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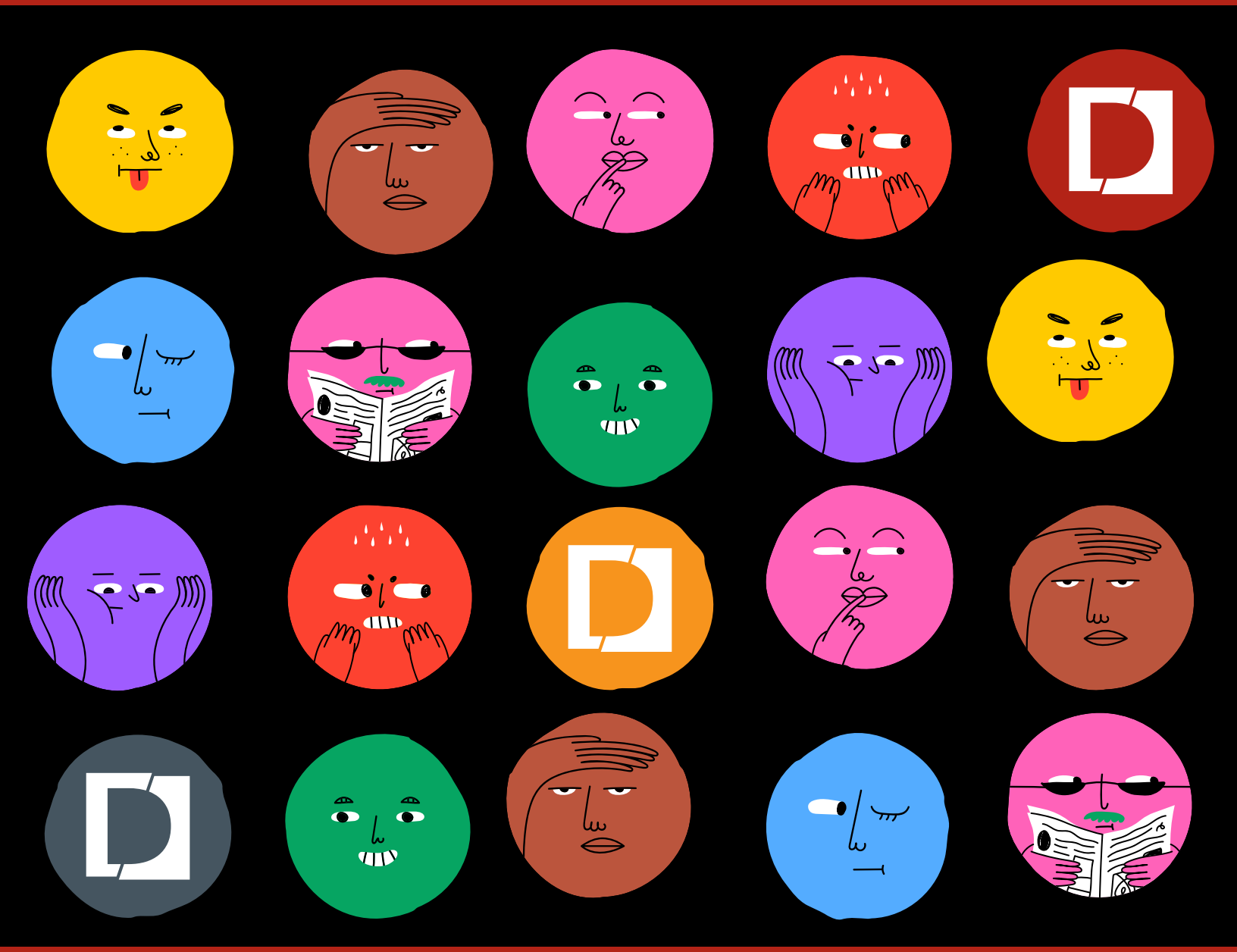
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy



Critique and "Controversy" in Pedagogy and Pop Culture

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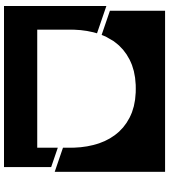

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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

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. *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions offering theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture and pedagogy, 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, please visit www.journaldialogue.org or email Dr. Anna CohenMiller, Editor in Chief, at editors@journaldialogue.org.

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Teaching for Change

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." This axiom was aptly expressed by Nelson Mandela, a renowned political leader who taught by the example he set through his words and his deeds to an audience of 40 million South Africans. The axiom ties well into the theme of the current issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* which deals with the act of teaching through the elucidation of known phenomena in order to affect the thinking of members of the public and bring about an element of personal growth and social transformation. Such pedagogy is present in various forms both inside and outside the traditional classroom. Yet Mandela's lesson of peace and reconciliation was a challenging one to absorb and to live by in a post-apartheid South Africa that was rife with racism, white supremacy, and structural violence. But to maintain peace in the country, and to enable its citizens to move towards the transformation of the oppressive social, political and economic realities that had been experienced by Black South Africans, it was crucial that Mandela's message reach a mass public. Hence, by strategically utilising his political platform to lead controversial conversations within the public sphere, Mandela succeeded in employing rhetoric with the potential to impart knowledge to South Africans of all stripes, and was aimed at modifying their perspectives and bringing about transformative peace and stability within the country.

Education has to do with the types of conversations we choose to lead as educators and the methods we use to engage others in the conversation. It is about the pedagogical tools we employ, and its effectiveness relies on the skillful use of the platforms that are available to us. Regarding out-of-classroom platforms, these have been numerous and diverse throughout the ages. For instance, ancient Greeks had the Pnyx, a hill with a platform on which rhetoricians stood to address their listeners. Preachers had their pulpits and religious reformers their pamphlets. And today, we have various art forms, social media platforms, differing forms of satire, and late-night talk shows, among others. The wide reach of our current-day platforms impart a host of possibilities for personal and social change as these can be used to engender a conversation among diverse groups of people. Through them, an "educator" can elucidate a perspective on certain phenomena or further explain, approve of, or even ridicule a particular politico/socio event. Also, by using platforms such as comedy or satire, a public personage can spread their message in an entertaining way. This can be a powerful pedagogical tool. Yet as with all forms of communication, there are limitations that could lead to a particular message being diluted or provide room for misinterpretation.

The pedagogical tools used by public persons with large followings can also generate unfruitful misunderstandings and controversies. In some cases, the tools such influential personalities select to promote specific points of view can lead to a misinterpretation of their intended meaning, inciting their followers as well as their dissenters to remonstrate in ways that are potentially harmful to their reputations or to their cause. What's more, the negative conversations and comments that come up may have less of a focus on the message delivered than on the actual character of the person delivering that message.

The four articles and the musings on pedagogy and practice featured *in Critique and "Controversy" in Pedagogy and Pop Culture*, highlight the ways that pop culture and social media provide platforms that promote critical thinking, dialogue and debate, and the type of questioning that underpins a socially aware and politically engaged citizenry. For instance, in our first article, "Perils and Promise of Virtual Reality in Inclusive Teaching", Michelle VanNatta examines the possibilities, and potential difficulties, of employing

virtual reality (VR) as a classroom tool to support inclusive education pedagogy. The author presents a specific VR project that was employed in a criminology university class and provides the views of the students regarding the benefits and limitations of the exercise. Through VanNatta's article, we learn that via the use of VR, which has the technology to simulate real environments in a completely embodied and immersive experience, students are given the opportunity to experience the reality and point of view of others. It is this that renders VR technology relevant in the inclusive classroom. The adage that states that "you have to walk in another someone else's shoes before judging someone" rings true, and the shoes of others provided by the VR experience include those of members of diverse societal groups whose experiences in society differ from members of the dominant and more privileged ones. Allowing university students to experience the lives of different individuals from the latter's point of view enhances their understanding of the current realities of their lives. VanNatta illustrates the use of VR technology in her classroom via a study where, subsequent to the activity, students answered a survey where they shared their opinion on the effectiveness of the exercise as well as some limitations that would need to be addressed.

Our second article, "Will the Odds Ever Be in Her Favor? Katniss Everdeen and the Female Athlete" demonstrates a pedagogical strategy employed by the writer Tom Kemerly where the popular dystopian film *The Hunger Games* was brought into a "Culture of Fitness" class to generate the interest of the students, a technique that proved successful as it gave rise to thoughtful discussion and comparisons between the role of the female athlete both in the real world and in the film. Among Kemerly's students, which included several female athletes, the discussions became honest and very meaningful as these students described the gendered divisions they are forced to navigate within their sport and how these divisions affect their athletic performance as well as their conduct outside of practice and competition. These conflicts, in turn, mimic the reality of the female athletes in *The Hunger Games*. Hence, the same restrictions for female athletes exist in both spheres, the real and the make-believe, and interestingly, it was the film reflecting the reality of the female athletes in the classroom that enlivened the course and generated awareness of a situation in sports still lacking in fairness and equality.

With "Don't Sweat the Technique: Rhetoric, Coded Social Critique, and Conspiracy Theories in Hip Hop", John Chase takes the reader out of the traditional classroom and into that of the real world. As the title suggests, the article discusses the role conspiracy theories play in hip hop and the way the intent underlying their use can be misinterpreted by those who either follow or critique these various hip hop artists. Chase calls our attention to the consequences of hip hop artists infusing conspiracy panic into their work. Essentially, these artists employ lyrics related to conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique, embedding these words into the essence of a song. Frequently, however, such lyrics are used to demonstrate the fallaciousness of the conspiracy theory, and thus do not reflect the artist's point of view. Listeners and critics, however, frequently misunderstand the rhetorical nature of the song, reductively ascribing these views to the artist. Chase uses examples from hip hop lyricists Rakim, Tupac, and Nas to illustrate this tendency and to demonstrate how these misguided social critiques may ultimately delegitimize both the artist and their art, denying the artist's scope to widen their own individual outlook to produce a work of art.

In the final article of this issue, Marissa Lammon examines the conflation of comedy and politics in the creation of satirical sketches and their influence on public opinion about controversial phenomena. The primary example in "Cake and Conclusions: Rhetorical Roots in 'Sheetcaking' and Fallacious Community Responses", is that of comedian Tina Fey's hotly debated sketch on Saturday Night Live, where she ridiculed President Trump's response to the Charlottesville protests and urged privileged middle-class women to eat sheetcake instead of participating in rallies held in response to the protests. Fey's sketch prompted debate and controversy as many listeners misinterpreted her underlying message. Lammon uncovers the nature of the public's misunderstanding of the sketch and consequent outrage, demonstrating the role such satirical comedies play in moulding public opinion and satirizing public personages. The structure and nature of late-night talk shows is laid bare, showing their capacity to inform viewers of political issues and perspectives through humor and satire, and by so doing, leading to the formation of society's understanding and resulting opinion of political issues.

In this issue's musings, Florencia Garcia-Rapp reflects on the scholar's need for tolerance and an acceptance of ambiguity while researching issues in popular culture. In "Teaching and Learning Popular Media Cultures: Fostering Enquiry Journeys within the Messy World of Human Social Life", Garcia-Rapp illustrates the potentiality of popular media culture pedagogies for enhancing anthropological discussions of today's society. Indeed, for the student and/or researcher of the social sciences to attain an understanding of modern culture, it is crucial that social phenomena are interpreted in the spirit of openness towards diverse interpretations. It has to do with entering the discussion with the expectation of encountering contradictions and differing viewpoints, which ultimately enhance the scholar's understanding of cultural phenomena and enables them to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. Furthermore, Garcia-Rapp highlights the import of bringing in elements of popular culture into the classroom through the processes of zooming in and zooming out as a way of allowing the educator to truly understand their students and providing students the opportunity to expand their knowledge of the cultural artifacts they engage with on a daily basis.

Ultimately, we should have these conversations, regardless of the discomfort brought about by potentially difficult dialogues. It is therefore necessary for educators and rhetoricians of any stripe to take on these pedagogical risks and that the ensuing conversations be held in an open and accepting manner. This is the type of education that will enable us to actualize a more liberatory society for all.

The overarching theme underlying *Critique and "Controversy" in Pedagogy and Popular Culture* is the conversations that are generated by educators in the traditional classroom and rhetoricians on popular culture platforms that are geared towards heightening awareness of current politico/socio issues and bringing about heightened tolerance and empathy towards individuals from other social groups. The current issue has come about through the collaboration of our dedicated team of individuals which include all authors featured in the issue and our peer-reviewers: Managing and Musings Editor, Karina Vado; Copy Editors, Robert Gordyn, Arlyze Menzies; Reference Editors, Joseph Yap, Yelizaveta Kamilova, April Manabat; and Production Editor and Creative Director, Douglas CohenMiller. In reading the articles and Musing in this issue, readers will gain an understanding of the merits of introducing studies of popular culture into the classroom, and conversely, the impact of popular culture in shaping and enhancing opinions and sensitivities regarding the controversial issues of the politico/socio sphere.

Miriam Sciala
Managing Editor
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We look forward to your engagement with this issue and working with you in the future!

Anna CohenMiller
Editor in Chief

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

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Peril and Promise: Student Experiences of Virtual Reality and Implications for Inclusive Social Justice Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Virtual reality (VR) is a fast-evolving technology rapidly being integrated into education and training in multiple sectors of society. As the use of VR spreads, it is important to critically analyze both its role in effective pedagogies and how students experience it. Virtual reality has extraordinary promise for deeply engaging students, and it also poses particular challenges for equitable and effective teaching of diverse students. This paper discusses students' responses to a VR exercise and examines some of the complexities VR presents around racial justice, gender equity, and economic fairness. Virtual reality technology may be less effective and less comfortable for some types of bodies compared to others. In addition, the content of VR videos and the use of the technology to experience entering spaces that one could not otherwise access must be handled with sensitivity to power differences and social hierarchies. Finally, the potential anonymity and shifts in norms in moving into virtual interactions must be carefully addressed by instructors in order to create productive learning spaces and reduce potentially harmful or toxic interactions. This analysis focuses on teaching in the field of criminology and draws from experience exploring VR with several criminology classes, but is applicable across disciplines. Best practices involve first assessing if virtual reality is truly the best way to teach specific material and if so, using backwards design and effective teaching strategies, considering the accessibility and risks of the technology for students of different genders, races, abilities, and experiences, and carefully reviewing technology set-ups and content in order to use the technology safely and to the best advantage of students.

Keywords: virtual reality, educational technology, diversity, social justice pedagogy, inclusive teaching

Virtual reality (VR) is a fast-evolving technology that is being integrated into many different sectors of US society, including gaming, medicine and healthcare, entertainment, the physical sciences, psychotherapy, education and training, and the criminal legal system, among others. There has been rapid growth in collections of 360-degree videos that can be a rich source of teaching material. This technology is a quickly expanding facet of popular culture that is often highly engaging for students, and many educators are interested in incorporating virtual reality into their pedagogy.

Like all teaching tools, VR presents particular challenges for effective, equitable, and inclusive teaching. This paper considers some of the research literature on risks and benefits associated with VR technology that are relevant for classroom use, examining some of the value and challenges VR poses for teaching diverse students in terms of racial justice, gender equity, and economic fairness. The paper also discusses the experiences reported by students using VR for a class assignment. Though the analysis draws from experience exploring a pilot VR exercise with several criminology classes, the majority of the issues addressed are relevant for a range of disciplines in the social sciences, humanities, STEM, and other fields.

Most students reported in a survey that the class VR exercise was extremely engaging and helpful to their learning, with many noting that the exercise helped them better understand others' experiences. At the same time, some students experienced negative physical effects from their VR use, some were concerned that engagement with the technology could overshadow focus on course content, and some commented that they had feelings of guilt or sadness after viewing a particular VR video.

This paper will discuss recent research concerning the promise and also the risks of incorporating VR into the classroom. Next, the paper will summarize student survey responses about their experiences with a VR exercise in several criminology courses. Finally, the article concludes with both concerns and recommendations that the literature and pilot exercise suggest about the use of this technology for college classrooms.

ENGAGING THE BODY FOR EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

Students can often learn best when their attention is captured by content and teaching techniques that connect to their whole selves, potentially including intellect, emotions, and the body. In his work on body pedagogics, Shilling (2007, 2017, 2018) asserts that "*physical* experience is vital to thought and learning" (2017, p. 1209). The body can be engaged with movement and with in-person human interaction. This is commonly attempted through in-class discussions with instructors and other students, creative projects, internships, games, scavenger hunts, or exercises such as "gallery walks" that have students move around their classroom commenting on articles or images posted throughout the room.

Although we might be tempted to think of virtual reality as a cerebral experience, virtual reality is fundamentally an embodied experience (Czub & Janeta, 2021; Kilteni & Groten, 2012; Tham et al. 2018). Immersive VR involves vision and hearing, and sometimes smell, temperature, movement, and proprioception. More research is needed to clarify how physical engagement with VR affects different bodies and to understand what issues VR poses for education in a society that allocates different privileges and values based on race, ethnicity, gender, body size, normative body and cognitive abilities, and other sociophysical factors.

Inclusive teaching methods that maximize learning for all students are a crucial part of effective pedagogy (Clayton-Pedersen & Clayton-Pedersen, 2007). The University of Michigan Online Teaching resource explains: "Inclusive teaching involves deliberately cultivating a learning environment where all students are treated equitably, have equal access to learning, and feel valued and supported in their learning. Such teaching attends to social identities and seeks to change the ways systemic inequities shape dynamics in teaching-learning spaces, affect individuals' experiences of those spaces, and influence course and curriculum

design" (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, n.d.). Inclusive teaching is beneficial to all students in its commitment to using multiple methods of delivering content and assessing learning, as well as promoting an atmosphere of respect for learners and meeting students' learning needs. From this foundation, new technologies incorporated into the classroom need to be accessible to students with different identities, abilities, experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. This means considering issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, language, religion, immigration status, and other social identities and hierarchies in the use of classroom technology. Professors can best reach students when honoring diversity in determining which voices to center in the classroom, using multiple methods to deliver content and assess learning, and planning carefully to optimally implement educational technologies.

Virtual reality-based lessons can strongly motivate students and can assist in perspective-taking and full-body engagement. At the same time, VR can risk thwarting efforts for inclusive teaching in multiple ways, raising issues of racial justice, gender equity, and unequal access based on economic resources and physical ability. The paper will address each of these issues, along with ideas about moves toward equity and inclusion in the use of this technology.

DEFINING VIRTUAL REALITY

There is no universally accepted definition of virtual reality, but the term usually refers to a range of computer-generated, three-dimensional environments that users can interact with to different degrees. In 1996, Steve Bryson called VR a "new interface paradigm that uses computers and human-computer interfaces to create the effect of a three- dimensional world in which the user interacts directly with virtual objects (62). In 1999, Frederick Brooks defined VR simply as "any in which the user is effectively immersed in a responsive virtual world" (16).

There are many different forms of VR emerging. Most often, visual and audio elements are included, and users can observe and interact with the space with the use of a headset with earphones and goggles in any room that allows safe movement. Increasingly, other sensory inputs are included and may include temperature, motion, pressure, and smell. Gloves may be used to transmit sensation to the hands, and full suits may include inputs throughout the body. Dedicated rooms and caves are now the primary venues for some systems. Many setups are designed for specific gaming consoles. Some virtual environments are designed for single users, while others can involve interacting with avatars of other users. Prices vary accordingly.

This paper focuses on moderately priced immersive virtual reality options that were available in 2019. The technology and prices are changing so rapidly that it is not particularly useful to offer specifics on VR systems here, but educators seeking options may wish to consult with their disciplinary organizations, trusted technology magazines, and their university's educational technology specialists. The next section will delve into some of the reasons that instructors may indeed want to consider incorporating virtual reality into their pedagogy.

THE PROMISE OF VIRTUAL REALITY IN TRAINING AND ENGAGED SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHING

A search for virtual reality in an academic database turns up not only all kinds of results in computer sciences, but burgeoning use in a wide range of fields. For example, Dawson, Levy, and Lyons (2011) posit: "virtual reality and 3D technology might be useful in establishing new discourses in archaeological interpretation, as well as assisting in the exploration, construction, and maintenance of cultural identities through knowledge repatriation" (387). Gasperin, Zanirati, and Cavazzola (2018) found that first year surgical residents could build up to the skill level of second year residents using virtual reality training for laparoscopic

gallbladder removal techniques. Higher education, professional development, and community training are all making use of VR, including police training (Fields, 2006; Reyes, n.d.), therapy and education for prisoners (Trahan, 2019), empathy-building and community education (Tsoupikova et al. 2017; Stuart, 2016), and diversity training (Lee, 2014).

It is useful for professors in liberal arts and social sciences to help prepare their students to navigate the complex technologies that graduates may encounter in their professional lives. While many professors speak of their students as "digital natives" and assume that students are experts in the technologies surrounding them, in reality, professors may overestimate students' expertise in truly understanding contemporary technologies (Murray and Perez, 2014). Professors can enhance students' intellectual and pre-professional development by helping them wrestle with the ethical, practical, and social issues raised by emerging technologies. Instructors can help prepare students to consider the benefits and limits of particular technology and to make decisions about its use.

There are many different studies arguing that carefully designed virtual reality experiences can potentially be used to advance student learning and to enhance social justice-oriented pedagogies. For example, Farmer and Maister (2017) argue that specific forms of virtual reality experiences which have users take on aspects of others' identities in virtual spaces can help users to build empathy and reduce prejudice, as measured by instruments such as implicit bias testing. Mateu, Lasala, and Alaman (2014) examined an interactive mixed reality world called "virtual touch" that allows roleplaying and problem-solving. They looked at the benefits of virtual touch for inclusive education at a high school level. Their review is enthusiastic about the inclusive education potential of virtual touch for helping immigrant high school students learn Catalan language and culture. The assessment they provide is promising, but gives very little discussion of students' subjective perspectives and the best practices for implementing this type of program for true inclusivity. Diaz-Lopez, Tarango, and Contreras (2019) explore the inclusive educational promise of VR for archives and digital libraries, asserting that VR can be used to expand access to information and facilitate citizen science. Petrunina et al. (2020) comment that VR can be useful in promoting cognitive development for students with disabilities such as musculoskeletal disorders. Kavanagh et al. (2017) give a systematic review of VR in education and conclude that the most common use of VR was to "increase the intrinsic motivation of students" (p. 85).

While much research shows strong promise for VR in areas of social justice and inclusive teaching practices, VR must be employed with care and attention to specific factors in order to achieve its promise. The next section will consider some of the research findings about potential risks and pitfalls in the use of VR.

PERILS OF VIRTUAL REALITY IN UNIVERSITY CLASSES

Although virtual reality can provide significant educational benefits, there are a variety of risks and concerns with adapting VR for classroom use. Some key issues include the potential of a VR experience to involve: physical and sensory discomfort, negative cognitive impacts, trauma and difficult emotional reactions, lack of fit for particular bodies, lack of appropriate space or assistance to use the equipment, risk of assault or harmful interactions, and reinforcement of hierarchies of race, gender, and other social identities. These factors could exclude or intensely harm some students with marginalized identities, while more privileged students may find the same VR assignment to be fun or to bolster their sense of power and knowledge. Each of these factors will be considered in turn.

Physical Effects and Gender in Virtual Reality

Virtual reality use can provide a rich and engaging learning environment for users, but it carries the risk of certain kinds of physical harm. First, VR systems require disconnection from one's real physical surroundings and can involve repetitive, awkward movements that could lead to accident or injury (Penumudi et al. 2020).

Users of VR can also be vulnerable to a condition specific to computer applications called cybersickness. Symptoms can include "nausea, vomiting, eye fatigue, dizziness, [and] ataxia… related to the conflict between different body sensory systems" (Baniasadi, Ayyoubzadeh, and Mohammadzadeh 2020, p. 5). Some studies have shown these reactions to be extremely prevalent with certain types of virtual reality. One study found in their survey of participants that in a 15 - 60-minute exposure, "more than 80% of participants experienced nausea, oculomotor disturbances, and/or disorientation" (Stanney et al. 2003, p. 504), with the disorientation sometimes persisting more than a day. Almost ten percent of participants in that study quit early, while the authors noted that around 1% experienced an "emetic response."

Of particular concern for inclusive teaching is the finding that women may be more likely than men to experience sickness with currently available VR technologies. For example, Dobie et al. (2001) believe that there are biological differences in susceptibility to motion sickness that do not have to do with previous exposure to the technology nor to differences in reporting between men and women. A 2017 study specifically of men and women playing games on the VR system *Oculus Rift* found no significant differences in side effects for men and women in one game, but dramatically higher rates of motion sickness for women compared to men in another game (Munafo, Diedrick, and Stoffregen). The higher rates of motion sickness apparently correlated with gendered differences in body sway patterns (ibid). Stanney, Fidopiastis, and Foster (2020) argue that some differences in men's and women's susceptibility to cybersickness stem from headsets being designed to fit men better than women. When headsets were better adapted to accommodate women's interpupillary distance and not just to fit the average interpupillary distances of men, gender differences in cybersickness dropped significantly.

Trauma, Oppression, and Virtual Reality

Virtual reality also proves to be a double-edged sword in its psychological impact. For example, while VR can be used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (Kothgassner et al. 2019; Loucks et al. 2019; Gerardi et al. 2010; Difede et al. 2006), it can also trigger flashbacks and anxiety in some situations. There is the potential for deep and disturbing effects on the psyche that impact different groups in different ways that are not yet fully explored and understood.

One research group concluded that individuals can be strongly affected by the nature of the avatars made available to users in virtual spaces. They found that women who saw their own faces on highly sexualized avatars in virtual space subsequently self-objectified more and agreed more with rape myths in a questionnaire than did women who had the opportunity to operate in virtual space with more neutral avatars (Fox et al. 2015).

Nakamura, in her powerful 2020 article "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," raises the issue that people who occupy different positions in social hierarchies are bound to experience VRs differently. For example, Nakamura describes how a VR which places viewers in a position to observe the murder of Trayvon Martin appears to have been perceived as an interesting consciousness raising opportunity for many white viewers, while it was intensely traumatic for many Black viewers.

Nakamura writes that while VR content companies advertise themselves as offering unique opportunities to build understanding, "VR about victimized people has much in common with earlier forms such as literature, photography, and film, all of which use representations of suffering to produce feelings of immersion, identification, and empathy for those bodies that are not ours (Gaines, 2017)" (53). Referring to the VR depicting the murder of Trayvon Martin, Nakamura comments that many white people have difficulty believing Black teenagers' accounts of being brutalized by police, and instead feel the need to witness or "experience" some aspect of police violence themselves within VR before feeling distress about the problem or taking the issue seriously.

Nakamura argues that VR creates a sort of automated racial empathy that stops short of encouraging any kind of action toward transforming material conditions of inequality, writing that "the invasion of personal and private space that documentary VR titles 'for good' create is a spurious or 'toxic empathy' that enables white viewers to feel that they have experienced authentic empathy for these others, and this digitally mediated compassion is problematically represented in multiple media texts as itself a form of political activism" (47).

Harmful Behavior in Virtual Reality

Some analysts have raised concerns about how VR environments are vulnerable to particular forms of crime, including identity theft (Lake, 2020) and sexual aggression (Hansen, 2019). There is a concern that interacting in a virtual space can include a sense of anomie, anonymity, and exemption from the everyday rules of social interaction that could enhance the risk of harassment or abuse of others. Various such cases have been reported and some individuals and groups are working on developing strategies to reduce the risk of mistreatment in these spaces (see, for example, Hansen, 2019; Lemley and Volokh, 2018; and Madary and Metzinger, 2016).

Virtual Reality and Memory

Some have also raised the issue of how use of virtual reality may interact with memory and create confusion for users between "real" memory and memories of virtual reality. Already in 2009, Segovia and Bailenson at Stanford were finding that elementary school children had trouble discerning whether they had experienced something in VR or in real life. Although there have been various proposals for the use of virtual reality in treating psychiatric disorders and dementia (e.g. Kim, Pang, and Kim, 2019), this potential for users to confuse VR with real world events could make the use of the technology especially problematic for those with disturbances in perception, memory, and cognitive processing.

Pilot Exercise Exploring Use of Virtual Reality in Undergraduate Classes

The following section will discuss the exploration of virtual reality in several undergraduate criminology and sociology classes at Dominican University in Illinois. In keeping with findings in the literature, this pilot exercise found both potential risks and potential rewards in a trial of VR. The main questions guiding this pilot test with virtual reality were: How do students experience virtual reality in the context of a class exercise and what do they take away from viewing short VR videos related to class topics? Different elements of this question were examined with a short survey administered to students intended to address the following: How well can a short, immersive virtual reality exercise with moderate-cost equipment contribute to learning? What kinds of physical, emotional, or other effects do students experience when using virtual reality? Could virtual reality be useful for enhancing empathy-building or perspective-taking in college students? What kinds of technical or logistical issues might arise with the use of VR for a class exercise?

VR and Course Learning Goals. The VRs were selected to assist with goals related to understanding diversity and inequality in the criminal legal system for the courses Law & Society, Crime & Social Justice, and International and Comparative Criminology. All classes were assigned to view two short VR videos available freely online: "Clouds Over Sidra" and "On Blindness."

Law & Society has a learning goal that "Students will build capacity in critical assessment of diverse approaches to criminalization, adjudication, punishment, incapacitation, and maintenance of social order. Students will be able to articulate issues around implementing a fair legal system in a society with communities with diverse values, experiences, and identities." Crime and Social Justice has a learning goal that "Students will be able to articulate the impact of diversity issues and social inequality based on race, class, gender, sexual identity, national origin, ability and health, age, and religion on the US criminal legal system." International and Comparative Criminology has a goal "to assess strengths and weaknesses of different criminal legal systems on multiple dimensions, including efficiency, fairness, public safety, and human rights."

After the viewing, some courses connected to "On Blindness" by discussing questions about how blindness might impact interactions with police, testifying in court after being violently victimized, participating on a jury, serving as a witness in court, or being in jail or prison. Course discussions around "Clouds Over Sidra" addressed factors such as why there is controversy in the US around refugee issues, different views of refugees, ideas about the "cultural defense" to criminal charges and how the US should handle legal cases involving refugees who come from legal systems that are very different from that of the US, and whether culture and personal experience should be a factor in assigning guilt or giving a sentence.

Sample. Dominican is a small, private liberal arts university with an enrollment of about 2100 students and approximately fifty different undergraduate majors. Many students enroll just after high school and are between eighteen and twenty-four years old. Many students also enroll as transfers from community colleges. Most students live off campus and commute. The school is a Hispanic Serving Institution and has a student/faculty ratio of 11:1. Many students speak Spanish or Polish as a first language and a significant number of students are first generation college students.

Method. Virtual reality videos were assigned in several classes in an attempt to learn about students' responses to the technology. Working with a limited budget, the school provided a small grant to purchase a Samsung Galaxy cellphone and Samsung Gear headset, which use audio and visual inputs. This setup allowed students to use 360 videos that are freely available online.

Dominican's Media Center created a supervised space for students to use the headset and move freely with minimal risk of bumping into walls or other objects. A google sheet allowed students to coordinate their schedules with the library staff. The staff member oriented the students to the equipment and assisted them throughout their use, which typically had a duration of ten to twenty minutes each.

An alternative assignment worth the same credit was made available for students whose schedules made it difficult to get to the Media Center or who were not able or willing to view and respond to the VR for any reason.

Data Collection. After viewing, students were instructed to fill out anonymous electronic Qualtrics surveys reflecting on their experiences. About forty-six students responded. The survey asked students fourteen open-ended questions about factors such as their overall experience; what they learned; what aspects of the VR were helpful to their learning and why; what aspects of the VR did not contribute to their learning and why; how did the VR affect them emotionally and physically; how did the VR affect their impressions of different individuals and groups; what they liked and disliked about each VR video they viewed; how they would compare learning through VR with other types of learning; what they would change about this exercise; concerns they had about VR in college classes; and a question inviting them to comment freely.

Data Analysis. After initial review of student comments, a coding system was created by the author. The survey responses were then analyzed and coded into categories based on themes that appeared in the data. The coding process assessed the answer to each question to determine if it was primarily positive about VR, primarily negative about VR, primarily neutral, or mixed.

Findings. The survey questions were open ended and allowed students to frame their own responses. The core themes that emerged from the data are discussed below. Overall, the responses were strongly positive, although students did express a variety of concerns as well. Themes that emerged related to the questions asked in the survey and included: Positive engagement with and excitement about the exercise, negative bodily reactions, mixed emotional reactions, enjoyment of the technology as well as some negative technical and logistical issues, the immersive nature of the experience and the feeling of "being there," increased understanding or learning, novelty of the experience, the desire to experience more VR, and concerns about misuse of the technology or addiction to the technology. Student responses are described in more detail below.

General responses. When asked to reflect on their overall impressions, four students mentioned that this was their first-time using VR, while another four emphasized that they had used such technology previously. The majority used positive language to describe their experience, a few had significant negative reactions, and many had a blend of positive and negative comments.

Excitement about the technology. A dominant theme in student comments was positive engagement with the VR process. Comments included that: this experience with VR was novel and unique for them; they found the process very engaging and attention-grabbing; they had fun and were entertained; the experience was immersive and "felt like you were there."

Learning. Numerous students pointed out specific ways that they had learned about diverse communities and many also commented that there was nothing about the experience that they felt was detrimental to their learning process. Three students commented that they had difficulty linking the VR material to their learning from the course.

Based on informal professor impressions rather than survey responses, student discussion related to the VR topics involved more energy and attention than has been observed when these issues were taught through other means, though this intensity was not formally measured.

Physical experience. Four students described negative physical experiences including dizziness, motion sickness and disorientation. One student reported having a headache afterward that lasted for an hour. Some students expressed concern about others potentially becoming sick if VRs were used more widely.

Emotional experience. Some students emphasized that the VRs helped them have more empathy for others or feel more grateful for the privileges in their own lives, while some student responses focused on more negative emotional effects that the experience had on them, such as feeling sad or guilty. Some students expressed concerns about others becoming upset if exposed to certain kinds of VRs.

Logistics. Some noted that noises from the surrounding area disrupted their ability to learn. One of the respondents commented that having to go to the Media Center to participate was an inconvenience.

Concerns about Addiction, Distraction from Core Learning Goals, and Misuse of VR. Multiple students raised concerns that relying on VR for school could contribute to screen addiction or distractibility, that there could be problems with paying for the technology or ensuring adequate technical functioning, that students might focus too much on the technology and not on substantive material in a lesson, and that students might not take VR learning seriously. One student noted, "Virtual reality eliminated the human connection to the world which would make learning hard in the future." Another commented, "People might use it as a form of torture." An additional qualm was, "People could definitely use this technology for inappropriate things such as adult videos or violent content."

Comparing VR to other teaching tools. A number of students noted that they felt VR was better than traditional classroom learning tools, with comments like, "It was more intriguing. I felt more involved which made me pay attention more." Another said, "It is better because you can visualize it as well as listen. It keeps you more engaged." One student commented that the VR experience was so much better than learning in the regular classroom that they wondered: "Do we still need profs?" On the other hand, a smaller but significant number of students commented that they preferred classroom staples such as professor lectures or regular videos in class followed by discussion, and noted that their VR experience, at least as used in the pilot, had them much more focused on the technology itself rather than any course material.

DISCUSSION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCORPORATING VIRTUAL REALITY INTO A CLASS

The following section of this paper offers some ideas toward incorporating the technology in a way that is compatible with inclusive teaching that builds the best student learning outcomes. This feedback

on experiences with virtual reality, along with the literature discussed, suggest several ways to create the most optimal VR learning experiences for students. These include significant preparation so that students understand the context of what they will experience both in terms of content and how it fits into learning goals, as well as potential physical and emotional reactions. A detailed and structured debriefing afterwards can help students integrate and reflect on what they have experienced. In this exercise, students were placed in the fairly voyeuristic role of observing the Syrian refugee camp in "Clouds Over Sidra" without a clear analysis of the history and context of these specific camps and the production of this particular virtual video. Some of the ethical problems with "Clouds Over Sidra" are discussed in Nakamura's powerful 2020 *Journal of Visual Culture* paper, mentioned earlier. This pilot exercise was conducted in 2019, before the publication of Nakamura's article, and the article raised crucial issues that were not considered in implementing the pilot. Although the student survey data did not point to any particularly concerning results from the use of this VR, anyone interested in using "Clouds Over Sidra" is strongly encouraged to review Nakamura's concerns about the politics and ethics of this particular VR and the general genre to which it belongs.

The VR video on blindness would have best served students if its importance and limitations were carefully discussed with students in advance, and the questions asked in the debriefing about people with visual disabilities navigating the criminal legal system would best have been posed both before and after the VR experience.

Ideally, professors would be able to select VR systems that minimize side effects for all genders and types of bodies, but the availability of these is questionable. At minimum, students need to be adequately warned of potential physical and psychological effects they might experience during and after the use of VR, and any available information on cybersickness related to any specific system in use must be actively investigated in advance. Students must be informed that if they experience physical, emotional, or other discomfort that they can choose to stop their VR experience at any time and access course learning goals in another way. Some potential alternative assignments that may offer other approaches to the learning goals could include viewing and responding to conventional video or working through interactive web material.

The room set up for students to use for their VR experiences should not be noisy nor distracting, in order to allow students to properly engage with their experience. There should be staff available to help students with set up and to monitor students during use to help ensure safety. Finally, students' potential emotional outcomes, such as potential feelings of guilt or distress, should be discussed both before and after the experience.

Professors must consider why they want to incorporate virtual reality into a class in the first place. Using the course planning strategy of backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998; Reynolds & Kearns, 2017), instructors do best to first develop the core learning goals of their class. What do they want students to be able to do and understand at the conclusion of the semester? If VR is the best tool for bringing particular content to the class, or if students need to learn about virtual reality itself because of its importance in their field, then finding the optimal ways to incorporate VR is a positive step. Using VR in a class simply because the technology itself is intriguing is tempting, but suboptimal for overall learning, as students themselves commented that the technology can be more a distraction than an aid in learning.

For social science students in particular, it can be valuable to connect the use of classroom materials and media with information on the political economy of the production of those materials. Students can learn to critically analyze how information, knowledge, and images are created. Students may be able to build their understanding of the genre of VR by considering who profits economically from the sales of VR equipment and content, as well as considering the conditions of labor under which content is produced. It is also useful for students to know who controls the images and narratives that they are consuming (Nakamura 2020). For example, in the same way that professors may ask students to consider the historical and political context in

which a particular work of literature was created, students may consider how a VR video featuring members of marginalized communities may take a different shape if the video is written, directed, and produced by members of more privileged communities employed by a video game company compared to a video produced by members of the community being portrayed. Virtual reality is a powerful format that has the potential to provide a major platform for diverse perspectives that can be extraordinarily beneficial to students if meaningful content is incorporated into classes with due care.

In addition, students can be asked to critically consider the emotional elements of VR representations. What is the VR experience positioning students to feel, and to what end? The company that produced the aforementioned VR about the murder of Trayvon Martin asserts that its aim is to produce empathy, but Lisa Nakamura reminds us that the name of the company is actually "Pathos."

Next, instructors need to investigate the specific VR systems they would like to use in order to best fit the technology to their classroom needs. First, it is important to consider what students might be able to afford if they have to purchase any technology on their own. Students are often already facing excessive debt from tuition, living expenses, and books. Most likely, professors will need to consider what the school is able to afford, as well as the type of space and supervision needed to effectively use the technology while avoiding risks of injury, theft, or use of the devices for purposes not appropriate to the university. Very low-cost goggles are now available, some even made of cardboard, that can give a very basic VR experience for under $30. These can be paired with mobile apps and earbuds, but students must be able to afford a smartphone to be able to do this. For students who are studying from home via online learning, these goggles could be a required purchase for a class to be used at home in the same ways that textbooks or calculators may be required for a course, but economic assistance or equipment loans may be needed for students who do not have access to smartphones.

Some types of VR take quite a bit of effort to set up and acclimate to, so the logistics of incorporating the technology for a class can be complicated. Is someone available to train and assist students in the use of devices? How will scheduling be handled? Professors may be able to collaborate with a campus library, media center, technology center, teaching assistant, or other campus workers or resources in order to make a virtual reality exercise happen.

Instructors can seek out VR systems that are maximally accessible to students of all sizes, abilities, and genders, as some VR setups are easier to adjust for different body sizes and shapes than others, and some setups are more likely than others to produce gender differences in physical side effects. Additionally, some systems are better designed than others to accommodate students who may have blindness or low vision, hearing impairment, claustrophobia, movement or balance issues, a tendency to motion sickness, or other physical, psychological or medical conditions that could impact the use of the technology.

While VR may have great potential for empowering populations with different abilities (see, for example, Bryant, 2020), it can also be developed and deployed in ways that exclude. It is up to developers and instructors to make VR spaces as inclusive as possible.

Once an instructor has identified the course goals and clarified that incorporating VR is a good way to meet those goals and selected the most appropriate VR system, it is important to take care in selecting specific VR content. The strength of VR in producing an immersive experience can also be a downfall if the content produces significant distress. Trauma triggers can be difficult to predict. While the issue of trigger warnings continues to be debated in academia (see, for example, Bentley, 2017), if an individual has post-traumatic stress disorder, all sorts of stimuli could trigger flashbacks or distress, from the color red to the smell of lemons. Just as attempts at universal design can never be one hundred percent universal in accommodating every individual's needs at all times, not all trauma triggers can be predicted and avoided. There are, however, many virtual reality videos that can be easily identified as potentially traumatic to view for particular individuals or

groups. Trauma is not distributed equally in the population. Individuals with marginalized identities, groups targeted for state violence, people who come from communities burdened by systemic trauma (Goldsmith, Martin, and Smith, 2014) and/or historical trauma (Kohut, 2020), and women, trans*, and non-binary people targeted for gender-based violence may be vulnerable to acute distress when confronted with materials related to violence or oppression. Learning about certain human rights abuses through VR could be an engaging and powerful learning experience for some students, while others directly affected by these or similar abuses may become so overwhelmed by the distressing material in the immersive VR medium that their learning in class and their overall wellbeing is harmed. While some students may benefit from having their awareness raised about particular types of suffering in the world, other students in the class may be routinely subjected to that form of suffering. Those who are targeted may need to be able to distance themselves through a variety of sophisticated practical, cognitive, emotional, and intellectual strategies in order to contemplate the same issues. The intense immersion of virtual reality can make it difficult to employ distancing techniques that can work with an emotionally overwhelming book, such as daydreaming, looking away, slowing down one's reading, skipping around in the text, or using grounding techniques to focus on one's immediate physical surroundings. It is important for professors to use extreme caution or to avoid VRs that depict intense forms of suffering, abuse, mistreatment, and inequality. The same students who are already facing marginalization and inequality are those who are most likely to be harmed in the process of viewing such materials.

In terms of addressing potential crime or aggression in classroom VR spaces that involve interaction with others, professors need to develop clear policies and safety strategies. It may be useful to collaborate with a university's information and technology department, computer science faculty, diversity officer, sexual assault and gender violence prevention staff, counseling center, safety office, and office of student conduct, among others, to develop clear codes of conduct, supervision measures, safety planning, grievance procedures, intervention plans, and sanctions or restorative practices as a response to any policy violations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With anonymous one-time surveys, it was not possible to ask probing questions and delve more deeply into why some students were able to make learning goal connections more readily than others. In addition, there was no pre and post-test of material, strongly limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about the efficacy of the exercise for student comprehension. Students' positive responses focused most intensely on the interesting nature of the exercise and the ways it helped them expand their knowledge of others' perspectives, and their negative responses focused most intensely on physical side effects and their concerns about the potential of the medium being more engaging than the content.

For both instructor and students, the novelty and excitement of incorporating this technology sometimes overshadowed the focus on core learning objectives. This highlights the importance of strict adherence to backwards design, focusing first on creating learning objectives, measuring the objectives effectively, and incorporating teaching methods and technologies always and only in the service of those objectives.

While this pilot exercise provided valuable information about student experiences, for future research, it would be useful to divide students into a VR group and a control group viewing conventional videos. Student knowledge of target material and skills could be carefully assessed before and after the lesson so that student learning can be evaluated along with their general experiences of the technology. In addition, it would be useful to have a larger number of participants in order to complete some statistical analyses and to look for any correlation between student characteristics and responses to the VRs. The technology and content would need to be carefully selected for accessibility, with consideration given to avoiding both VR systems and VR videos with heightened risks of causing cybersickness or distress to any group of students.

CONCLUSION

Virtual reality classroom assignments have the potential to reproduce or create inequalities through the colonizing gaze and artificial embodiment. The technology creates differential physical and emotional impacts across race, gender, and disability, with a higher burden falling on groups with marginalized identities and histories of trauma. Likewise, the technology can be hard to access for those with physical disabilities or those facing economic struggles. Is there a role for VR in criminology pedagogy? Like most technology in education, instructors can use VR more or less skillfully as a tool to help students build particular competencies and knowledge. With good planning, preparation of lesson specifics, careful selection of technology and content, and thorough debriefing, VR could be useful as a tool for certain types of classes. Best practices involve first assessing if virtual reality is truly the best way to teach specific material if so, using backwards design, inclusive teaching strategies, and careful review of technology set-ups and content in order to use the technology to the best advantage of students.

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Will the Odds Ever Be in Her Favor? Katniss Everdeen and the Female Athlete

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ABSTRACT

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a specific issue. One subset of autoethnography, critical autoethnography, combines the narrative or storytelling aspect of autoethnography with critical theory approaches in order to gain illustrate for the reader a specific site of oppression within one's culture. Through an examination of the books and films of *The Hunger Games*' saga, this paper will examine the interaction between students and professor in regard to the journey of the female athlete through the power dynamic prevalent in the social milieu of sport culture today. For both Katniss and the female athlete, a specific gender representation has been accepted by society and assigned to women; thus, placing constraints on her and her actions by controlling her representation. It is this attempt at control over the female athlete that is the focus of this critical autoethnography. Institutionalized patriarchal practices such as these are faced by Katniss and the female athlete within Panem and the world of sport, respectively. These metaphorically similar norms and rituals reinforce the notion of a perceived superiority of the male athlete through adherence to socially constructed and strictly enforced gender norms that are the site of a constant battle faced by the female athlete today.

Keywords: women's sports, pop culture, power, gender, autoethnography, student experience

At first glance, the fictional world of *The Hunger Games* created by author Suzanne Collins and the real world of sports today may not seem to have a lot in common. Technically, both worlds revolve around competition, albeit one has much higher stakes than the other. Upon further examination, however, more similarities between these worlds emerge. A few years ago, while teaching a course titled "Culture of Fitness," I noticed students growing frustrated and examining the assigned material less and less as the semester progressed, primarily because no one saw a real connection between themselves and the subject matter. Rather than continue with methods that were not connecting with these students, I decided to utilize a reading with which all were familiar and challenge them to make connections themselves. When we chose to examine *The Hunger Games*, the shift to incorporate popular culture into the course renewed students' interest, as well as provided some unexpected results.

I initially imagined that using *The Hunger Games* in the course would lead to an examination of gym culture, social media and "Fitspiration," and issues related to gender, race, and sexuality in sport. However, this particular class included a significant number of women who were members of the university's D-I athletic teams. These student athletes not only found different connections than I had made, but their insights also shone a spotlight on my own biased point of view, which was certainly influenced by my past experiences as a white male in sport. Almost from the beginning of examining the text, the athletes in class began to draw connections between President Snow and the NCAA. Between the Department of Athletics and their coaches. Between the Capitol and a rabid fan base that expects feminine beauty simultaneously with high level sport performance. Between Career tributes and those athletes who receive preferential treatment because of their privilege. The text revealed many more underlying issues to which the athletes could relate than I realized.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, was a character with whom the female athletes could best relate, for she endured oppression and subordination similar to that which female athletes face today. The institutionalized patriarchal practices that Katniss and female athletes encounter within Panem and the real world of sport, respectively, utilize metaphorically similar norms and rituals to reinforce the notion of superiority of the male athlete. Through adherence to socially constructed and strictly enforced gender norms, the world of sports reveals a constant battle faced by female athletes today. This battle is the focus of this critical autoethnography, which will examine the books and films of *The Hunger Games* saga. More specifically, the voice of its protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, serves as an allegory for the journey taken by the female athlete (referred to simply as "athlete" in the remainder of this paper), through the power dynamic prevalent in the social milieu of sport and fitness culture today.

"THEY HAVE TOO MANY ADVANTAGES": PRIVILEGE AND THE MALE ATHLETE

In *The Hunger Games*, author Suzanne Collins tells the story of the country of Panem, a dystopian depiction of future North America, born after an uprising by the districts that was quelled by the Capitol. The country of Panem is divided into 13 nation-states (12 of which are operational) referred to as districts; each of these districts is responsible for providing the Capitol with the goods of an industry dictated to that area by the Capitol. All districts are subject to the command of the Capitol, led by tyrannical dictator President Coriolanus Snow. The districts have no influence on the politics of Panem and very limited control over their own districts. As a reminder of the Capitol's unassailable power, the districts are forced to supply, through a lottery, one boy and one girl aged 12 to 18 to compete in the "Hunger Games." The children are allowed to train for a week before being sent into an arena of the Capitol's creation to fight to the death in a televised event that is mandatory viewing for everyone in the districts. The last person standing at the end of the games is then celebrated and given a privileged position in society.

The root of the war being waged by both Katniss and the women of my classroom is the automatic privilege afforded to those aligned with the Capitol and its metaphorical corollary, the male athlete. One of the

ancillary readings for the course that struck a chord with the students came from French philosopher Michel Foucault, who stated that privilege typically exists in a form of perceived superiority, which is indicative of a type of power that "applies itself to everyday life, categorizes the individual and marks them by their own individuality, attaches them to their own identity, imposes a law of truth on them that they must recognize, and others recognize in them" (46). I initially interpreted this passage as generically highlighting the privilege that an athlete in a social environment often enjoys, a type of "perceived superiority" in the form of increased leeway with disciplinary action. The women of the class also saw this, but they expressed a deeper connection to the passage. They saw sport through the eyes of Laura Burton, who stated that this type of power is inherent within sport and shapes gender expectations and their concomitant performances by encouraging the exhibition of traits that reproduce traditional values of masculinity, which are responsible for, among other things, subordinating women (156). To them, their inferior positioning in both the world of sport and in society manifests in characteristics such as their "soccer thighs" and "lacrosse shoulders," which marks their bodies in way that society at large deems inferior to the prescribed feminine norm, and that the sports world sees as a girl trying to play a man's game. They found this argument particularly problematic—their bodies became a symbol of their violation of social norms, which are quite difficult to argue against.

Upon closer scrutiny, *The Hunger Games* reveals a similar patriarchy-enforcing construction in the world of sport that privileges the male tributes in the book. The power referenced by Foucault (46) and experienced by Katniss and the women in my class, have broad social implications for the athlete, making her vulnerable to patriarchal control that influences her gender performances. While this lends itself to a binary view of gender, it cannot be dismissed as an archaic discourse. Certainly, both today's 21st century culture and 22nd century Panem have become more gender inclusive and have loosened the constraints of an unyielding traditional gender binary. However, within the patriarchal control inherent in the world of sport and *The Hunger Games*, the gender binary and its accompanying roles and expectations is still apparent. The cultural expectations surrounding gender performance and expectations abound in the districts of Panem, just as they do in society today. Katniss was aware of the roles expected of her — for example, she noticed that Peeta and his brothers were taught wrestling in school, while she did not receive any similar training. Furthermore, she noticed the boys in Panem are conditioned to be aggressive and fight, while that behavior in girls is forbidden (Henthorne 50). These cultural norms are then extended into the environment of the Hunger Games, where male tributes display aggression through their use of swords, spears, tridents, and other melee weapons, while female tributes utilize less confrontational weapons such as guile, stealth, and distance weapons such as throwing knives or a bow and arrow.

Similarly, the athlete today is subjected to different expectations than her male counterparts for performing a variety of sports, from tennis to mixed martial arts (MMA). Within the world of tennis, John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, Nick Kyrgios, and Andy Roddick are notorious for smashing racquets, having on-court tantrums, intentionally hitting balls at the umpire, even drug use, yet they are known as the "bad boys" of tennis and fans cannot get enough of their antics. However, at the 2018 U.S. Open, Serena Williams, arguably more successful than any of these men, was fined $17,000 for smashing a racquet and arguing with the umpire when he accused her of cheating. Similarly, former undefeated Women's Ultimate Fighting Champion (UFC) Ronda Rousey was constantly berated by viewers for acting in ways deemed unsportsmanlike. Rousey's "unsportsmanlike" behaviors consisted of discussing her love of pre-fight sex, commenting on the attractiveness of her body, getting into fights with men, and challenging boxers to winner-take-all fights. Similarly, the athletes in my class shared their experiences of feeling scrutinized for their behavior off the field, stating that their social media accounts were monitored by their coaches and the university to ensure that they were behaving in ways deemed "appropriate." They were unaware of any such policy for male athletes.

The cultural attitudes that reward male dominance in Panem also resonated with the students. Katniss' fear of entering her district's trading market, "The Hob," without her father by her side was familiar to some of the athletes who recalled similar situations of being fearful during their initial forays into sport when they did not have an older brother or father to navigate the difficulties they would face. Katniss describes how after her father died in a mining explosion, she would wear his clothes and tuck her braid into her cap when entering The Hob, in effect, masking her femininity so that she would be taken seriously as a trader who had a place in the marketplace. Katniss' experiences are much like those of the athlete who needs to, in their words, "not be girly" to avoid being categorized as a "normal girl" and not a serious athlete, thereby risking being categorized by the type of power referenced by Foucault, in which the "truth" of their inferiority is recognized by others.

Privilege is expressed, often subtly, in the language accompanying gender. Just as Katniss notes within the Hunger Games that while the Career tributes are technically no different than the tributes from the other districts and have the same rules applied to them, for those throughout Panem, it is well-known that the Career tributes are privileged over those from the "regular" districts through greater access to expert skills training and conditioning, food, and time. Similarly, despite the fact that males and females play many of the same sports and thus perform many of the same acts, the connotation of the separation is identification of the norm ("athlete") and derivation from the norm ("female athlete"). For example, the language of sport informs the individual that men play "basketball" and "soccer," but women play "women's basketball" and "women's soccer." Despite the fact that both sports are played by men and women, the language surrounding the performance of the sports creates a gendered division within society, thus privileging one set of athletes (male) over the other (female). These linguistic separations serve to naturalize a difference between men's and women's sports in the minds of its viewers and creates a connotation that the men's and women's "versions" of the sport are decidedly different. Thus, it is implied that one must be better than the other, with the attached linguistic apparatus signaling to society that the "pure" version is superior, and those who perform it are also superior to those who do not. Language such as this is used to describe both Katniss and the athlete, illustrating the privileging power that language holds.

"THEY'RE JUST TOO STRONG": POWER AND THE MALE ATHLETE

Patriarchal control is evident in sport through discourses that are congruent with hegemonic masculinity, thus rewarding hypermasculine, heterosexual men. Furthermore, discourses such as these marginalize women by building a world that is ultimately masculine and heterosexual, naturalizing the patriarchal organization of sport (Spaaij et al. 401). This worldview creates tension between femininity and athleticism today (Musto and McGann 102; George 322). This tension arises from the pressures layered upon the athlete's body, as it requires a constant state of ontological contradiction: she must possess a functional, athletic body that will allow for success within her sport, while simultaneously possessing an aesthetically pleasing body that meets the expectations of the entrenched traditional gender roles. Additionally, she must demonstrate the behaviors and attitudes needed to be successful in her sport, while simultaneously demonstrating the socially appropriate behaviors and attitudes expected by traditional feminine gender roles. In other words, the athlete must have a body and behavior that occupy both sides of the binary simultaneously — a difficult task, to be sure.

The power of masculinity over the domain of sport is in many ways similar to the control of personal expression that the Capitol has over the citizens of Panem. In describing a time when she was younger, Katniss recalled that she would often scare her mother by speaking out against how unfair the Capitol was to the people of District 12. Upon learning that this would cause more trouble, she decided to "hold my tongue and turn my features into an indifferent mask [...] Do my work quietly in school. Make only polite small talk in the public market" (Collins 6). This passage spoke to many of the athletes in the class who saw a similarity in

their own lives when as girls, they questioned why they could not play with the boys or be on their team. This type of questioning, they shared, was met differently depending on their ages. As young girls, most responses were dismissive of their ideas based on the surety that those ideas would change once they became interested in boys. However, once adolescence was reached, the responses to their desires to play sports and be athletic became more caustic. Sexuality was often questioned with the threat of being perceived as homosexual often used as a cudgel to force more appropriate behaviors. For many, they shared that this often pushed them into a position where they would attempt to create two personas: the on-field athlete and an hyperfeminine off-field persona that would be used to negate any critiques of their athleticism. For those who continued to identify as "athlete" and not "female athlete," they related that they often faced social ostracization and found sanctuary with those teammates who were undergoing the same type of treatment, finding acceptance among their teammates while enduring social sanctions. The students who relayed these experiences took issue with the ideas presented by Stephen Franzoi (417) and Kayoung Kim and Michael Sagas (124), who described the female body as an object constructed of discrete parts that exists to be observed, categorized, and evaluated for the purposes of aestheticism; the students expressed that this interpretation limits their ability, as well as that of Katniss, to act in a way that they, not society, deem appropriate.

Challenging the privilege inherent in the hegemonic masculinity of the male athlete in the manner of Katniss and the athlete is difficult, as gender performance is not, as Judith Butler argued, a "wholly voluntary" (139), socially constructed, theoretical concept that can be ignored. Rather, as the students in the class repeatedly pointed out, gender becomes a construct not solely controlled by the individual, particularly considering gender as subject to the power described by Foucault (46) which "applies itself to everyday life, categorizes the individual and marks them by their own individuality, attaches them to their own identity, imposes a law of truth on them that they must recognize, and others recognize in them." Consequently, gender performances and their associated identities become a physical reality inscribed onto bodies, expected to be maintained and performed correctly under threat of punishment (Haslanger 159; Johansson 43). In Katniss' world, the punishment for violations of expected norms is typically death; for the athlete, the coercion is more subtle. Furthermore, although punishment is not as overt, the culturally constructed difference between men and women is framed as "natural" by the mass media, which reifies a hegemonic hierarchy in which men are placed at the top of the social order (Hardin et al. 106; Shifflett et al. 125). It is phenomena such as these that contribute to the patriarchal control within sport culture.

"THEY ARE THE CAPITOL'S FAVORITES": LIVING UNDER THE MALE GAZE

Normalizing certain behaviors and practices reinforces "acceptable" performance standards of gender, which are then policed by a male gaze that insists women treat their bodies as objects of action, as opposed to the originators of action (Kotarba and Held 155). Not surprisingly, for the athlete this balance is quite difficult to achieve as the performance of hegemonically authorized femininity, as dictated by the patriarchy, possesses a narrowly defined balance of "acceptable" athleticism and concomitant muscularity (Dashper 354; Krane 116; Worthen and Baker 473). In this way, patriarchy subverts the athlete who asserts her agency physically through improved body functionality in the form of her athleticism (Markula 94).

In contrast, consider Katniss' sister, Primrose Everdeen. The reader's introduction to Prim is a description of her by Katniss who says, "Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named" (Collins 3). In today's world, Prim, as well as her mother who is described by Katniss as "very beautiful," represent a hegemonically authorized femininity that is subject to the male gaze and thus encourages women to abide by socially constructed gender norms so that they are accepted by society. This portrayal of femininity, described by the athletes as more easily attained by "NARPs" (non-athletic regular

people), has a much greater societal acceptance, as evident in Katniss' description of Prim as someone who "no one can help loving" (Collins 24). However, the love that people have for Prim comes from a reiteration of "cumulative social practices" that, according to Judith Butler (140), further reinforce cultural norms; any attempts to change these performances of "appropriate" femininity typically result in strong normative reactions (Worthen and Dirks 107).

As an example of the ingrained nature of these "cumulative social practices," Katniss describes her fellow tributes in the way they are seen through the lens of the patriarchy: men are strong and capable; women are pleasing to the eye; and any variation from this theme is punished. For example, she describes Glimmer, the female tribute from District 1 as having "flowing blonde hair, emerald green eyes, her body tall and lush ... she's sexy all the way. " The male tribute from District 2 as "the monstrous boy [who] is a ruthless killing machine." The female tribute from District 5 becomes "the 'fox-faced' girl [who] is sly and elusive." Rue is described as "dressed in a gossamer gown complete with wings, who flutters her way to Caesar." Finally, the male tribute from District 11, Thresh, is "one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox" (Collins 45). Katniss' descriptions differentiate gender along binaristic lines. The male tributes are described according to their functional abilities, and the female tributes are described according to their aesthetic attributes.

Katniss' descriptions of the tributes along functional/aesthetic lines triggered a class discussion that revealed schisms in the previously united perspectives of athletes. The source of the division was the type of interrogation that female bodies undergo, and how some athletes have an easier time than others, due to the physical demands of their respective sports. Those women who were involved in sports that required a female body more congruous with the patriarchal ideal, such as cross-country (described by the class as petite, lightly muscled bodies) or volleyball (long-legged, tanned, elegant bodies), were viewed as having an easier time than those whose sports required a different body size such as basketball (taller or more muscular) or softball (masculine or asymmetric bodies). Those involved in basketball or softball argued that their groups tended to be closer because of their propensity to resist the cultural indoctrination and pressure to perform their femininity in a way that embraces their body-object status.

The body-as-object perspective subverts the athlete (while maintaining the perceived superiority of the male athlete) by stripping away agency and power. According to Iris Young, "those aspects of a woman's body most gazed at and discussed, and in terms of which she herself all too often measures her own worth, are those which least suggest action – neck, breasts, buttocks, which, in essence, defines women as Other" (31). This was a point of particular irritation for the women in the class, especially for those athletes in those sports with bodies described as "more appropriate." One student made a particularly compelling point about her volleyball uniform being an example of overt sexualization, when she said, "I'm 6'1" and I'm wearing shorts with a 2" inseam. Should they [Department of Athletics] be really surprised that the biggest group of fans we have other than our family and friends is a bunch of old men?" The cross-country athletes rightfully questioned why they are forced to compete in a "glorified bikini," while their male counterparts wear running shorts and a tank top. Similarly, upon her arrival in the Capitol, Katniss is subjected to hours of body waxing, eyebrow plucking, chemical peels, skin scrubs, and nail filing, all the while having the stylists commenting on her hideous appearance and that she was in no way presentable to the general public until she had been significantly improved; in contrast, Peeta is given a haircut and a shower.

The athlete is similarly objectified as she delves deeper into the world of sport, challenging society to redefine what has historically been classified according to masculine standards that give the male athlete the illusion of physical power and superiority. The patriarchy then uses this to control the athlete by explaining how the athlete's presence undermines the gender roles that society depends on for stability, indirectly reminding society of women's traditional roles. Furthermore, the patriarchy insists that the physical activity

she is engaged in cannot possibly be genuine, and that despite her "masculine" body, she is incapable of performing at the same level of the male athlete.

Social acceptance of the pure functionality of a woman's body within a system ruled by the male gaze is difficult, but it does give women power that aestheticism does not. That is not to say that women today cannot be powerful. On the contrary, as voiced by one student in the class, it was acceptable for her to be empowered through playing her sport, but her power was essentially "on loan" with the understanding that she would not use it to interfere with (or challenge) society's established gender norms.

THE PERFECT TOUCH OF REBELLION...

For the athlete, fitting into the existing gender structure is vital for her continued acceptance. Unfortunately, this requires the loss of a degree (or more) of personal agency in order to be found acceptable by the male gaze. For example, in the text, Katniss initially argued and, in some cases, literally fought with her entire team, accomplishing nothing but alienation and separation; she later realizes that in order to have a chance to win The Hunger Games, she needs to heed the advice of Haymitch Abernathy, the male winner from District 12 of the 50th Hunger Games (Katniss's inaugural games were the 74th). Haymitch's advice to her was to make herself more "likable" to the fans of the Capitol so that she would get sponsors that would give her gifts to help her survive; to that end, he pushed her to adopt a more "traditional" feminine gender performance by accepting the mantle of "star-crossed lover," wearing dresses and playing up the role of a sweet, innocent girl from District 12 — not a teenage girl who is lethal with a bow and arrow from 300 yards. Later, as Haymitch predicted, Katniss realizes that the fans in the Capitol want to help the "young girl in love" and at that point said, "One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart...Give me something I can work with'" (Collins, 261). This phenomenon is well-described by Sean P. Connors who detailed how Katniss was coerced by the patriarchal structures of Panem society and several male characters into performing an emphasized femininity to increase her own chances of survival. Connors cites Katniss' wearing grand dresses, removing her body hair, and being cast as desirable due to Peeta's profession of love as a reinforcement of her attempts at an expected feminine performance to enhance her appeal to Capitol viewers (Connors 148–149). Unfortunately, this realization and performance made Katniss even more beholden to that specific gender performance in order to maintain her popularity leading to a further loss of agency and self.

Similarly, the athletes' shared experiences of their coaches encouraging them to be more feminine at social gatherings through make-up and dress, and to refrain from wearing any sports gear that coded them as an athlete of whichever stripe they happened to be. Coaches monitor athletes' social media accounts to ensure they fit the social construction of "girl," meaning no videos of them playing their respective sports except for those images captured and cleared by the university, no images of them looking, in their words, "trashed" after an especially hard practice, and no overtly sexualized images, despite the fact that the uniforms that some of them are forced to wear are sexualizing. In essence, they were told to deny a major aspect of their lives and identities in order to make themselves more appealing to anyone outside of the sport, with the goal of making them—and by extension, female athletics—more popular. Therefore, while it is clear that engaging in athletic activities is empowering, it is disempowering to reside in a system that holds an expectation that one will maintain a socially acceptable feminine demeanor. As a result, the athlete is encouraged to attempt to straddle the expectations of sport culture and general culture by adopting the theme "we can be athletes and feminine too" (Barak et al. 474-475; Krane 116).

With this statement, the question must be asked, "What about the athlete as an individual who challenges institutionalized definitions of gender performance?" The response from the athletes was both

pragmatic and discouraging. Many agreed that they could certainly compete with or even best some of the male players, but to what end? Sure, they would feel a sense of accomplishment regarding their skill and hard work, but outside of the world of sport, they were forced to consider the cost of such a display of their prowess. To them it seemed that the more skill they possessed and the more they encroached on the "male sport domain," the more their heterosexuality and femininity were questioned. In their words, "What would be the point? If I seem to be not as good, then no one is surprised because I'm just a girl. If I proved to others that I was better, then that is where the real problems begin. I would be seen as either a lesbian or undateable." The tenuous empowerment that the athlete acquires for herself by flouting gender norms is demonstrated by Katniss, whose archery skills make her the most lethal Hunger Games tribute in decades, and who receives more support and adoration from the fans and the Capitol community when she plays the role of the dutiful girlfriend to Peeta, the other half of the pair of "star-crossed lovers." She fed him soup when he was sick and fretted and cared for him with a smattering of kisses and loving affectations, to the delight of Capitol viewers and sponsors. For both Katniss and the athlete, as Charlene Weaving describes, being a woman in an athletic body is to be a site of struggle where the battle for empowerment is ongoing (233).

Based on class discussions, the underlying issue the athletes face when challenging hegemonically authorized femininity is balancing self-expressed gender performances with socially constructed gender norms. Finding an equilibrium between the two is necessary for both Katniss and the athlete to disguise their non-traditional gender behaviors enough so that they cannot be accused of directly challenging the structuralist dominant ideology and thereby face reprisal. However, this balancing act has its price. Many of the athletes shared a rather disturbing sentiment that Katniss describes at the end of the book, after winning The Hunger Games with Peeta and finishing all the post-Games interviews:

> I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta's arm around my shoulders feels alien (Collins 370).

This description mirrors that of the athletes, who stated that their environment and those within it were greatly involved in determining their identity at any specific time. One athlete put it this way:

> When I'm on the field, I'm an athlete. I play the role of the athlete the way that my coach expects me to play it. As a freshman, I had to learn a new version of myself because the idea that my college coach has of an athlete is different from my high school coach, which was different from my club coach. So, I basically just play the role that I'm expected to play. My on-field identity then influences the feminized version that I present to the world in social situations. So, if I'm more aggressive on the field, I'm more girly in public. If I wear bows in my hair on the field, I don't have to try as hard to convince people that I'm a girl when I'm in public.

All of this is done so that they can be seen as "normal" and having their priorities "straight." Therefore, while the athlete may project empowerment, strength, confidence, and aggression while in the midst of their sport, they also realize that some of those qualities are not as appreciated when they are not playing their sport. As such, there is an aspect of their gender that is performed according to norms that are external to them. This juxtaposition of behaviors is important because it illustrates that challenging a system does not mean upending the entire thing and bringing it crashing down in flames. An interesting interpretation that the athletes had was that while the story of Katniss is one that casts her as an empowered hero who challenges the Capitol throughout the entire saga, she does eventually marry Peeta and adopt the heteronormative lifestyle

that earlier in the story she vowed never to do. While the story is written to show that she did it on her own terms, for them, the salient point is that for whatever reason, she eventually followed the norm. The feeling of being trapped was one that they have experienced as well.

THE ONGOING STRUGGLE AGAINST THE CAPITOL

After The Hunger Games, the Capitol sends the most recent victor(s) on a tour that requires the attendance of all citizens in each district. The districts are supposed to be happy for the victor(s), but they are typically angry and bitter at being forced to celebrate the killers of the children from their districts. To add insult to injury, the Capitol holds the victory tour six months after the conclusion of the previous Hunger Games in order to provide a constant reminder that the districts are powerless against the Capitol. Whereas I had not attached much significance to this aspect of the saga, the athletes found it quite relevant to their experiences in college sports: "The Capitol and President Snow are basically the NCAA." When I asked why, their responses were surprising. "Katniss is supposed to be happy that she survived The Hunger Games and should want to be involved in all the trappings surrounding it. We are told, 'Well, you're getting your education paid for, so you should expect to have to work for it.' I get that, and I'm grateful, but paying for my education doesn't mean you get to control every aspect of my life for the next four years." The athletes found that much like Katniss, they endure a constant effort by their perceived oppressors to convince them that their lives are not that bad, while simultaneously being reminded of the power they do not have.

The illusion of agency is a powerful weapon that oppressors use in order to maintain hegemonic control over those they subordinate. For the athletes, the illusion of agency is the sense of empowerment that they gain through their sport participation. They were quite adamant that while there was some power to be had, their ability to utilize it as social currency, such as is done by their male counterparts, is questionable. While the athletes certainly felt that they had gained a degree of power and agency through the internalization of aspects of their sporting identities into their personas, the question for them remains, where do they go from here?

What is the end game for the patriarchy and the athlete? Is she, like Katniss, expected to placate the fans by feigning romantic relationships such as Katniss did with Peeta? Doing so would be to accept conventional forms of femininity and have her athletic accomplishments de-emphasized for her marital status, as when American trapshooter and two-time Olympic bronze medalist Corey Cogdell-Unrein was described by the Chicago Times as the "wife of Chicago Bears linebacker Mitchell Unrein." Associations such as these are a powerful means of trivializing the athlete by inextricably linking her to a male partner, effectively obscuring her individual identity and power. For Katniss, as well as the athlete, being female is problematic in that it contrasts her positioning as a functional body, which is disempowering as it results in sexualization, trivialization, and devaluation upon achieving a feminine appearance (Festle 51; Fink 336; Sherry et al. 301).

The ontological balancing act that the patriarchy foists on the athlete, as illustrated in the context of *The Hunger Games*, is among its most egregious acts of oppression. The expectation that the athlete will remain silent in a system of infinite subordination is unrealistic and insulting. Many who may recognize patriarchal control in society in theory are often, as I was in hearing the perspectives of the athletes in my class, ignorant of how it manifests in an individual's everyday experiences. Thus, outsiders can become complicit in contributing to the subordination of marginalized groups in order to protect an existing power structure from which they benefit. Consider what options this level of oppression leaves for the athlete.

My perspective in using *The Hunger Games* as a metaphor for the athlete overcoming oppression was in itself an example of my ignorance concerning the plight of the athletes. I saw Katniss' defying the Capitol by threatening to take the Nightlock berries with Peeta as an example of overturning the oppression that they face; the students saw it a bit differently. They pointed to Katniss' firing an arrow at a cooked pig surrounded by the Gamemakers when she felt she was not receiving the respect she deserved. She followed this act with a curtsy

as a means of softening the aggression she just performed. The athletes saw this act as Katniss' contribution to their revolution in that they can learn to perform the authorized stereotype and fake their subservience to the rules of the patriarchy, thereby lessening the punishment for violations and, in their words, putting on display the ridiculous and superficial nature of the structure put in place by their oppressors. Therefore, after a semester of dialogue about this text and many differing opinions, the athletes saw in Katniss how their participation in athletics has allowed them to wrest from their oppressors and take back for themselves agency and bodily autonomy.

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Don't Sweat the Technique: Rhetoric, Coded Social Critique, and Conspiracy Theories in Hip-Hop

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories are once again a topic of heated debate in both popular and scholarly media. Critics on one side of this debate often take for granted an "underlying assumption that conspiracy theories should be subdued if not eliminated" (Uscinski 444). Other scholars have expressed concern over the ways the "conspiracy theorist" pejorative stifles dissent and regulates political rationality (Rankin; deHaven-Smith). Bratich argues that social anxieties about issues like emerging technology and race "get managed" through the public debate about conspiracy theories as an "object of concern" (160–61). This paper asks, what are the consequences when "conspiracy panic" spreads beyond concerns about dubious claims by government officials and political pundits and begins to shape the critical response to artistic productions? An answer to this question can be found by examining the relationship between conspiracy theories and hip-hop. As a genre, hip-hop has a longstanding interest in conspiracy theories, particularly among artists known for their engagement with social issues (Beighey and Unnithan; Gosa). I start by contextualizing the conspiratorial lyrics of two historic MCs: Rakim and Tupac Shakur. I then examine a recent release by the rapper Nas. Several critics cited the perceived conspiracism in Nas's lyrics as reason for their lukewarm response to it. I offer a counter-reading that situates the lyrics in question within Nas's broader rhetorical strategy of giving "voice to things to which nature has not given a voice" (Quintilian 161). Ultimately, this paper makes two claims: first, hip-hop artists deploy conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique for addressing social and political anxieties; and, second, by adopting a strict literalist frame for interpreting lyrics, we echo earlier attacks on the genre and risk undermining hip-hop's legitimacy as a genre and as a powerful tool of what Shane Miller calls "coded social critique" (40).

Keywords: classical rhetoric, hip hop, popular culture, conspiracy theories, social justice

In the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have played an increasingly prominent role in American public discourse. While scholars engaging the issue often take for granted an "underlying assumption that conspiracy theories should be subdued if not eliminated," others express concern over the "conspiracy theorist" pejorative's role in stifling dissent and regulating political rationality (Uscinski 444; Rankin; deHaven-Smith). Bratich argues that social anxieties about issues like emerging technology and race relations "get managed" not through conspiracy theories themselves, but through "conspiracy panics" in which conspiracy theories are viewed as "object[s] of concern" (160–61). What are the consequences when "conspiracy panic" spreads beyond concerns about dubious claims by government officials and political pundits and begins to shape the critical response to artistic productions? This paper seeks an answer to this question by examining the rhetorical use of—and critical response to—conspiratorial ideas in hip-hop lyrics.

While politics, economics, science, and technology are often at the center of the recent conspiracy panic, less attention has been paid to conspiracy theories in and about popular art. Yet, from the "Paul is dead" and the "Elvis is alive" theories of the 1960s and 1970s to more recent theories about Avril Lavigne's clone and Jay Z's and Beyonce's role in the Illuminati, popular music and conspiracy culture have long intersected (Sheffield; Chan; Estatie; Maine; Chen). Few genres have engaged with conspiracy theories more directly and more frequently than hip-hop. Songs that touch on conspiratorial themes span the history of hip-hop. In the unambiguously titled "Conspiracy," Gang Starr's Guru raps that the government "created crack and AIDS / got the public thinking these were things that Black folks made" (0:25-0:32). In "Georgia… Bush," Lil Wayne alludes to conspiratorial claims that Black areas of New Orleans were sacrificed to protect more affluent white areas in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (1:26-1:35). Several rappers have expressed interest or belief in conspiracy theories outside of their music, as well. B.o.B., for example, made headlines after he tweeted about his belief that Earth is flat (Said-Moorhouse). And, before him, artists like Ol' Dirty Bastard and Prodigy of Mobb Deep vocalized their admiration for infamous conspiracy theorist Bill Cooper (Jacobson).

Hip-hop artists' interest in conspiracy theories has also occasionally garnered scholarly attention. In an empirical study of "oppositional resistance" in rap lyrics, Catherine Beighey and N. Prabha Unnithan examine lyrics from 1980s and early '90s rap songs, finding that rappers from that period touched on themes of incarceration, police violence, and "racial genocide conspiracy" in about 44 percent of lyrics sampled (44). More recently, Travis Gosa suggests that "hip-hop likely plays a role in propagating conspiracy theory" but, he cautions "against simply dismissing this discourse as crackpot theorizing by fringe groups" (188). Gosa traces hip-hop conspiracism to the genre's deep seated entanglements with Five Percenter ideology and other early influences on the genre. For Gosa, hip-hop conspiracy should be understood, at least in part, "as responses to real structural shifts and social problems in American life" (200). Gosa speculates that "future researchers will find these ideas concentrated in the subgenre of more 'political' or 'socially conscious' hip-hop" (201). I hesitate to draw a hard line of distinction between "conscious" hip-hop and other subgenres, but there does seem to be a correlation between conspiratorial lyrics and artists who frequently address social issues. This paper seeks to further explore that connection. Rather than dismissing entire projects because they are conspiratorial, this paper examines the rhetorical role played by conspiratorial lyrics in hip-hop music. I explore lyrics from prominent artists from the genre's history: Rakim, Tupac, and Nas. Ultimately, this paper makes two claims: first, hip-hop artists deploy conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique for addressing social and political anxieties; and, second, by adopting a strict literalist frame for interpreting lyrics, we echo earlier attacks on the genre and risk undermining hip-hop's legitimacy as a genre and as a powerful tool of what Shane Miller calls "coded social critique" (40).

THE PROBLEM WITH HIP-HOP LITERALISM

At the center of the issue of hip-hop conspiracism is a long-standing disagreement about the lyrical content of hip-hop music—a disagreement with implications for the genre's artistic legitimacy. When a critic conflates a rapper's mention of conspiratorial ideas with an endorsement of conspiratorial views, the critic collapses author and speaker and thus denies the lyricist's ability to explore perspectives beyond their own—a fundamental function of art. Such a view is rooted in a bias against hip-hop as a genre, a bias no doubt embedded in the racial politics surrounding the genre and its history. When Johnny Cash sings that he "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die," few question whether Cash himself is speaking literally (00:42-00:49). Yet, the extent to which hip-hop lyrics should be interpreted literally is a debate that has raged for decades, with various figures taking up the mantle for both sides. In 1992, then Vice President Dan Quayle called Interscope Records to pull Tupac Shakur's debut album from the shelves, asserting a causal link between the album and the death of a Texas state trooper. The alleged killer was said to be listening to Shakur's debut album, *2pacalypse Now*, when the trooper pulled him over, leading Quayle to declare that the album "has no place in our society" (Broder). In another incident, the FBI infamously sent an "intimidating" letter to N.W.A. and the group's label following the release of the group's album *Straight Outta Compton*, and then-President George H.W. Bush denounced Body Count's "Cop Killer" as "sick" (Grow; "Bush Calls Cop-Killing Lyrics 'Sick'"). Countless other examples from the period exist, but I won't belabor the point. In short, much of the early and ongoing debate about rap in mainstream American discourse centers around the idea of whether hip-hop can or should be taken literally and whether hip-hop artists should be granted the same affordances as artists working in other genres.

Beyond harsh words from politicians, pundits, and law enforcement groups, the debate over literalism in hip-hop can also have other serious consequences. In the Summer 2019 trial of Tekashi 6ix9ine (a trial fraught with controversy for a variety of reasons, most of them unrelated to the subject of this paper), prosecutors asked the rapper about his lyrics and their relation to the 6ix9ine's real-world gang affiliations and alleged criminal activities (Younger). Music videos and song lyrics have been entered into evidence in several other courtrooms as well, including the separate cases of Tay-K, YNW Melly, and Drakeo the Ruler. These cases are all very recent, but the courtroom use of rap lyrics has long been controversial among legal scholars. Writing in 2005, for example, Sean-Patrick Wilson reviewed several cases of lyrics being used against their composers in the courtroom, arguing in part that American culture struggles to see rappers in a similar light as "the horror authors and other producers/composers of criminally- inspired popular artistic creations in America" (376). More recently, scholars have argued that the use of rap lyrics in courtrooms violate federal rules about the use of evidence and "adds to the criminalization of race while simultaneously running the risk of chilling free expression" (Lutes et al. 132). In short, whether rap lyrics should be interpreted literally or given the same license as other artistic productions is a debate with far-reaching material consequences and legal implications.

To be clear, the stakes for literalism in hip-hop conspiracy are somewhat different than the examples cited above. As far as I'm aware, no one is filing lawsuits, pulling records from shelves or off streaming services, or making public statements from the Oval Office because of rappers' conspiratorial musings. Nevertheless, the critical reception of conspiratorial lyrics may suggest that, after over 40 years of the genre's existence, American culture still hasn't quite figured out how to *read* hip-hop and still does not view it the same way it views other mediums of artistic expression. Adrienne Brown argues that hip-hop scholarship suffers from "a long tradition of cultural critics that insist on reading hip-hop strictly within the limited registers of the realist or the memetic" and who hold the genre "to a standard which few other cultural imaginaries have had to aspire to be considered and close read" (266). As Brown suggests, hip-hop is often treated unevenly, with even academics holding the genre's artists to standards that are rarely applied when dealing with other

genres and media. Moreover, the extent to which hip-hop lyrics should be read literally is a central point of conflict in public understandings of the genre. As such, it must be at the center of any discussion about hip-hop conspiracy, from how it's deployed by rappers themselves to how critics understand its function within the genre.

A recent example of this hyperliteralist way of reading hip-hop can be seen in the response to *Nasir*, a recent studio album by the rapper, Nas. Critics were virtually unanimous in their lukewarm reception of *Nasir*, considering it a failure of an album—at least by Nas's standards—and citing the rapper's flirtations with conspiracy theory as a key contributing factor. One critic lampooned the album, saying Nas sounds "like an online commenter shitposting in search of a jolt of entropy" (Kearse). According to another critic, Nas is "turning into the middle-aged Black equivalent of a credulous Fox News viewer, falling down one YouTube wormhole after another and receiving conspiracy theory as fact" (Breihan, "Nas Sounds Tired"). A *Guardian* reviewer's primary critique of the album centers around Nas's "mixing of social justice and conspiracy theory" (Petridis). There are a few problems with these reviews. First, they suggest that conspiracy theories are a major presence on the album, but in reality, the lines in question are confined to only half of a verse from a single song. More importantly, there is little to suggest that Nas is endorsing the "anti-vaxx" conspiracy theories he evokes. The assumption that Nas raps these lines to advance an anti-vaccine position is reductive. As I will argue shortly, the lines in question are part of a broader rhetorical strategy that Nas frequently uses to address social issues. Moreover, Nas is far from alone in engaging in this kind of "mixing" of conspiratorial imagery and social justice. Rappers frequently blur the lines between conspiracy and social justice. Breihan's review is particularly insightful in this regard, namely because he begins his review of *Nasir* (on which Nas collaborated with Kanye West) by comparing it to a similar collaboration between Rakim and Dr. Dre. Elsewhere, Breihan speaks glowingly of Rakim, calling him a "poet" and a "scholar" and crediting him with "revolutionizing" the genre ("Rakim Vs. Big Daddy Kane"). He's right, of course, about Rakim's contributions to hip-hop; Rakim is a giant of the genre. But it is an ironic comparison for Breihan to make, considering that Rakim occasionally delves into conspiratorial topics—sometimes making claims that are far more outlandish than anything Nas raps on *Nasir*.

HIP-HOP CONSPIRACY AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Sometimes called The God MC, an allusion to his Five Percenter beliefs but also to his technical contributions to hip-hop, Rakim's influence on the genre is undeniable. But that influence is also inseparable from his poignant social and political commentary, which in turn, is frequently bound up with his use of conspiratorial themes. Take, for example, "Teach the Children" which opens:

> No more time to pass time cause these are the last rhymes
> Cause we're living in the last times
> They wanna go to war, more wars to come
> But most of us fight more wars than one
> Discrimination in the racial nation
> While they destroy our strong foundation. (Eric B. & Rakim 0:08-0:22)

Rapping in 1992, just after the Gulf War and at the tail end of both an economic recession and 1980s-'90s crack epidemic in the rapper's hometown New York, Rakim's lyrics here are urgent, forceful, apocalyptic and unmistakably political. Rakim wants to talk about racial dynamics in the United States, "the racial nation." Listen up, there's no time to waste; we've avoided this conversation for long enough, and we are going to talk about it now, right now. In what follows, Rakim lists several grievances about geopolitical turmoil ("they wanna fight for more oil and gold"), as well as the more individualized turmoil of economic insecurity

("Unemployment, I got laid off / The streets is the last resorts to get paid off") before making an appeal to the powers that be ("Maybe I should ask the president / Somebody get me the president / But he don't want to hear it, it's out of the question"). Rakim's speaker struggles with life in a country at war both overseas and on the home front. At the start of the second verse, Rakim introduces conspiratorial imagery:

> They're corrupt, and their time's up soon
> But they'll blow it up and prepare life on the moon
> Sounds like Total Recall
> But who gotta spaceship, you get it, we fall. (1:59-2:09)

Rakim self-reflectively acknowledges the seemingly outlandish nature of these lyrics, noting they resemble science fiction, but he nevertheless stands by them. In a hyperliteralist reading of these lyrics, we could say that Rakim's speaker believes in "breakaway civilizations," a conspiracy theory which holds that economic and political elites are planning to (or have already initiated a plan to) escape Earth and set up a colony either on a space station of some sort or on a new planetary home.

Breakaway civilization theory is actually a set of related theories that are a hybridization of the "shadow government" and "secret space program" tropes in conspiracy culture. According to some versions of breakaway civilization theory, the rich and powerful will either destroy the planet deliberately, or they will destroy it incidentally through war, disease, industrial pollution, and over-exploitation. In others, these elites don't destroy the planet entirely, but rather install a system for the continuous extraction of resources, leaving behind a working class that endlessly toils under increasingly dystopian conditions. Yet other theories contend that, instead of escaping to space, these elites will escape somewhere below the surface, to the center of a hollow earth through an opening near Antarctica. Alex Jones sees breakaway civilization as a way for political and corporate elites to "do whatever they want, and play God, and enjoy fruits of human intellect and human development" (03:22-03:45). Rakim's allusion to breakaway civilization theory predates Alex Jones's discussion on the topic, so the point here isn't whether the rapper is propagating Jones's ideas. Neither Jones nor Rakim is the first to float the idea that powerful people plan to leave for a new home after effectively destroying this one. Moreover, economic elites themselves have made statements that lend at least *some* credence to the idea: Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have both publicly stated their desire to use space colonization as a kind of backup plan to save humanity in the face of climate catastrophe (Mosher and Dickerson; Levy). It may be conspiratorial to believe that breakaway civilization is already underway, as the theory's adherents like Jones apparently do, but it may be equally naïve and utopian to believe that Musk and Bezos genuinely envision an escape plan that would benefit all (or even most) of 7.8 billion people on the planet. Breakaway civilization theories may be largely outlandish, but they speak to real anxieties about environmental collapse, seemingly endless war, and classism.

For Rakim's speaker, that's largely the point: breakaway civilization doesn't need to be historically accurate or scientifically feasible, since "they" have already left you behind. Powerful people may as well actually be in space, since politically, socially, and economically, they already seem to be living in a different reality than the rest of us—particularly someone speaking from the position of Rakim's speaker. The president can turn a cold shoulder to the appeals of his constituents because "he don't wanna hear it," and that's enough of a reason. The song's hook emphasizes self-reliance in the face of being left behind. As the song's refrain asserts, "We gotta teach the children, keep a song / show them the light, teach them right from wrong / make some sense so they can carry on." For the speaker, it should be abundantly clear by now that powerful individuals and institutions will not provide that kind of education. Toward the end of the song, Rakim again flirts with conspiracism, this time making an even more explicit connection between the conspiracy he sees and its antidote, knowledge:

Education, the kids need a sculpture
Teach them the abacus and their culture
And that'll help stop the robbing, raping and killing
Poison neighborhoods are illing
But they import more keys from across seas
A drug disease hits the streets with ease. (2:35-2:49)

While breakaway civilization theory is one of the more "out there" conspiracy theories, Rakim's conspiracy theorizing is perhaps a bit more grounded in this final verse. Through a more direct connection to knowledge of self and of culture, and through a more intensive, more intimate, and more community-based form of education, the "ills" of post-industrial city life—violence, theft, and drug-related crime—can be overcome. Here, Rakim points to a conspiracy often cited in hip-hop lyrics, one holding that the same "they" who start wars for gold and oil and who plan to escape to more livable conditions off-planet are also importing drugs to Black neighborhoods in a deliberate attempt to poison those neighborhoods.

The conspiracy Rakim alludes to here is referenced often in hip-hop songs by some of the genre's biggest names. For example, Tupac Shakur raps the following lines on his critically acclaimed posthumous single, "Changes" (2pac). Like Rakim, Shakur did not shy away from conspiratorial topics (and, ironically, his death would inspire several popular conspiracy theories, including claims that he faked his death). As Eithne Quinn argues, Shakur "mobilized themes of paranoia and narratives of conspiracy" in part to "[interrogate] the operations of cultural power" (178). In "Changes," he alludes to topics frequently discussed in online conspiracy theory circles, namely that federal agencies (especially the CIA) traffic guns and drugs to predominantly Black neighborhoods as a way of increasing violence in these areas, sustaining the prison-industrial complex, and, more generally, to sow discord in African-American communities. It's a "conspiracy theory" in the broadest sense of the term. It accuses a US government agency of acting in secret against the interests of the public, resulting in profound damages against members of that public; moreover, it's an explanation of events that the agency in question denies. In a 1998 statement to the House Intelligence Committee, CIA inspector General Frederick P. Hitz said that, while "the CIA worked with a variety of people to support the Contra program," an internal investigation "found no evidence in the course of this lengthy investigation of any conspiracy by CIA or its employees to bring drugs into the United States" ("Allegations of Connections"). Hitz's investigation was in response to "Dark Alliance," a three-part series published in August 1996 by *The Mercury News*. The journalist behind the series, Gary Webb, has become something of an icon in the online conspiracy theory community (in part because of the reporting itself, but also because he later died in what conspiracist theorists view as a highly suspicious suicide) with posts about Webb appearing frequently on conspiracy forums like Reddit's r/conspiracy (u/x23b1 23; u/Venus230; u/CHRISTINEitsDAVEpmME).

While Shakur does not refer—either directly or indirectly—to Webb or his "Dark Alliance" reporting (the song was recorded before Webb's published on the topic), the rapper's lyrics are situated within a broader discourse of suspicion about high-level government agencies' and their involvement in what amounts to violence against Black communities. Interestingly, a few days after the most recent post about Webb appeared on r/conspiracy, a user posted a recording of "Changes" to the same forum in a post titled "Very Sad how Tupac's 'Changes' is Still Very Relevant Today" (u/raobj280). While the post garnered significantly fewer upvotes and comments than the Webb post, it is clear that the forum's users were engaging not only with the more explicitly conspiratorial lines in Shakur's song, but with the broader, more critical message of the song. One commenter calls it "a great song" and expresses frustration that "nothing has gotten better for DECADES" (u/---l__). When another commenter questioned the relevance of the post and dismissed Shakur's "gangster rap schtick," the original poster responded by calling attention to Shakur's willingness to "[speak] out about police brutality, injustice, government corruption" (u/raobj280). It's worth noting here that the post in question was

created during the nationwide protests following the killing of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department. This crucial bit of context was undoubtedly on the minds of at least one commenter, who wrote,"Heard this song today, I'd forgotten how powerful it is. This should be the anthem of 2020. We need changes" (u/PseudoWarriorAU). This user's comments are interesting, particularly in a time when it's common to cast conspiracy theorizing as a predominantly right-wing activity (Roberts; Andersen; von Rennenkampff). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address any potential connections between conspiratorial tendencies and specific ideological positions, but it is worth noting how Shakur's decades-old lyrics operate as "coded social critique" (Miller), creating an opportunity for a discussion of racial injustice, the effect of the War on Drugs in inner city communities, and the ways in which both issues are connected to US imperialism in the Global South—all in a community that is so often written off as a right-wing digital space.

PLAYING WITH POWER: PROSOPOPOEIA AND THE VOICELESS

As we can see, some of hip-hop's most historic figures have long evoked conspiratorial imagery as a starting point for social critique. Before returning to the discussion of Nas' "Everything," we should examine a rhetorical device that the rapper frequently deploys in his lyrics: *prosopopoeia*. For Medieval rhetorician Geoffrey of Vinsauf, prosopopoeia is a way of endowing entire communities and cultures with human characteristics. It "gives voice [t]o a thing which has no power of speech" (513). For Quintilian, prosopopoeia allows rhetors to "invent persuasions, or reproaches, or complaints, or eulogies, or lamentations, and put them into the mouths of characters likely to utter them" (161). Modern texts often treat prosopopoeia as interchangeable with personification ("Prosopopoeia" [OED Online]; "Prosopopoeia" Merriam-Webster; "Prosopopoeia" Silva Rhetoricae; Butler and Quintilian). But the term was initially more closely tied to *ethopoeia*, a word derived from *ethos*. In the Greek tradition, ethos is the rhetorical appeal through which a speaker demonstrates their good moral character. It's a demonstration that is always something of a performance or mask. Similarly, "prosopopoeia derives from the Greek word *prosōpon*, meaning "face" or "mask" (Alexander 99). Prosopopoeia allows rhetors to temporarily don on a mask and speak for the voiceless. With prosopopoeia, a rapper can take on not just one persona but several, and those personas can include themselves, other specific people, entire groups of people, or non-human objects and ideas.

When it comes to prosopopoeia, few rappers use the device more effectively—or more frequently—than Nas. In "I Gave You Power," a song from his 1997 album, *It Was Written*, Nas addresses gun violence by rapping from the point of view of a pistol. Notably, Nas emphasizes the gun's lack of agency: its inability to decide what happens to it, who picks it up, or who it's used against. As Nas says in the song's intro, people:

> Just use me for whatever the fuck they want
> I don't get to say shit
> Just grab me, just do what the fuck they want
> Sell me, throw me away. ("I Gave You Power" 0:01-0:17)

This theme of powerlessness is one that Nas returns to throughout his discography. In "I Gave you Power," the rapper traces the gun's "life" cycle from being created "to kill," through its travels "through so many towns / Ohio to Little Rock to Canarsie, living harshly" and its use in various robberies and murders. The gun "mighta took your first child, scarred your life, and crippled your style," but it nevertheless "gave you power." The gun is conscious of its paradoxical role in the lives of people who use it: the gun is a machine designed to murder (specifically, Nas raps, "my creation was for Blacks to kill Blacks"), but at the same time, it gives its owner a sense of empowerment that would be difficult to obtain elsewhere. Throughout the song, the gun becomes increasingly disillusioned with its position in the world. Eventually, the owner grabs the gun to use in a street fight. The gun is taken outside, and the owner pulls the trigger. But, instead of firing, the gun resists: "He

squeezed harder, I didn't budge, sick of the blood / Sick of the thugs, sick of wrath of the next man's grudge." In the meantime, the owner's would-be victim draws his own weapon—"a newer me in better shape"—and kills the owner. Lying on the street, the gun hears witnesses screaming and running from the scene, as well as the approach of police sirens. The gun is momentarily relieved—relieved that its violent existence is all over, that it can stop being used as a tool for murder. But, again, the song takes a turn: "Now I'm happy, until I felt somebody else grab me. / Damn." The beat drops out as Nas delivers this final line, his voice dripping with disappointment and resignation. At this point, it's clear to both the gun and the listener that the cycle will continue. Before the police arrive, the gun is seized by someone, a witness or a passerby, and the gun realizes that it will be used again.

Nas takes a similar rhetorical approach to other songs throughout his catalog, using prosopopoeia to address various social and political issues. In "Blood Diamonds are Forever," he raps from the point of view of a piece of jewelry reflecting on its role in the exploitative system of the diamond trade, musing introspectively about how first-world luxuries come at the expense of real human lives in the Global South (Nas, "Blood Diamonds Are Forever"). In "Last Words," Nas raps as a prison cell, reflecting on the hopelessness, recidivism, and the need for prison reform (Nas, "Last Words"). In yet another song, "Project Roach," Nas speaks from a roach's point of view about racial politics in the United States (Nas, "Project Roach"). He draws parallels between the treatment of Blacks and the way most people would treat the insect. At first glance, the song seems offensive in how it compares Black people to a creature typically regarded as a pest, but by the end of the song, it becomes clear that the parallel Nas really wants to draw is centered on the bug's reputation for resilience: "You can't win, you can't stand the crunchy sound I make / If you squash me, learn to live with me." In short, far from being a one-time curiosity, prosopopoeia has long been a central feature of Nas's work. It is a technique that the rapper uses frequently to broach complex topics that other rappers may address through more straightforward means. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this paper, it's a technique that should give listeners and critics pause when considering whether or not to advance a hyperliteralist interpretation of Nas's lyrics.

When it comes to conspiratorial lyrics, however, critics assume the lyricist and the speaker are one-and-the-same. Much of the controversy surrounding the release of *Nasir* focuses on the song, "Everything." In addition to the *Pitchfork*, *Guardian*, and *Stereogum* reviews of *Nasir* previously mentioned in this paper, other outlets weighed in on the issue, as well. Writing for the popular site *HipHopDX*, Daniel Speilberger sought to "fact check" Nas's lyrics, writing that "anti-vaxxers—like many conspiracy theorists—don't necessarily care about facts ("Those 'Nasir' Anti-Vaxx Hot Lines"). Specifically, Spielberger and the other critics took issue with the first half of a single verse from a song. Interestingly, in these lines, Nas makes no claims of "fact" beyond those based entirely on subjective human experience. Additionally, the lines aren't merely a small selection used to illustrate a broader trend of "anti-vaxx" sentiment on the album; nowhere else in the song or on the rest of the album does Nas take an anti-vaccination position. Moreover, these cited lines, on their own, hardly constitute a "position" at all. When read in context, the lyrics seem to be suggesting something beyond the simplistic notion that "vaccines are harmful," a reductive conclusion that reviewers seem convinced Nas made.

Like "Project Roach," "Blood Diamonds are Forever," "Last Words," and "I Gave You Power," however, the lines from "Everything" are part of a broader technique the rapper uses to speak for the powerless. In the first part of the lyrics at issue, Nas raps:

> From the birth of a child, the world is foul
> Excursions of a searchin' child
> Should learn to take nothin' personal
> A parent hates to watch his baby's face
> Takin' his first immunization shots, but this is great. ("Everything" 03:00-03:13)

For Nas, the child's pain is visceral, beyond the child's own comprehension. Whether vaccines are beneficial or harmful, or whether they're necessary, isn't addressed here; what matters to Nas is that the child's experience of that pain is intense and confusing, and more importantly, that it shapes their relationship to themselves, their loved ones, and the larger world around them. Sometimes, the world is "foul," and perhaps even more tragic, sometimes that foulness is delivered by people who are supposed to protect you. It's "nothing personal." The physical pain of an injection, a pain that exists on a purely physical level for an infant—someone who has no understanding of the personal and public health implications of vaccination—is what's important here.

That early sense of pain and suffering, for Nas, helps prepare a child for the harsh realities of the world. Nas states this pretty explicitly when he raps, "but this is great." It's possible to read a hint of irony in this last line, but it requires a certain level of presumption on the part of the listener. There's no conclusive evidence that the rapper meant the statement ironically. Nas's vocal inflection and his body language in the music video both seem to suggest that he meant "this is great" to be taken earnestly (Nas, "Everything" 3:07-3:29). Nevertheless, the following lines build on the assessment that the pain of vaccination is "great" by spelling out why:

> The child's introduction to suffering and pain
> Understands without words, nothin' is explained
> Or rushed to the brain, lookin' up at his parents' face
> Like, "I thought you would protect me from this scary place?"
> "Why'd you let them inject me?"
> "Who's gonna know how these side effects is gonna affect me?" ("Everything" 03:13-03:29)

For Nas, the pain of vaccination helps the child understand something about the harsh realities of life. It's an interesting maneuver, particularly in its use of prosopopoeia. First, Nas gives a voice to the voiceless after explicitly calling attention to their lack of voice. The child who "speaks" is pre-linguistic; they are vaccinated sometime shortly after their birth, and the lesson they learn comes "without words," with "nothin'… explained." Here, Nas points to the child's language-less perception of the world. What follows is just as interesting: The child only obtains a voice after experiencing the sting of betrayal, after realizing that the very parents responsible for their birth would be unable, or unwilling, to protect them from painful experiences.

Insofar as it describes negative effects of vaccinations, the only line that takes anything close to a clear-cut "anti-vax" position is the child's last spoken line, and even that isn't as clear cut as it might seem. In a strict literalist reading of "Everything," the line, "Who's gonna know how these side effects is gonna affect me?" does, in fact, seem to take a negative view of vaccinations. But only if we are to count questioning a medical treatment's side effects as being "anti" that treatment. In addition, remember that at this point in the song, the rapper is fully immersed in prosopopoeia. While earlier lines feature Nas narrating the incident (presumably as a fully grown adult), in these particular lines he speaks as the infant. Moreover, Nas calls potential negative symptoms following vaccination "side effects," a tacit acknowledgement that such symptoms are, in fact, "side" effects—not "primary" or "intended" effects, as anti-vaxxers and dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorists sometimes assert.

Rather than challenging, or even questioning, the medical practice of vaccination, Nas actually does something far more interesting: He plays with the very meaning of vaccination. In the second half of the verse, when he raps, "Who knew I would grow to meet presidents that respect me?" it's clear that Nas himself is the vaccinated child: Nas has visited the White House to meet with Barack Obama, and the President calls himself a fan of the rapper (B. Jones; Newell). Nas follows that line with:

> If Starbucks is bought by Nestlé, please don't arrest me
> I need to use your restroom and I ain't buy no espresso
> Soon enough, assume the cuffs, the position

> Not new to us, since back on the bus sittin'
> Said, "Screw that bus!" – boycotted that bus outta business
> The future's us, yet every citizen's in prison ("Everything" 03:28-03:47)

Throughout the verse, Nas shifts his point of view at least four times. He begins by speaking as himself (as the rapper/narrator), then moves to the view of a parent making decisions about the health and well-being of their child, then speaks as the child, then back to himself as rapper/narrator reflecting on his own accomplishments. Finally, the song ends with him speaking as a representative of "us." Here, Nas seems to be making an argument about a sense of powerlessness shared by the members of his community—regardless of their age or the level of success in their careers—and the need for a shared sense of resilience. It's a point Nas has previously sought to address, like when he told an interviewer that "a nice watch" and "a nice day on a yacht with rich friends couldn't make me forget about" issues of racism (McLaughlin). Far from being a song about the merits of anti-vaxx positions, "Everything" uses *the initial, lived experience of being vaccinated* as a larger commentary on social issues. That is, through prosopopoeia, Nas uses vaccination to draw an extended metaphor about how life treats marginalized people. If the function of a vaccination is to inoculate someone against an invisible danger, the lyrics extend that function beyond the realm of disease and into social, economic, and political realities of life for children—particularly Black children—in America.

CONCLUSION

Despite now being widely regarded as the "biggest" musical genre in the United States (Ryan; McIntyre), hip-hop is still regularly subjected to standards that are rarely applied to other artistic forms. While it is not as common as it once was to see national politicians hold press conferences to denounce rappers and their lyrics, reactionary attitudes toward the genre persist. From the ongoing use of lyrics in courtroom proceedings to accusations by cable news pundits that "hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years" (Ramirez), American culture regularly shows that its relationship with the genre is uneasy. A recent manifestation of this attitude can be seen in the way critics respond to conspiratorial references in hip-hop lyrics. As the critical response to *Nasir* suggests, even mere hints of conspiracism can lead to hyperliteralist readings in which the artists' words are taken at face value. It's especially concerning with a genre that emphasizes the subversion of dominant discourses through creative wordplay and witty poeticism. It is not uncommon for a rapper's spoken lines to conflict with their personal attitudes and beliefs. And, while hip-hop lyricists like Nas make particularly creative use of prosopopoeia, there is nothing new about rappers speaking through eyes that are not their own. From its earliest history, the imaginative and seamlessly heteroglossic character of hip-hop is what makes the genre so compelling and so important. Tricia Rose writes that hip-hop "voices many of the class-, gender-, and race-related forms of cultural and political alienation" and "articulates many of the facets of life in urban America for African Americans situated at the bottom of a highly technological capitalist society" (184). It is through the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia (and related devices like personification, imitation, and ethopoeia) that much of this work is done. By speaking as prelinguistic children, as inanimate objects like diamonds and guns, or as entire communities, rappers follow Quintilian by giving "a voice to things to which nature has not given a voice" (161).

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Cake and Conclusions: Rhetorical Roots in "Sheetcaking" and Fallacious Community Responses

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ABSTRACT

The convergence of politics and comedy within political entertainment has created a new environment, dissemination of information, and formation of public opinion. In response to white nationalist rallies, comedian Tina Fey utilized her political comedy platform to satirically comment on the inaction of several privileged consumers. Community response to the satirical skit reflected the complexity of satire as rhetorical strategy, notably when present online and within popular culture discourse, and the cognitive demands that result in fallacious tendencies. The following examines the fallacies that arise in response to Fey's satirical message and the implications for political entertainment media.

Keywords: Saturday Night Live, Tina Fey, fallacious rhetoric, political satire, social activism, political entertainment, political discourse, popular discourse

On August 12, 2017, hundreds of armed, white nationalists rallied in the streets of Charlottesville. In response to earlier protests combating police brutality and racial profiling, a group of approximately 250 predominantly white males marched in a torchlight procession through the University of Virginia campus, encouraging far-right ideals and bigotry. Carrying nationalist flags and lit torches, the group shouted racist, discriminatory slogans: "White lives matter! Blood and soil! You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!" (Heim, 2017). The group continued through Charlottesville and navigated through the University of Virginia campus grounds. With no intervention by authorities , a small group of students from the University of Virginia formed a counter-protest. The group of approximately 30 students locked arms around the base of the University's Thomas Jefferson statue and prepared to face the protestors. When both groups met, extreme violence erupted – chemicals were sprayed, rocks were thrown, and a car barreled into a group of unarmed bystanders. The chaos progressed and 24 hours later, three fatalities were reported. The events were addressed later by White House officials through attribution of blame to not just the neo-Nazi groups responsible for the initial protest, with president Trump claiming "there is blame on both sides" and backing his statements as correct opposed to purely political (Merica, 2017).

"LET THEM EAT CAKE"

In response to the Charlottesville protests, comedian Tina Fey performed a skit on *Saturday Night Live*'s Weekend Update. In a University of Virginia sweatshirt, Fey addressed several political figures for their incompetence, ridiculing President Donald Trump on multiple fronts for his political etiquette and response to the rallies:

> Our president, Donald J. Trump – which I don't think people talk enough about what a stupid jackass name that is… whatever, he gets away with it 'cause he's gorgeous – anyway, Donny John comes out and says that he condemns violence on many sides. And I'm feeling sick 'cause you know, I've seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and I wasn't confused by it. Nazis are always bad… And then Donny Johnny says we need to defend our country's beautiful confederate monuments when you know he would take them down in a second if he thought he could build a bunch of poorly constructed condos on the spot (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Fey continues to highlight the inherent flaws of several other political figures including Ann Coulter and Paul Ryan, attacking their intelligence and evasions:

> When Ann Coulter crawls out of her Roach Motel and says, 'Antifa attacked Republicans in Berkeley,' and you're like, 'Okay, Yard-Sale Barbie'… I say, where's Paul Ryan in all of this? You're supposed to be the cool, young congressman but you don't know how to @ someone on Twitter? 'Racism is bad @realDonaldTrump,' you pussy (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

By highlighting the faults of the current political figures, Fey establishes a rationale for satirical attacks. These justifications then serve as a foundation for the overall satirical message and a necessary component to engaging in effective satire.

Beyond critique of several politicians, Fey transitions to a significant rhetorical goal, satirically encouraging inaction by highlighting the idleness of several middle-class women privileged with an ability to disregard national controversies:

> I don't want any more people to get hurt and I know a lot of us are feeling anxious and we're asking ourselves, 'what can I do?' and so I would urge people this Saturday

> instead of participating in the screaming matches and potential violence, find a local business. Order a cake with an American flag on it. And just eat it… Sheetcaking is a grassroots movement – most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election… I really want to encourage all the good, sane Americans to treat these rallies like the opening of a thoughtful movie with two female leads – don't show up (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

By commenting on the anxieties many Americans felt at the time and simultaneously remarking on the stress-eating solution many privileged women partake in, Fey provides the community with a message that aims to highlight the ridiculousness and ineffectiveness of inaction, through uniquely complex rhetorical strategies.

COMMUNITY OUTRAGE

Headlines broke almost immediately after the skit, claiming Tina Fey "suggests eating sheet cake over protesting alt-right rallies" (Fox News, 2017), and that "we fight Nazism with sheet cake" (Fox News, 2017; Hirsh, 2017). Articles argued her "eat cake strategy after Charlottesville is bad advice" and "the epitome of white privilege" (Dommu, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017;). News media from both political sides reported on the literal interpretation of Fey's statements, suggesting to consumers that Fey was offering a solution that in fact involved urging people to stay home and eat sheet cake rather than participate in political protests (Fox News, 2017). News articles offered brief descriptions of the content of Fey's argument and provided the video for consumers to make their own judgments – after having been told what her intentions were.

Literal interpretations and subsequent criticisms extended beyond news media and further permeated social media, where several outraged users administered personal attacks on the comedian and her status as a wealthy white woman:

> "Tina Fey represents some of the worst impulses of liberal white women who can't see beyond themselves" (Jade, 2017).

> "Love Tina Fey, but I'm REALLY not feeling her 'Ignore racism and stress-eat instead' take. It strikes me as willfully naïve and privileged." (Tom and Lorenzo, 2017).

> "Also, Tina Fey has a long history of insensitive/appropriate/racist jokes and then digging in her heels when she's called out." (Menta, 2017).

> "Instead of eating cake and parroting provably-failed tactics, Tina Fey could simply fill all the GoFundMes for Black people injured on a12." (Gorcenski, 2017).

> "Tina Fey adapts 'don't show up' as an anti-facism strategy from her years of doing the same for people of color, queer people, lower-clas-" (Edison, 2017).

Other users focused their attention on her "eat cake" claims, with surface-level interpretations that remark on the inappropriateness of stress-eating and the absurdity of suggesting to do so:

> "…did Tina Fey really just 'Let Them Eat Cake' this shit" (Devon of Nine, 2017)

> "tina fey telling people who historically don't show up to fight white supremacy to not show up is… well, it's consistent" (Kindred, 2017)

> "…let's dismantle white supremacy and THEN we deserve to stay at home and yell into cake." (Drase, 2017).

> "I can't. Really? Eat cake instead of fight? Y'all been doing that since day one for us. Switch it up." (Nissel, 2017).

Ironically, the outrage with Fey's suggestion to stress eat as a coping strategy for political and social turmoil solidifies the argument Fey satirically makes. The difference, though, is that Fey offers up a mirror to which audience members avoid the reflection; instead, they recognize the absurdity in inaction during chaotic tragedies, yet fail to recognize Fey's illustration that such a strategy does exist among the privileged: "most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election" (Saturday Night Live, 2017). Fey utilizes her comedy platform to highlight the problems with wealthy, privileged individuals remaining idle during times of distress.

Media that do acknowledge the satire behind Fey's claims report on the inappropriateness considering the solemn topic: "I'm seeing some 'TINA FEY SATIRE!!1!" this morning. Like, even if that's true (which IDK IDK), satire doesn't WORK when reality is insane." (Donna stole Roy Kent's Rolex, 2017). Articles include commentary on the realization that "Fey is a comedian, not an activist" but suggest "that justification [is] lazy when the comedian in question is talking about actual Nazis on an ostensibly political show" (Kane, 2017). Such responses touch on the components of the Political Satire Appropriateness Model outlined by Lance Holbert (2016). The model suggests that the appropriateness of political satire consists of perceived social threat and human flaw of the satirized, and the audience interpretation of the satire is therefore dependent on the level of agreement between what the satirist and the satirees view as appropriate. The current model suggests that the existence of prior background knowledge into the satirical attacks as well as the satirized are necessary components to the reception of satire as a rhetorical goal. However, the model fails to acknowledge the influence of media platforms as well as potential contributions to fallacious responses.

POLITICAL ENTERTAINMENT

The use of multiple platforms to disperse information during conflict or tragedy has become thoroughly rooted in mass communication, particularly in instances of political events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Anxiety surrounding political issues prompts interest and increased attention to news through amplified emotional engagement, and scholars have uncovered political entertainment models as a means to maintain political relevance in the present media environment (Lee & Kwak, 2014; Esralew & Young, 2012). Traditionally separate entities, politics and humor have converged in late-night talk shows and sketch comedies to reach young viewers while employing relatively high levels of awareness and engagement in politics (Baumgartner et al., 2012; Holbert et al., 2013). Unlike journalism and news media restraints centered on critique and analysis, political entertainment shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) mimic real-world events and figures, theoretically influencing public opinion on politics and the political information environment (Abel & Barther, 2013).

A unique component to political entertainment derives from the characterizations of the humor presented within them. Late-night comedy sketches have positioned themselves as central to the political media environment and feature political humor identified as "predominantly aggressive and unflattering toward politics" through the emphasis and mimicry of political figures and process failures (Esralew & Young, 2012; Moy & Pfau, 2000). Despite the lack of legitimacy neither confirmed nor denied by news media regarding opinions and portrayals demonstrated by comedians in political entertainment, comedians are able to generate debate regarding political issues and candidates through humorous sketches, as their content is seen as trustworthy by consumers (Abel & Barther, 2013).

Saturday Night Live

Identified by academia as an institution with serious political clout, *SNL* has been incorporating

comedy and critical thinking into audiences since 1975 (Abel & Barther, 2013; Reincheld, 2006). In their attempts to "rejuvenate television creativity" and facilitate a substantial impact on social consciousness, the writers and producers of *SNL*'s Weekend Update have long devoted a significant amount of time and attention to traditional news media (Reincheld, 2006, p.190). Building on comic commentary and satirical genres in the early 1960s, *SNL* aimed to reconstruct television comedy and did so through the use of political parody and genuine administration of information – what they considered to be a stark contrast to the traditional news media – and allowed audiences access to information dispersion with heightened authenticity (Day & Thompson, 2012).

Characterized by their authenticity and uncensored presentations, comedians on *SNL* occupy a unique position in political communication, news, and persuasion (Day & Thompson, 2012). *SNL* in particular allows for comedians to perform a specific political message from a particular lens that is familiar to the audience, allowing media to highlight familiar concepts that facilitate consumer judgments (Baumgartner et al., 2012).

A large portion of the familiar content within *SNL* is related to political figures and campaigns. As early as 1975, *SNL* has been utilizing parodies of presidential candidates as a rhetorical strategy and entertainment model, stressing negative portrayals and attention to political life and playing a significant role in the formation of public opinion (Baumgartner et al., 2012). Notably, the impersonation of Sarah Palin by Tina Fey in 2008 resulted in *SNL*'s "largest audience in over 14 years" and elicited a significant public debate as to the effect the skit had on Palin's ratings (Esrawlew & Young, 2012). Coined the "Fey Effect," literature extensively reviewed the influence that not only political comedy may have on public opinion, but also how specific celebrity figures can enhance this effect. Interestingly, comedic performances "draw upon the star's biography and personalized observational humor," exposing versions of themselves that can be manipulated and performed within different frameworks and thereby contribute to the interpretation of their messages (Patterson, 2012, p. 235). In fact, the caricature of Palin became a source of anticipation by consumers in instances where the vice-presidential candidate would exemplify poor performance to the public. Viewers anticipating Fey's parody of Palin contributed to the surge in *SNL*'s ratings, attracting their largest audience in over 14 years and eliciting an academic discussion on the influence of celebrity figures in shaping public opinion (Esralew & Young, 2012).

Tina Fey

The potential influence of comedy on political campaigns, remarkable in itself, gains attention when considering the social position of the comedian. As a highly male-dominated industry, comedy television rarely includes women satirists, positioning Tina Fey as "the most visibly successful female comedian in contemporary U.S. media" (Hmielowski et al., 2011; Patterson, 2012, p. 232). The Western concept that women are not funny and comedy is a male talent has contributed to the masculinizing of comedy for centuries. Political comedy shows have historically been predominantly male and casts have outwardly dispersed their anti-female comedian views in the early productions. Early *SNL* comedian John Belushi publicly ranted on the humorless nature of women and threatened his resignation if all female writers were not fired from the show (Hill & Weingrad, 1986). Softer judgements have been further placed on women comedians where Michael O'Donoghue, *SNL*'s first head writer, attributed the success of male comedians to the "hunk of meat between [their] legs" (Hill & Weingrad, 1986, p. 244). Given the history of marginalization toward women in the comedy realm, the positioning of Tina Fey as *SNL*'s first female head writer in 1999 established her success in contemporary culture.

Scholars argue that the construction of Fey's public image derives from various mediated discourses within a contemporary media environment and her role as a feminist identity functioning within feminist politics (Patterson, 2012). With the assumption that patriarchal systems have established themselves as superior, postfeminism has allowed for the transformation of "feminist political ideals and practices into

individual attitudes and lifestyle choices" (Patterson, 2012, p. 235). This in turn creates an environment in which conscious choices regarding identity influence public perception and feminine agency, highlighting the importance of Fey's political framework and comedic content. An analysis of Fey's work as a comedian reveals an ample amount of blunt, self-deprecating humor and satire that aim to highlight real-world issues such as gender inequality and hegemonic femininity (Patterson, 2012). Fey has consistently utilized unique rhetorical strategies that are purposefully multifaceted and designed to produce social change.

RHETORIC IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

Political themes pervade history where rhetoric as the art of persuasion historically began as the practice of and participation in political science (Cline, 2006). The nature of the political system in ancient Greece demanded community participation and effective speech, particularly the ability to speak in one's best interest. This resulted in the emergence of Sophists, teachers of rhetoric as the art of persuasion that believed politics and law could be influenced by man (Leggett, 2012). Later rhetoricians such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle saw the original sophistic view of rhetoric as an injustice where language was being used as a tool for manipulation. Aristotelian rhetoric established the logical, ethical, and psychological components to persuasion and identified rhetoric as the ability to see what is persuasive in every given case – transitioning away from the ability to persuade to include the ability to recognize persuasion (Zalta, 2010).

Satire

Under Aristotle, rhetoric became about the intellectual and philosophical development of what should be said and how best to say it, particular to the given case (Gross & Dascal, 2001; Murphy, Katula, & Hoppmann, 2013). Different strategies subsequently arose that involved a series of adaptations according to the particular environment, audience, and purpose, varying in complexity and audience engagement. Among them, one of the most cognitively demanding rhetorical strategies of satire appears in a select number of media outlets. According to Burke (1984), humorous appeals "imply attitudes and courses of action," by producing heightened consciousness and enabling audiences to notice the problems at hand (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2010). This form of humor has transitioned in presentation from its early modern characterizations as conservative and supportive of dominant ideologies to a contemporary critique of society and its institutional structures (Colletta, 2009). This new form of satire incorporates humor with a cognitively demanding reflection of society and dominant norms that requires a unique amount of audience engagement to be effective.

Given its cognitive demands, satire often produces incongruity among intended versus received message, indirectly thwarting satire's rhetorical force (Boukes et. al, 2015; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). The process audience members must partake in for the satire to be effective involves recognizing incongruity among the words and current knowledge, examining alternative explanations or interpretations, and critically deciding about the author's knowledge or beliefs (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2010). This is primarily because the essential structure of the rhetorical strategy is designed to deceive and require recognition of deception:

> …the audience is expected to assimilate the special mixture of aggression, play, laughter, and judgement that is set before it. Each of these alone can create difficulties… satire usually causes trouble, not merely because it is an attack and a judgment, but also because satire, at its most complex, demands its audience be sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic: sophisticated about the audience context in which the satire transpires, sensitive to the means at work, and sympathetic in sharing the aggression and judgment (Test, 1991).

The effectiveness, then, derives from several working facets centered on satirist delivery, audience engagement,

and media environment.

Political Satire

Examining political entertainment and humor itself reveals irony and satire as primary rhetorical strategies. As an institution with profound implications in the political news media realm, *SNL* incorporates sketches replete with satirical messages and thereby plays an essential role in the cultivation of American TV satire (Reincheld, 2006). Yet, satirical messages in a political realm are more often misinterpreted through the increase in audience engagement. Adding a political element to satirical messages simultaneously heightens complexity and audience comprehension demands, requiring audience members to deconstruct messages using existing knowledge of political events, figures, and crises, that is often obtained through consumption of other media texts (Boukes et al., 2015; Holbert & Young, 2012;). Considering its exploration of controversial topics, political satire incorporates a cognitively demanding message with dichotomous political ideologies in which potential misfires evolve from feelings of personal attack. The sarcastic humor embedded in political satire evokes such responses that engage viewers on a news media as well as emotional level, which allows for political entertainment content to be processed with biases and "reinterpreted in ways that serve to reinforce political viewpoints" (Lee & Kwak, 2014; LaMarre et al., 2009). By presenting political content that is often dichotomous in nature due to political affiliation and ideologies, political satire has more potential than satire alone to spark an emotional identification/separation.

Tina Fey's absurd suggestion to binge eat sheet cake in place of participation in political activism is a clear demonstration of satire as a rhetorical strategy, but also representative of the complexities involved with adding a political element. Fey exemplifies a modern approach to satire through humor centered on a direct disapproval of social and political elements that currently exist in society. Her deliberate jokes against political figures like President Trump for his business-oriented background and Paul Ryan for his illiteracy on social media despite being the "cool, young congressman" are derivative of critical reflection of America's political representation (Saturday Night Live, 2017). Fey advances her critique of society through arguments that indisputably condemn the events in Charlottesville:

> The next time you see a bunch of white boys in polo shirts screaming about taking our country back and you want to scream 'It's not our country, we stole it from the Native Americans…' And when they have a peaceful protest at Standing Rock, we shoot at them with rubber bullets, but we let you chinless turds march through the streets with semi-automatic weapons (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Further, her suggestion of "sheet-caking" followed by her claims that "most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election" incorporates humor into her public disapproval of privileged stress-eating in place of political activism (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Considering the purposeful irony within satirical messages and the information processing theories in which people process ambiguous information in ways that favor their social selves, the incorporation of political ideologies into complex rhetorical strategies involves the underlying cognitive processes in which the message is interpreted, encoded, stored, and retrieved (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). Fey's critiques of society's institutions and events like Standing Rock require political and social awareness with an accompanying understanding of the events. Such involvement reflects the tendencies of audiences to misinterpret information or engage in fallacious responses as a result of error in the information processing system or lack of context.

FALLACIOUS COMMUNITY RESPONSES

This outside force in shaping responses to satirical messages accompanied with the human tendency to process information in a dichotomous structure inevitably contributes to unintended, ineffective rhetorical discourse. Tracing back to the foundations of rhetoric, Aristotle outlined the basic human functional capabilities including the ability to reason and engage in critical reflection, and further essentialists reflected upon his outline as a lack in any of these areas results in a lack of humanness (Nussbaum, 1992). According to Aristotle, fallacious arguments are those that appear to be refutations but illustrate delusions opposed to reasoning (Hasper, 2012).

Ad Hominem

The *ad hominem* fallacy involves the digression away from a person's argument onto an irrelevant personal attack against the individual themselves. These attacks can introspectively be deemed irrelevant, yet aim to discredit an individual on the basis of illegitimacy (Yap, 2012). Yet, regardless of the relevance or justification of the personal attacks, an *ad hominem* argument can undoubtedly influence an arguer's credibility and public perceptions. Stating that Tina Fey "represents some of the worst impulses of liberal white women who can't see beyond themselves" fails to acknowledge the content of Fey's claims and instead fallaciously attacks the comedian for her status as liberal, white, and female (Jade, 2017). Doing so illegitimates her status as a public figure with credible political and activist opinion, despite her success in the comedy industry and her social and political involvement. Although Fey's success in comedy and overcoming oppression within the industry has established a sense of *eunoia* (appeal to good will) embedded within her message, even those with a positive attitude toward Fey as a comedian and public figure respond negatively toward the satire:

> I adore both Tina Fey and sheet cake. But let's dismantle white supremacy and THEN we deserve to stay at home and yell into cake (Drase, 2017).
>
> Love Tina Fey, but I'm REALLY not feeling her 'Ignore racism and stress-eat instead' take. It strikes me as willfully naïve and privileged (Tom & Lorenzo, 2017).
>
> My love for Tina Fey and my devotion to cake are at odds with the terrible advice to not actively fight fascism (@evenglezos).

Where Fey's résumé builds a theoretically powerful appeal to good will, the misinterpretations of the satirical message contribute to fallacious tendencies centered on discrediting the satirist.

This fallacy is most effective in discounting a particular argument by raising doubt regarding an arguer's credibility, notably in highlighting inconsistencies within the person's claims and behaviors (Walton, 2008). Social media extended their dismantlement of Fey's claims to the audience's perception of Fey's own inaction: "Instead of eating cake and parroting provably-failed tactics, Tina Fey could simply fill all the GoFundMes for Black people injured on a12" (Gorcenski, 2017). Attempting to illustrate an absence of genuine concern for the community through inaction in parallel territories, users responded to Fey's sheetcaking with *ad hominem* fallacious tendencies that attack her credibility. These arguments aim to discredit Fey's claims by emphasizing her previous work as "insensitive, inappropriate, [and] racist" and commenting on her current work as undoubtedly consistent, being "willfully naïve and privileged" (Menta, 2017; Tom & Lorenzo, 2017).

Further, Fey's political views contribute to audience perception of her as part of a specific political affiliation and therefore function for consumers as a rationale behind illegitimating her from representing the entire affiliate. Identifying Fey as a liberal white woman in combination with her outward condemnation of members of the Republican party contributes to the attacks on her credibility as a woman with liberal views. The opposing group is portrayed in a positive light where the liberal community is denounced for being led

by Fey, with social media users urging one another to avoid her claims by arguing that Fey is not "a person to listen to when it comes to race," and consumers ought to associate themselves with more credible, deserving historical women.

False Dilemma

Equally unsupported and flawed in reasoning is the *false dilemma* fallacy. Emphasized by dichotomous media coverage and bias information processing, arguments rooted in *false dilemma* presume "an unjustified false division of an issue into but two propositions" (Lewinski, 2014, p. 203). The invalid arguments extend flawed deductive reasoning, presenting a contrary position as a contradiction by presenting only two arguments. Essentially adopting a binary perspective, responses to Tina Fey's "sheetcaking" further divided the community into two categories: conservatives and liberals, whites and blacks, those that accept the satire and those that reject it.

Where the technical, news media approach to addressing the rallies outwardly urged citizens to engage in social activism, Fey's comedic, satirical approach was positioned by consumers as the "other" argument – which, in previous analysis, was fallaciously articulated to be inaccurate, inappropriate, and noncredible. Users separate the democratic affiliation into leftists that meticulously "mass [movements] of solidarity" and liberals that preposterously suggest "[ignoring] racism and stress [eating] instead" (@LanaDelRaytheon; Tom and Lorenzo, 2017). The dichotomy within *false dilemma* separates the responses of different democratic affiliates and derides one over the other.

The alt-right rallies arguably began as a result of dichotomous media coverage and the immense separation and maltreatment of black versus white individuals. Beyond criticizing Fey's position as a white woman, consumers remarked on the differences between whites and blacks, both in Fey's skit and successive responses:

> "i wonder if Tina Fey knows the idea that 'black men are threatening' is the same racist idea that gets them knee-jerk shot by police hmmm" (Harderson, 2017).

> "So about Tina Fey… not all drag queens are Black and not all Black men are prone to violent behavior" (Robles, 2017).

> "Hooh boy, the stark difference of opinion on Tina Fey form white people and PoC right now speaks volumes about perspective and experience" (@SidzenKane).

The negative or positive interpretation of Fey's satire largely stems from the separation of white and black that has permeated media outlets prior to the events in Charlottesville. Many consumers disregarded Fey's attempts to elicit social change due to her status as a white woman, adopting a "you're with me or against me" mentality: "I can't. Really? Eat cake instead of fight? Y'all been doing that since day one for us. Switch it up." (Nissel, 2017). The division of the majority and minority therefore contributes to the discrediting of Fey as a satirist as well as the fallacious, dichotomous responses rooted in *false dilemma*.

The *false dilemma* fallacy further created a separation of those that understood and accepted Fey's satire, and those that either adopted a literal interpretation or rejected the message on the basis of inappropriateness. Literal interpretations and rejections saturated social media, leaving consumers shocked and repulsed by Fey's supposed solution to "literally – 'eat cake'" (Higgins, 2017). Those that accepted the satirical message and accomplished the rhetorical goal critically attempted to illustrate to those that "didn't get it":

> "I'm muting anyone who doesn't understand that Tina Fey is a comedian and was making a joke. We can still have jokes right?" (Terminally Chill, 2017).

> "Did you not see the satire? Mocking the non action by some who are dealing w situation solely by stress eating?" (Anne with an "e", 2017).

> "guys tina fey is a comedian not an activist eating a cake is not enough to end racism eating cake is just a fun thing to do" (@DanaSchwartzzz).
>
> "HOLY FUCK PEOPLE TAKING TINA FEY LITERALLY PLEASE MAKE IT STOP PLEASE IT IS SATIRE PLEASE" (@jbolognino).

Those that did recognize the satire and still rejected it assumed the message was inappropriate given the seriousness of the topic: "we get the joke, it's just bad" (Problem Werewolf, 2017). This created a fallacious argument that some individuals simply could not recognize the satire and those that did, ignorantly accepted the assumptions when willfully inappropriate to do so.

Contextual considerations

When exploring how consumers fallaciously responded to Fey's satirical comments, it becomes important to note the underlying contextual considerations related to not only *SNL* as a political platform, but also the fundamental components to democracy that are challenged in Fey's skit. Aforementioned, the foundation of *SNL* as political entertainment is, in the current climate, built upon the melding of politics with comedy and amusement. While it has been argued that the use of political parody is essential to democratic public culture by means of opening discourses and challenging the limitations of public speech, there could be other factors that influence its effectiveness or usefulness (Hariman, 2008). One of the more apparent potential pitfalls of such an approach to democratic participation and political discussion would be the level of seriousness that can become lost in parody. That is, just as viewers gravitated to *SNL* in hopes of viewing more Fey/Palin parody, it could be argued that this participation and consumption exists independent of any political or democratic goal – viewers simply watch because the skit is funny and entertaining. This can be related to discussions of literature that demonstrate media users' perceptions of political parody influence to be correlated with the likelihood of activism; users only found a political parody to be a source of influence if it was positively correlated with willingness to engage in corrective action (Lim & Golan, 2011).

Beyond the potential blurred lines in political entertainment media, the goal of Fey's skit (and the subsequent fallacious responses) is connected to highlighting fundamental flaws in the current political climate. Democratic stability rests upon not only a faith but also an assumption in human beings to govern behavior in ways that are stable and allow balance (Weingast, 2014). As Fey attempts to illustrate by suggesting many privileged members of society are inactive and unconcerned with human rights, members of the democratic society are not in a position to effectively govern themselves. Ironically, her point is even further reinforced by the fallacious responses to her critique – that is to say that several demographics, including those with higher education and media literacy, were not mentally equipped at processing, reflecting on, and engaging with this level of civic dialogue.

CONCLUSION

With media permeating every-day life, their presence is indisputably persuasive, containing an ample number of messages targeted to different audiences. These media operate in different environments that in turn influence the effectiveness of the rhetoric present within them. The political entertainment media realm is one that functions uniquely on the basis of entertainment and humor in combination with real-world political issues, touched upon through cognitively demanding rhetorical strategies such as satire. The merging of politics and comedy within political entertainment has undoubtedly influenced public opinion, with the incorporation of satire within these mediums heightening the complexity and level of audience engagement that in turn amplifies cognitive demands when interpreting satirical messages, particularly in a political setting. An increase in cognitive exertion and incongruity between audience interpretation and satirist intention in

instances such as Tina Fey's "sheetcaking" exemplifies responses reflective of fallacious arguments. In a setting where humor is necessary in illustrating controversial opinion and highlighting political and social unrest, the surrounding media environment that contributes to misinterpretation and fallacious responses can be recognized as playing a pivotal role in rhetoric within these diverse mediums. The question then arises as to what components are necessary in producing effective rhetoric and accomplishing one's rhetorical goals in a complex media environment demanding cognitive resources.

A large portion of research into answering this question involves consideration of the rhetor and the audience – to what extent does the rhetor successfully employ rhetorical strategies and to what extent is the audience receptive of the rhetoric. Reflection into any potential causes of incongruity among intended versus received interpretation further explains the tendency of consumers to engage in fallacious responses. In this particular instance, the unique features of political entertainment in combination with the satirical content and cognitively demanding components to rhetorical strategies could be identified as factors that contribute to audience use of *ad hominem* and *false dilemma* fallacies. Further, an exploration into the dichotomous nature of news and political media reveals the contribution to the use of *false dilemma* – these media operate themselves in several instances on the assumption that political affiliations are either one or the other. These identification strategies further resonate within consumers and elicit feelings of personal attack given the biases involved with information processing and the use of *ad hominem* in compensation. As demonstrated through Tina Fey's *SNL* skit, though the fundamental use of communication involves rhetoric, the speaker and surrounding environmental components influence the ways in which speakers and audiences interact.

Given the nature of rhetoric and its use and function within popular culture, an exploration in the rhetorical roots of political entertainment media serves to heighten consumer awareness into the role media play in consumer life. Such an examination forces consumers and rhetoricians into a space that reflects upon the content of rhetorical messages and subsequently requires they respond in an effective, rhetorically sound manner. By encouraging reflection into how media operate using rhetoric, consumers exemplify effective media literacy. An increase in media literacy and awareness of media influence on cognitive processes as demanded in several rhetorical strategies can theoretically reduce the amount of fallacious rhetoric and dichotomy within news and social media. The need for further study into how media shape rhetorical practice and reception is therefore necessary in facilitating consumer engagement that is rhetorically valid and free of logical fallacies, which has the potential to change the way audiences interact with media – on a more informed and critically thought-out level.

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