is placed in the front of the band so that what he plays is presented with as much power as possible. In addition, his physical position of facing the audience opens a direct line of communication and allows for maximum impact. As Ingrid Monson argues:

> When a musician successfully reaches a discerning audience, moves its members
> to applaud or shout praises, raises the energy to dramatic proportions, and leaves
> a sonorous memory that lingers long after, he or she has moved beyond technical
> competence, beyond the chord changes and into the realm of "saying something." (1-2)

The idea of communication is crucial to Monson's somewhat romantic description of improvisation. Yet, the concept of "saying something" also highlights the importance of adding meaning to the music, as she suggests the act of communication through the music is made significant through "the reciprocal and multi-layered relationships among sound, social settings, and cultural politics that affect the *meaning* of jazz improvisation'(2 *my emphasis*). In his complex study of when and how music has meaning, Lawrence Kramer describes music as "the art of collapsing distances" (3). This highlights that it is not only jazz and improvisation that act as forms of musical communication, but that all music has the ability to do so.

Yet it is the immediacy of the act of improvisation – composing on the spot – that makes the sense of communication in jazz more vibrant than in other forms of music. Indeed, numerous recent empirical studies into the state of jazz performances highlight how important this live composition is to audiences, as Burland and Pitts posit:

> Spontaneity and uncertainty offer a sense of excitement as does the immediacy of the
> event: the sense that the music is being formed "in the moment" and that the audience
> is part of that process resonates with research on jazz musicians and audiences. (527)[4]

Monson's concept of "saying something" through improvisation is also a reminder that an important part of the jazz performance process is collaboration. The improvising soloist relies on the support of his or her band for the establishment of the melody, harmony and rhythm, and on their complicity in the act of creation. A common metaphor used by musicians to describe what it is like to improvise in a jazz context is that of a conversation. Yet Berliner has a more comprehensive metaphor for a jazz performance: that of a journey, where the musicians

> must take in the immediate inventions around them while leading their own
> performances toward emerging musical images, retaining, for the sake of continuity,

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3   Front line players in novels, primarily play trumpet or saxophone. One significant exception is the character of Rufus Scott in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, who is a drummer.

4   Other empirical studies that emphasise the importance of live performance and improvisation include (Brand et al.; Doffman; Macdonald and Wilson). Yet it is important to note that the results of studies such as these may be affected by how audiences believe they *should* respond both to the music and to questions posed by researchers.

the features of a quickly receding trail of sound. They constantly interpret one another's ideas, anticipating them on the basis of the music's predetermined harmonic events. (348)

In addition to this complex collaborative journey, the act of improvisation provides an interesting narrative context for these characters. An episode of improvisation is also a public display of something incredibly intimate: the moment of creation. As Alperson suggests, improvisation is interesting to audiences and readers alike because "we are actually witnessing the shaping activity of the improviser. It is as if we the audience gain privileged access to the performer's mind at the moment of creation" (274). Improvisation then, is the act of creating music in a public or live setting, through the combination of technical skill, musical knowledge, personal history, collaborative intuition and emotion.

The concept of improvisation is substantial enough to be the subject of numerous books and much critical material (cf. Alperson; Berliner; Carvalho; Kamoche and Cunha; Lespinasse; Monson; Szekely; Dean and Smith), and it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to cover all nuances of the form completely.

What is interesting about the representation of improvisation in literature, is that fact that author's often take this process of creation and render it violent. The music itself even becomes a kind of victim of violence. Where the music is cut up, reconfigured and broken down through the process of improvisation, violence is represented as an element of the music-making process. Of course, it is possible to see this fragmentation and reassembly as simply a creative process that is neither violent nor destructive. For instance, in his description of jazz composition, Paul Berliner describes the process of altering a melody through improvisation as follows:

> Pursuing subtle courses, musicians carry over the inflections and ornaments of particular phrases to embellish other phrases. Venturing further, they may extract a figure's salient characteristic, such as melodic shape or rhythmic configuration, and treat it as the rudiment for new figures. (146)

Berliner's attempt at a realistic description of the process of improvisation is focused on the embellishment, extraction and treatment of a melody. However, I argue that the language Zabor uses to describe this process is quite different because of its suggestion of violence. It is the *representation* of the creative process that is of concern here, not how that process is achieved in real life. For instance, in contrast to Berliner's description, Zabor describes his fictional character improvising with a very different emphasis:

> First thing he did was start dismantling the tune. He played a series of violent lower-register honks, then some angry, disordered runs that violated the cadence at the end of the chorus. And there went the tempo: the rhythm section was forced to break ranks and stutter … the Bear applied more pressure, the time splintered like boxwood. (45)

Zabor's Bear dismantles, disorders, violates, and splinters time and his fellow musicians have to "break ranks." While improvisation in jazz is not necessarily a violent or destructive process in reality, Zabor's extract highlights how improvisation can lend itself to being described as such. Zabor represents the same process as that which Berliner describes, yet Zabor has chosen to foreground the potential violence of the act, and in doing so he focuses the reader's attention on The Bear's aggression and determination in the scene. This suggests that there is an inherent violence in The Bear's music-making process. Just as a painter may cut up or rip an image to reassemble into a collage[5], a jazz musician may break a melody or harmony apart to make something new. How an author chooses to describe this act is what determines whether it is viewed as violence or not. When an author does represent the music as violent, the music often becomes a reflection of the character's psychological state.

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5   Such as in the work of Pablo Picasso or Kurt Schwitters.

One of the most interesting psychological elements of *The Bear Comes Home* is that, when considering The Bear's mental state, it can also be read as a complex exploration of the relationship between racial identity and jazz. The ongoing social, scientific and authoritarian persecution of The Bear leads to a personal existential crisis and The Bear uses his music to respond to his victimisation.

The late 1990s was a very different time for jazz and racial identity compared to many earlier jazz novels such as Herbert Simmons' *Man Walking on Eggshells* and Ann Petry's *The Street*. The US Civil Rights movement ended in 1968 with several Civil Rights Acts being passed between 1964 and 1968. The most contemporary racial conflict to the novel were the 1992 race riots, instigated by the police beating of African-American man, Rodney King, in Los Angeles. Significantly, at around the same time the United States became involved in the Persian Gulf War, which went some way to shifting the focus of racial discrimination in the US towards Iraqis, and to reducing the perception of African-Americans as the "other" (Sidanius and Liu 685).

By the time of Zabor's writing, jazz, having arguably reached its peak of popularity in the 1940s, was no longer the sound that represented popular tastes. In a recent study into the current state of jazz gigs, audience members agreed that "jazz venues should be small and intimate" so that listeners can "immerse themselves in the experience" (Burland and Pitts 527). Burland and Pitts' study also argues that current audience members are "knowledgeable about jazz repertoire" and therefore attend performances with specific expectations about what they will hear (523). This suggests that these audience members are unlike the large dance audiences of the 1930s and are more educated and critical. In addition, as Brand, Sloboda, Saul and Hathaway argue, jazz has been suffering "a noted decline in the prevalence of attendance at concerts particularly … in North America and Europe over the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century" (635-6).

Thus jazz was almost seen as cult music by the late 1990s, existing largely in the underground scene of small bars with an air of exclusivity. Zabor draws on this underground world as a perfect setting for the arrival of The Bear who slips in and out of small dark clubs, avoiding too many questions because these are places where unusual characters are accepted.

As The Bear dons his hat and trench coat to step into jazz clubs and meet his idols, he also has to try and stay under the radar to avoid the police and the scientists who would like to study him. It is in this climate of hiding, suspicion and the need to play music that The Bear tries to find out who he really is and how he can exist within the human world. I argue that Zabor uses The Bear's continual search for his place in society through his music as a metaphor for the desire to have one's racial identity accepted.

Prior to the beginning of the novel, The Bear has been working with his best friend, a human called Jones, as an "act" – he is a street performer who is led by his master to do human-like things, such as dance, drink beer and playfully wrestle with Jones. When he is performing on the street, The Bear hides his true identity and pretends to be enslaved:

> When Jones led him home toward evening, The Bear's walk rolled him shoulder to shoulder, his head swayed genial and empty, his face was vacant and his eyes were glazed … The Bear knew how to behave in company. (Zabor 9)

However, when The Bear arrives home, he relaxes, takes the chain out of his nose and puts his feet up to have a beer (10). When he is outside his home, he is performing and adhering to stereotypes of what people think a bear living in a metropolis should be. He performs the appearance of slavery, of dependence and disciplined behaviour. Yet he is not happy. This performance is something he desperately wants to shed. After one encouraging experience performing jazz with Lester Bowie, The Bear finds he is no longer able to keep up the performance of slavery, feeling as though he is about to "slip away": "Time and the city were pounding him to a powder, and something weaker was fighting for life in his heart" (Zabor 32). He chooses to drop the

act and takes the ring from his nose and bleeds all over the back of a taxi. The rest of the novel leaves him searching for a way he can be defined now that he is no longer simply a dancing bear.

The Bear, as an animal trying to exist in the human world, is a symbol of the outsider, or the other, but is also a symbol of violence. In this case, Zabor continually makes us aware of his animal status by never giving him a name and always referring to him as "The Bear." In addition, The Bear is always willing to show his teeth to get his way, and we are reminded that his huge form cannot be disguised. Jerome Stueart posits that The Bear is, however, not bear enough and is "like a man in a bear suit"(198), arguing that we are only really made aware of his difference through the awkward sex scenes, as he fears hurting his human girlfriend, Iris, in the process of penetration. I argue that it is not only in the sex scenes, but also in the musical scenes that we are made aware of his "bearishness." He bares his teeth at the audience, terrifying them with his potential violence, without even meaning to:

> He reared his head back to take a larger breath, and had he been aware of his audience he would have realized that the sudden sight of his open jaws – great white tearing teeth, livid purple gums and broad, slavering tongue – had made it collectively gasp and jump back a foot. (Zabor 23)

It seems at times as if The Bear is unaware of how terrifying and strange he can be – particularly once he has decided to drop the guise of being Jones slave. Yet it is after this scene described above that The Bear is able to begin to really consider where he stands in relation to the human world.

When The Bear forms his own group, his music is suggested to show traces of both bebop and free jazz. In his discussion of one of the landmark albums of the free jazz era, Coltrane's *Ascension*, Alyn Shipton argues that the "collective free playing" had "power, collective passion, and primal screaming qualities" (740). While Shipton admits that free jazz can be inaccessible or difficult to understand, he suggests another way of listening to the music:

> If preconceptions about harmony, melody, and swing are suspended, and the music is approached in its own terms, it becomes a series of profound, impressive and frequently uncomfortable statements. (741)

Thus while the music may be both "profound" and "uncomfortable," it has the capacity to be heard as a collection of statements or claims. It is almost as though it is a search for a sound, experimental and explorative. Ornette Coleman, who was partly responsible for the development of free jazz, is described by an old friend, Dewey Redman, as having a "a restless, questioning mind," which not only reflects free jazz, but the characterisation of Zabor's The Bear (Shipton 774). Coltrane himself, who is one of The Bear's idols, also described the music as a process of searching (cf. Shipton 759).

Indeed, The Bear often uses the music as a means of searching for answers and exploring the anomaly that is his existence. Therefore, the music becomes a tool through which he can search for himself and Zabor describes this process as somewhat destructive. The Bear breaks apart the music that he knows to make something new in an effort to understand his desire to create music. In addition, through this process, he hopes to discover something about his own identity. As he records some music, he slips into this kind of philosophising:

> There was a kind of shuttered tumult in him, as if all this equivocal music were being generated by a drama taking place from behind the closed doors of a room somewhere deeper in the house of his nature than he could bodily reach … but all he could do here … was use what he knew about music and the horn to make some sense out of such [an] echo of [the] real. (173)

But by the end of the novel, as his band members sit between sets with bleeding fingers (literally) he is convinced this search for identity through his music has led to nothing but violence:

> What have I done? The Bear asked himself ... Violence to everyone around me, the usual price of my obtaining any kind of pleasure at all. Does making an artistic statement sufficient to the fundamental questions my existence has proposed really require this much breakage? (457)

Therefore, by the conclusion, he has not found his identity, but instead has found that his musical response to the discrimination he has faced has led him to enact both intimate and performative violence upon others. His own acts of violence are explained as being a response to his identity crisis, which he attempts to solve through music. Zabor portrays the creative process as a violent act that is influenced by, and has influence upon, the psychological state of the performer.

In addition, The Bear has no answers: The uncertainty of who he is in relation to the human world remains. If the novel is viewed as a commentary on racial identity in the late twentieth century, Zabor seems to suggest that creative collaboration is not necessarily enough to bridge the gap between different ethnicities because of the imbalance of power – physically and socially. An underlying concept here is also that creative expression through improvisation cannot define who we are as individuals and how we relate to one another.

Finally, the primary way The Bear hopes to define himself is by comparing himself to other musicians, and by being accepted by them. Musicians initially don't take him seriously, as many are afraid to play with him or think he is just a "novelty act" (Zabor 43), reflecting the history of early black minstrel performers in America (Gioia 8). Once most musicians and audiences do accept him, however, it is as a musician and not as a bear. He is respected and even admired, embarking on a big performance opportunity at the end of the novel. Stueart argues that the reason the musicians finally accept him is not only because of his musical ability, but also because of the fact that he is a bear:

> Other jazz musicians are the only ones taking him seriously, and this might stem from the fact that jazz is improvisation – working off the material you have to create something new. The Bear is an improvisation of a jazz musician, literally. A playful detour from the mainstream melody, an offbeat that still works, a harmony only heard if one modulates the right chords. The Bear, being improvisation on his own part and Zabor's improv, fits in well with the other improvisos who play instruments with him in various gigs throughout the book. (207)

Thus, Stueart suggests that The Bear himself is a kind of improvisation, and as such, he "fits in" because of the fact that he is a bear. While I agree that there is a possibility that his fellow musicians acceptance of him does come from their willingness to accept new ideas, I would dispute Stueart's equating of jazz improvisation with Zabor's "improvisation" of The Bear as a character. As previously argued, one of the qualities that makes jazz improvisation so arresting is that it is immediate and live; it evolves unpredictably and is only repeated if it is recorded and can be played back. Perhaps this is the manner in which Zabor wrote the character, but it seems simplistic to equate the two so fully.

Nevertheless, as Stueart suggests, The Bear, like African-American jazz musicians before him, finds some acceptance through jazz. Ultimately, it seems to be a legitimate occupation for him, as it was for early black jazz musicians struggling to find their place in society in the early twentieth century (Sidran 31). By the end of the novel, although he has found a place where he can be accepted, The Bear remains dissatisfied: He fears the violence of his music and has an incomplete love affair with Iris, his white lover. He muses over "this lucky-in-music-unlucky-in-love routine: I won't have it" (Zabor 473), reflecting the pattern of so many jazz musicians' lives. His identity as a bear has finally been made redundant in his professional career, but it still

has an impact on how he relates to women and perhaps the human race generally – where the human race represents the dominant race, that is, the white population of America.

Similarly, Zabor suggests musicians are capable of attacking one another through music, as The Bear responds to some unwilling collaborators by unsettling their sense of the music. Zabor portrays this attack as violence against both the music and the musicians:

> As the Bear applied more pressure, the time splintered like boxwood beneath the weight of his phrasing and the home key collided smartly with two or three others, motivic fragments flying off at the edges like electrons from a critical mass about to go fission. (45)

In this way the ruptured music is represented as a weapon with which he can control his fellow musicians; he unsettles them to the point that they are forced to comply with the way he wants to play. In the context of the narrative, The Bear performs with violence in order to claim his place as a serious musician. Therefore the music becomes a means of fighting for respect, and for breaking down assumptions that he is a gimmick. It becomes the means for him to prove that he is not simply a saxophone playing Bear, but rather, an accomplished musician.

However, towards the end of the novel, when The Bear has finally established himself as a musician first, and a bear second, there is still violence in the music that he plays, and he hurts the musicians he works with – though with a different intention and outcome (457). Zabor thus explores a form of performative violence that occurs when performing music physically hurts the musicians. After The Bear takes a long solo at a gig, one musician says to him, "Next time you want to kill us use a gun, all right?" (457), suggesting he has pushed the rest of the band too far, exhausting them with his stamina. This question causes The Bear some self-doubt, unsure if he should be collaborating with humans at all: "What have I done?" (457).

The Bear does not want to hurt people, and his potential violence becomes emblematic of his personal struggle throughout the novel: How can a bear relate to humans without destroying them? He fears causing harm in his friendship with Jones, who may be incarcerated for helping him. He fears physically hurting Iris, his human lover, when they have intercourse, and finally he fears hurting his fellow musicians as they perform.

By the end of the novel, he hides himself away, disappearing into the wilderness to be alone and unable to "budge [a] brute rock with [a] bit of misremembered, half-accomplished song" (478). This line suggests that The Bear has tried to use music to change the "brute rock" of his existence and his complex relationship with humans. However, he has found that his music is not enough to actually change his world, no matter how much he would like it to have an impact. The music has enabled a dialogue between himself and human beings, but it has not actually solved the problem of his *relationship* with humanity – he is still a bear, and he is still stronger, bigger and more violent than a human.

The Bear's consideration of a "misremembered, half-accomplished song" suggests that this is how he sees the jazz he plays: broken, fragmentary and perhaps unfinished. He sees his own performance ability as having not yet reached its peak, and therefore his own narrative is unfinished, and the music reflects this. His feeling that his song cannot move the physical world suggests that perhaps the meaning of the music is not enough. The music has failed to produce the bond he hoped to create, and the suggestion is that perhaps he was asking too much of the music. If examined in the context of music making as a representation of the creative process, The Bear's position at the end of the novel suggests that if artists have an expectation that their craft will improve their life, they will be disappointed.

Zabor represents jazz and improvisation as an art form that has the capacity to transform sound into a means of manipulating both musicians and audiences physically and psychologically. The idea of breaking music down, pulling it apart and disrupting the key or time signature is used as a metaphor for the disruption

of conventions in relation to identity, race and social history. Conversely, violence within the narrative also becomes a metaphorical tool through which to explore the creative process – particularly the process of improvisation. Physical or visible violence may be a metaphor for psychological disturbance or suffering, while psychological or musical violence is at times a metaphor for deeper emotional concerns within The Bear. The history of The Bear's "slavery" and the music he makes has an impact on how the music is both performed and received by the audience. The music embodies and sometimes absorbs the violations, breakages and damage from The Bear's life.

Improvisation, then, is a tool through which Zabor suggests that violence is inherent in both the creative process and the search for identity. He represents the music making as violence and destructive, even through the reality of improvisation may be anything but. He creates an impossible character in a possible world, enabling a representation of improvisation that stretches the constraints of reality. The result is an enigmatic, geninus musician whose violent "nature" makes him simultaneously the most creative artist and the most destructive social animal.

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