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## Nailing Jell-O to a Tree

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NAILING JELL-O TO A TREE

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A Final Portfolio

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with specialization in  
English Teaching

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## Sometimes Defining Yourself and Your Work is Like Nailing Jell-O to a Tree

When I began thinking about the projects that I would include in this portfolio, there were four papers that immediately came to mind. These papers represented careful research, intellectual curiosity, and personal development. However, there did not seem to be much of a theme that unified the works I wanted to collect. Rather than see this as a setback or some kind of academic obstacle that needed to be worked out, I realized that these papers would be the perfect representation of my graduate studies. My time in this program was not characterized by a single vision; my time in this program has allowed me to explore many different fields. There is no singular definition or easy explanation for what either “English” or “Teaching,” much less “English Teaching,” is—and my portfolio examines the different moving parts within English studies: gender studies, analysis, representation, queer theory, writing and reflection, revolution, social progress, research, intercultural connections, praxis, and shifting identity. The portfolio shows the ways I have been able to stretch out a bit from the usual confines of secondary education. Rather than try to forcibly stake out a hunk of flavored gelatin to a living oak, I decided to celebrate the slippery and elusive ambiguity that this program has provided me.

The process of developing these papers pushed me into some very unfamiliar territory. Some papers required formats that I was unfamiliar with. Some papers involved interacting with foreign cultures. Other times I was treading carefully because I knew the content of the paper would be used to counter controversial measures in my school district. Each paper presented its own challenges, which I countered and conquered. Taken together, these frequent moments of

discomfort led me to moments of discovery that helped me gain a better perspective from a higher plateau. Instead of just applying more force to the nail (which is not going to make the Jell-O hold fast any better than it did before), my academic discomfort led me to find new methods and new schemas for accomplishing the goals set before me.

One of the biggest epiphanies that I had over the course of my MA program of study was that there is no such thing as writing “in general.” There is no all-purpose mode of writing. This realization not only shaped the way that I would engage in writing instruction within my classroom, but it also affected the way that I approached the writing tasks presented by each of these papers. Each paper had its own purpose and audience, which I became acutely aware of throughout my classes focused on writing.

The main goal in pursuing my MA was to find better ways of teaching writing. I have not had much to work with in the way of instructing students to become better writers. I had the freedom to design curricular models within my district, and I had plenty of years of experience. Nevertheless, I felt that something was missing. As I began my coursework, I came to realize that the delinquent element in my teaching practice was theory. I had ideas about what I thought writing should be, and how one should write, but these ideas ranged from popular misconceptions to simplistic notions about writing. I was building houses in the sand, and I was frustrated by my inability to make any progress.

With this in mind, I have decided to lead with a paper I wrote for Teaching Writing. The theory I gathered within this class, as well as from the Composition Instructor’s Workshop (which I took the same semester), provided me with a solid foundation upon which to build a functional instructional model. I was inspired to rebuild my department from the ground up, using these new concepts and approaches as the guiding principles for creating a better

understanding of who my students are as writers. This initial paper outlines the changes I have made in my thinking about writing as well as my methods of teaching writing.

I was writing “Mr. L. 2.0 or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love English Composition”<sup>1</sup> (mostly) to myself. At the time, I was coming to the end of my first year of coursework, and I wanted to check in with myself and to take account of what I had learned. I was determined not to fall into my old teaching practices; the whole point of pursuing my master’s degree was to transform how I engaged my students as writers. Writing this paper forced me to use the theory I had read and to take the time to redesign myself as a writing instructor.

When I originally wrote the paper, I was still on sabbatical leave; when I revised the paper for this portfolio, I wanted to incorporate the year of in-class, face-to-face trials I had gathered after my return to my classroom. This meant that I had to do some work with verb tenses (“I am going to” now became “I have done,” for example). I also felt it necessary to place some footnotes along the way as signposts so that the reader will have a sense of where and when the text takes place. The peer review process helped me here—one of my reviewers made copious references to confusion in tense, so I knew where I needed to make this clearer. The intended audience with the published draft is much broader—the combination of theoretical planning and reflections from in-class experiences shifts the reader from myself to any writing teacher interested in altering how they approach writing instruction in their classroom.

Some of these projects were the result of taking classes outside of the English department, namely Foundations of Feminist Theory from the Women’s Studies department.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper fulfills the pedagogy-based requirement for my program.

Understanding how gender dynamics influence and affect socio-political structures is crucial for someone in a field as heavily politicized as teaching. Thus, I was quite excited to be able to mix the readings in feminist theory with my chosen occupation. The result was the longest and most thoroughly researched project of my entire educational experience. This paper, the second in my collection, focusses on a non-American organization, the Afghan Institute of Learning, who create and supply educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan. I used the theory of the American writers covered in the class to make connections between the struggles of women in a global context.

“Educating Women in Afghanistan: Power, Revolution, and Rebellion”<sup>2</sup> stands at the intersection of several objectives I had. I wanted to address the importance of education (I am a teacher, after all), incorporate second wave feminist thought into a global context, and dispel misconceptions about Islam. This paper also supplied numerous challenges as I pursued it. I had to research the history of a country I knew very little about. I had to become more acquainted with the Qur’an. I had to engage in extensive research in order to fully understand the interconnections between each of the different services that the Afghan Institute of Learning provides. The result of this research led to some new insights for me as well as a chance to re-evaluate the perception of Afghanistan and Islam in American culture.

Americans tend to have a very limited understanding of Islam and of Islamic cultures, especially where countries that we have been—or are—at war with are concerned. When I began thinking about my paper on the struggles to educate women in Afghanistan, I wanted to delineate the culture of Afghanistan from the Islamic teachings in the Qur’an. This division would become

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<sup>2</sup> This paper fulfills the extensive research requirement for my program.

necessary for the feminist angle the paper would assume. I wanted to expose the differing relationships with Western ideals and behaviors that Afghanistan has faced—all the while being a predominantly Islamic country. Women's struggles within Afghanistan are the result of cultural behaviors; the conclusion of the paper revealed how the Qur'an and the Hadith can be used to empower women. Writing this paper helped me delineate between cultural behaviors and the role religion plays within those behaviors. This research paper has even fostered insights about how religion is used to enforce oppressive behaviors within my own country.

Some of the work in this portfolio addresses dire concerns for my local school district. All too frequently, weak administrators across the country allow parental complaints to gain the leverage necessary to maintain an aura of silence and invisibility for our LGBTQ youth. On a local level, this led to consequences that rippled through our entire school, from censorship in my classroom to a school culture of homophobia. I responded to this shift in my school by taking advantage of a research opportunity in the History of Education class. I formulated a research query about the necessity and importance of LGBTQ identities and themes, as well as queer reading, in the secondary English classroom. This essay underwent substantial development in the revision process for this portfolio, and it now stands as a weapon against the intolerance of any local school board.

The idea for “Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Introducing Queer Reading Strategies to the Secondary English Classroom” was spawned from issues that arose in my own teaching practice. I thought I knew how to implement progressive changes within my classroom. I thought that adding literature to my curriculum that featured explicitly gay characters would help break the silence that surrounds the closeted voices of our LGBTQ students. What I did not realize—and the research for this paper drew into sharp focus—was that I was contributing to the



Othering of the very students that I was trying to serve by not applying a queer lens to all of the literature that we read.

This essay started as a response to an exam question that I designed. When I wrote the essay and submitted it, I was frustrated that I didn't have the opportunity to explore the issue at hand (i.e., the importance of queer reading alongside of LGBTQ characters, authors, and themes) as fully as I would have liked. I continued reading the research and other materials on queer criticism even after the essay was due because the thesis itself had personal relevance to me.

Revising this essay allowed me to utilize my post-assignment reading and thinking about the subject. As a result, the paper expanded to almost twice its original length. I was able to explore the importance of queer reading and applying queer theory across the English curriculum. Through reading and writing this paper, I was able to gain an understanding of queer theory and how it sits alongside of feminist, ethnic, Marxist, postcolonial, or any other theoretical approach when reading any work of literature. I now see how to change the thinking and questioning for the literature I read with my students in order to trouble the heteronormative and cissexist biases that exist within our culture—specifically within our educational system.

As an English teacher, most of my instructional time is divided between reading and writing. The shift in my approach to writing is covered in the first paper in this collection, while the last paper in my portfolio is an artifact of the theoretical expansion and exploration I received through the Theory and Methods of Literary Criticism coursework. Theory informs so much of how we read a text, and much of the approaches we covered had immediate and direct applications to the literature that are commonly read in high school English courses. The fourth paper in my collection applies some of these new theoretical approaches to a text that I love dearly, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This paper was like the analytical equivalent of spelunking—

exploring and charting new (to me) regions of a text I was already quite familiar with. I felt as though I was seeing the text for the first time, once again. The newness that theory can lend to a text rejuvenates the reading and teaching experiences in the classroom. No matter how many times I have read and taught the works of Poe, Fitzgerald, or Huxley within the situated experience of my classroom, the new theory that we covered breathes new life into these works. In the end, I have more flexibility with how I present a text; the more lenses I have at my disposal, the more efficiently I can adapt the presentation to the unique persona created by the class.

The last paper in my collection, “Laugh of the Molly-dusa: Cixous as Curator through ‘Penelope,’” was easily the most fun I’ve had while preparing a final exam throughout the entire MA experience. I am genuinely delighted to work closely and intimately with James Joyce’s work, especially *Ulysses*. When it came time to begin thinking about the final paper, the connection between Cixous’s *écriture féminine* and the final chapter of *Ulysses* seemed obvious to me. When I mentioned my project to the instructor, she referred me to Cixous’s dissertation on Joyce, *The Exile of James Joyce*, which made the connection between my two central pieces even smoother. Along the way, I was able to employ Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” as well as my familiarity with Greek mythology—particularly Homer’s *Odyssey*.

The instructor for the course seemed really pleased with the result, and she noted a few places for me to develop my thinking a bit. I focused my revision on these developments. I tried to make some of the connections between Molly and Penelope a little clearer by utilizing Homer’s story. There were connections here that were begging to be explored, but I did not see them until the instructor pointed them out. I followed this up with an exploration of how Cixous’s ideas refute the male domination of the pen and authorship from Gilbert and Gubar’s

*The Madwoman in the Attic*. I was already familiar with this text, so I simply had to return to my underlining and marginalia to find the references that I needed. The paper reminds me of many of the essays I read as an undergraduate that helped illuminate the text at hand, and in turn, created interpretative direction for writing about the work itself. One of the reasons why I am so proud of this particular paper is that it does sound like a chapter in a book of essays about Joyce's *Ulysses*. It makes me feel like I have "arrived," as it were.

Taken together, these four papers represent the very different and comprehensive changes my thinking has undergone as a result of my coursework at BGSU. I have gained insights from new theoretical approaches, developed an action plan to implement better writing instruction in my classroom, realized ways to positively impact my school culture, used new readings in various theoretical disciplines to improve the use of literature in my classroom, and even found new ways of reading and interacting with some of my most beloved books. The Master of Arts degree in English, with a Specialization in English Teaching, has made me a more effective and more confident teacher, which will decidedly improve the relationship my students build with reading and writing.

## Mr. L. 2.0 or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love English Composition

### The Problem

*I know what I want to say, but I don't know how to write it down. Like, I have the ideas, but I don't know how to put them down. --Emilia, a Senior<sup>3</sup>*

I cannot even begin to count the times that I have heard students make some analogue of Emilia's complaint. A student might have an idea that they want to explore, but they can't seem to start writing. My students, like myself, haven't had any real guidance in the writing process. I have always felt like I should be able to help them; I am, after all, their English teacher. If not me, then who? I was consistently at a loss as to how to provide any real help or structure for my students in this area. I scaffolded their reading, made accommodations for their assignments, and other necessary classroom tasks—but I had no idea how to teach them to write.

I received no real writing instruction in high school. In college, I educated myself vicariously through the comments left by teachers and by copying the style, form, and organization of the critical material I read. I must have been mushfaking<sup>4</sup> fairly well, as I frequently earned high marks in my classes. As I pursued my pedagogical studies within my major at the university, there were few available classes—much less required classes—that were

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<sup>3</sup> This paper is not an IRB-approved study. The quotes are used with student approval, and their names have been changed to pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> James Gee re-appropriated this piece of prison slang and applied it to writing studies. "Mushfaking" is a manner of creating contraband items (such as hot water or weapons) using available items that were not designed for that purpose. Gee makes use of the word to refer to writers who have not been properly acquainted with a given Discourse, and are therefore getting by via imitation.

designed to prepare us to be writing instructors. We addressed reading levels and student-centered responses, but we did not address *how* to write these responses.

### A Time to Break Down; A Time to Build Up

I, and many others like me, worked for years with false, or at least misguided, assumptions about teaching English. Most of these assumptions were based on the premise of product-driven writing. I would give my students the writing task with the same impetus to work that the starting gun announces at the beginning of a race. Because I was not thinking of writing as a process, I was unaware of what else I could be doing to assist my students when they write. My students, too, tend to think of writing in terms of product, and they quickly become frustrated with the act of “doing” the assignment.

In this product-driven model, I was not helping my students find their voice or authentically engage in the writing process. I was treating *voice* like a buzzword—something to be used as part of the checklist of “things teachers say”—without actually creating an environment that allowed for the development of voice. “Voice” was just a word that I was supposed to embrace. I was placing emphasis on the finished product, and this emphasis was acknowledged by the grade earned for the product; my students understood this, and they were familiar with similar models through years of prior experience. Neither my students nor myself knew how to fix the problem in front of us, but we both knew there was an obvious problem.

By treating the writing prompt as an analogue of a starting gun, I was not providing sufficient time for exploration and discovery. As a result, the students relied on familiar models and methods, and sometimes asked for guidance. Often students felt paralyzed by the disproportionately minor emphasis on drafting, but neither they nor I knew this was the problem.

I was asking my students to think creatively about the text at hand, but I was giving them neither the framework nor the time to do so. Many students already think of themselves as bad writers, and I was preserving this self-perception through bad teaching practices.

I knew writing would be required in any profession, as well as in many mundane daily activities. However, by failing to recognize the different protocols for each rhetorical situation, my writing instruction never really prepared my students to write for any specific or real-world task. I was functioning under the notion that there is such a thing as “writing in general,” and I thought that the practices and modalities of writing transfer to every rhetorical situation.

Throughout Graduate Writing, Teaching of Writing, and Composition Instructor’s Workshop,<sup>5</sup> I have read *a lot* of writing about writing. As I read these meta-writings, I have reflected on my past practices. I realized that I needed to use a process-driven model instead of a product-driven model. As my thinking about the process of writing began to change, I began to realize that I could not merely make a few tweaks and minor adjustments to my English program.<sup>6</sup> The foundations of how I teach and what I do in my classroom would need significant pedagogical restructuring. Much like suddenly realizing I had been traversing the backcountry while holding my map upside-down, I would have to get out my compass, look at the sun, and reorient myself in the correct direction. These classes provided an exploded view—like that found in a technical manual for a complex machine—of the writing process, which would be

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<sup>5</sup> All of these classes are part of the MA program in English at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.

<sup>6</sup> I attended in-services, professional developments, and learned from experience. However, nothing seemed to be much more than a Band-Aid on the problem. None of these services worked because a deeper re-evaluation of how I taught writing was necessary.

quite incompatible with my prior methods and scheduling. I would have to re-evaluate what I do and why, so as to accommodate the needs of a process-driven model of writing instruction.

### Reconsidering an Erroneous Notion of Error

*Mr. L., is this right?* --Horatio, a Sophomore

English teachers often fall into the role of editorial proofreader and out of the role of revising reviewer, myself included. It is all too easy to become obsessed over each nitpicking detail, each deviance from some elementary school “rule,” to the point where we fail to see how the writing functions as a component of learning. Writing is distinct from speaking, and “may emanate from different organic sources and represent quite different, possibly distinct, language functions” (Emig 9). However, the act of writing is a synthesis of different modes of learning, which makes written product an artifact of the learning process. Writing is enactive (where the hand dominates), iconic (where the eye dominates), and symbolic (where the brain dominates). Since learning involves reinforcing what is learned, the entire process makes for a “uniquely powerful and multi-representational mode of learning” (Emig 10). When my students begin to write, they are engaging in a process that can be quite transformative—which *should* eject me from the position of mere copy editor. Now that Dr. Enig has re-framed my understanding of what writing *is*, I need to re-think my understanding of error and what to do about it.

When we begin to think about error as a circumstance that disrupts the reading experience, suddenly we realize that not all errors are created equally. We must rethink our interactions with the concept of error in our evaluation of student work. Mina Shaughnessy’s definition of error is particularly useful: “unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader...[that] demand energy without giving any return in meaning; they

shift the reader's attention away from where he is going (meaning) to how he is getting there (code)" (qtd. in Mutnick and Lamos 22). By altering how I interact with error, I must necessarily alter the purpose of the writing. Previously, I was focusing on error-correction at the sentence level, and in so doing, I was creating a purpose for writing that is error-based. If I only feedback that concerns coding errors, then the only assessment that my students can glean from their work is *I have made a lot of errors; I must be a bad writer*. This is especially dangerous. "Writing assessment constructs boundaries for learning and student agency in learning environments and frames how students understand writing and their own abilities" (Scott and Inoue 30). Since writing is indeed an artifact of the multi-functionality of learning, a statement like *I am a bad writer* is tantamount to *I have not learned anything/I cannot learn anything*. No wonder adolescents are so morose.

As writing instructors, we have to realize that the comments we leave on a writing sample have the power (whether we like it or not) to create the degree of value for the sample at hand. For as much as I would like the students to evaluate their own work on their own terms, it is my final feedback—and ultimately the grade—that establishes how much value a piece of work has. "[W]hatever is emphasized produces what is defined as 'good writing'...Likewise, what is not emphasized becomes less important and may not be considered characteristic of good writing" (Scott and Inoue 30). The focus on the code of the text hinders any attempt by the student to create their own value system for the writing they produce. Once I make any mark on the page, that mark will guide the student in their evaluation of the piece. I do not want my students to base their role as writer on the number of grammatical and mechanical errors they make, so I have established a system of evaluation that does not rely solely upon such errors. If I want my



students to foster a sense of accomplishment based on their ability to convey meaning, then the ability to convey meaning has to be the main focus of my feedback.

When and how I provide feedback in student writing will create space for academic and personal writing to merge. I am here to help students “[synthesize] personal and academic perspectives into novel academic arguments” (Mutnick and Lamos 24). It is not difficult to recognize the missing personal perspective from student writing—the dreaded stack of bland, boilerplate essays is evidence to the point. My instruction develops a personal relationship with writing first. When we get to academic writing, the students can then continue to build their self-identification as writers when they approach new rhetorical demands.

### Ain't I an Essay?

*Mr. L., is this what you want? --Portia, a Junior*

Composition is an expression of one's self, and the self is uncovered through composition. In order to create a space for my students to uncover and to express themselves through composition, I have made space for conflict. Both composition and teaching must necessarily embrace conflict “in order to ‘negotiate the oppressive discourses of racism, sexism, and classism surfacing in the composition classroom’” (Micciche 134). The truth of one's experience may unsettle commonly accepted normative behaviors; authentic composition needs to be embraced, especially when it is disruptive to the received and (sometimes) alienating cultural discourses from various outlets, such as news and social media.

As a teacher, I stand at the intersection of power and privilege, a position that has been enhanced in turn by the intersection of race, gender, and class. As my perspective of my role in the classroom changes, I have begun to see myself as a facilitator of agency—not merely

someone who grants agency. I am in a position to activate, within the student, the sense of enfranchisement within the political structure of the classroom. “We all deserve to be taken seriously, which means that critical inquiry and discovery are absolutely necessary” (Royster 559). Space must be created for writing in the English classroom that allows student writers to discover—not merely to parrot information or to engage in some kind of thematic treasure hunt within the text.

Writing prompts have to be carefully created for students to respond to, so as to avoid placing blinders on them to every other element within the text. All they see is what they are looking for because they want the “right answer.” Portia’s question that introduces this section perfectly exemplifies the model that she has been conditioned to be a part of—a model of *reception* and not of *creation*. Portia wants to make sure that what she is doing coincides with what I want her to do. Critical inquiry and discovery are absolutely necessary, but it is not enough that we—as the collective participants in a classroom environment—deserve to be taken seriously. We have to want to be taken seriously.

I have facilitated this agency<sup>7</sup> with one particular group of students, and in this class, I have seen the most growth. My English 11 (i.e., Junior English; American Literature) students responded quite strongly to having few guidelines and a generalized goal to reach at the end. I frequently leave the method, approach, and content to them, and they execute the necessary inquiry, which ultimately leads to discovery, to complete the task. By the end of the first semester, they became quite comfortable with the lack of guidelines and checklists to fulfill. However, it should be added that I frequently gave this class the support that they needed by

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<sup>7</sup> That is, of *wanting* to be taken seriously.

saying things to them like: *I want you to discover your way through the task or I am really glad to see you approaching this in your own way, which is precisely why I do not want to give you too many procedural guidelines.* This was not just a class that *deserved* to be taken seriously; they *wanted* to be taken seriously. Thus, the opportunities for inquiry and discovery were seized, yielding authentic writing opportunities.

Writing is a knowledge-making process; writing generates knowledge of the self and the world that surrounds the writer. Writing is “...mulling over a problem, thinking with others, and exploring new ideas or bringing disparate ideas together” (Estrem 19). I take advantage of the generative—and somewhat disruptive—nature of writing to trouble the cultural norms that go unquestioned. The writing process is disruptive on so many fronts: the self, interpretation of the text, and interpersonal relationships.

However, writing is only one part of the traditional English classroom. What we read creates the spark that will ignite the fire of disruption in the writing that the student produces. The processes of reading and writing are deeply intertwined. When we read, we are influenced by new ideas and perceptions, which influence what we write; when we write, we articulate new ideas and perceptions, which influence how we read. Therefore, what we read needs to be an apocalyptic<sup>8</sup> agent of change, pulling the conflicts of our life into the light where we may scrutinize them carefully in thinking and in writing.

The literature that we read in class provides a multitude of disruptive moments. The qualities of disruption and shock are indeed primary reasons for adopting a work in my

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<sup>8</sup> An *apocalypse* is literally an “uncovering.” The Greek word refers to something being taken out of hiding, revealed. The modern connotative shades of meaning for this word are no less significant when we consider the potentially life-altering repercussions of reading and writing.

curriculum. When students engage in this displacement, their writing troubles the dominant discourses of the culture they live in. Writing assignments can even initiate confrontation with established cultural discourses.

Writing assignments that coincide with a disruptive work of literature can be designed to examine the mechanisms that create that displacement. This may involve examining Chopin's use of irony to invert perceptions of gender in "The Story of an Hour," witnessing Ibo cultural norms and rituals without context in *Things Fall Apart*, or simply reading the Elizabethan English of *Romeo and Juliet*. As students express their de-situated position in their writing, they are expressing their discomfort as well as their perceptions of gender, culture, and language. In order to make writing from this position possible, they may be disrupting traditional modes of syntax and diction. Such writing requires introspection, reflection, creativity, bravery, and vulnerability. When we, as human beings, become uncomfortable, we become anxious. However, channeling our anxiety allows us to create good writing. This means, of course, that what is initially perceived as an error in meaning or understanding may be an expression of anxiety—and not really an "error" at all. Becoming a composition teacher is not analogous with "comma-checker;" becoming a composition teacher means becoming an "anxiety-detector."

The expression of the student's interaction with textual conflict (and the anxiety produced by such interaction!) may necessitate compositional conflict. When students write from a place of conflict, they may begin experimenting with non-linear modes of writing, thereby challenging the predictably organized blocks within the traditional paradigm of the five-paragraph essay. They are encouraged to use a non-standard pronoun such as the singular *they* (which I am a strong advocate for), thereby disrupting the inherited use of subject-verb agreement (and indirectly challenging the inherent sexism of the English language). In the classroom, I bring

attention to the historical usage of this pronoun in a mode of direct instruction, and the students then become aware of the truly fluid nature of language:<sup>9</sup> *Wait...Mr. L., you mean a word can be singular AND plural?* They may also rely on the grammatical structures and idioms of their L1<sup>10</sup> background, thereby challenging the authority of English-language coding systems. I point out to my students that academic language is full of loanwords, especially from French. Students often know the word they want, but they are not sure how to translate it; I tell them that this is exactly how words like *ennui*, *cri de coeur*, and *je ne sais quoi* ended up in English as well. Their writing is sprinkled with Paiute and Spanish words, and the writing that results moves a little closer to that synthesis of personal and academic perspectives that Mutnick and Lamos spoke of earlier.

Writing that troubles inherited conventions creates a new ripple when considering *error*. As Shaughnessy implies, writing (and the feedback it accrues) should focus on meaning and less on code. The glitches in the written code can be addressed after the drafting phase. The prewriting phase includes experimentation, discussion, and exploration; the disruptions will surface here, and the writer can keep those disruptions intact as drafting begins to take place.

This is all said knowing full well that the authority of my position as a teacher—and a white, male, heterosexual, middle-class teacher at that—cannot create a space where students are free from the hegemony of my presence. The realization that the classroom—or any other activity system—reproduces the culture outside of the classroom has been part of the academic dialogue for over twenty years, and needs to be considered when formulating one’s role within a

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<sup>9</sup> Students generally take to this change very quickly--it is difficult to argue that “his or her,” “his/her,” or the wretchedly unpronounceable “s/he” is not profoundly clumsy. The socio-political awareness is secondary in most cases.

<sup>10</sup> L1 can be used here to mean *native language* or *first acquired language*.

classroom. “Since the mid-1990s, feminists have been careful to point out that values, political realities, ideologies, social customs and beliefs, and other cultural organizing structures travel into spaces that humans create; thus there is no purely democratic, utopian space available to us in virtual or face-to-face realities” (Micciche 135). As a result, my students are prone to interpret my questions as criticism; they are prone to interpret my suggestions as gospel. Therefore, the language I use to couch my suggestions in the revision process is very important.

I take the stance and voice of a group collaboration, which means that phrases like “what are we...” or “perhaps we could...” abound in my feedback. Additionally, Google Docs uses language that is very helpful for empowering my students as writers. I can leave “Comments” and “Suggestions,” which students can then “Accept” or “Reject.” Even if I delete something or add in some words, it is recorded merely as a suggestion, and the student has all of the definitive power in the revision process as they choose to accept or to reject these suggestions. I am here to help them make their rhetorical decisions, but as I do so, I need to bring their attention to the anxiety, conflict, and displacement that they are addressing, as well as how they are adjusting to it. My students use reflection<sup>11</sup> to understand their own relationship with the disruption of the text they read and the way they have navigated that conflict.

....Aaaand ACTION!

*There is so much work, but I don't have to think about any of it. I miss the writing assignments you gave us. --Demetrius, a Senior*

I have attempted to outline some of the ways that my thinking about writing has changed. However, there would be no point in changing one's thinking if it was not followed by a change

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<sup>11</sup> A more detailed presentation of how reflection is used in my classroom follows in the next section.

in one's actions. I chose to start this section with something Demetrius told me during my absence from Lone Pine High School<sup>12</sup> because it suggests that there was a lot of good in what I was doing. Rather than completely replace my former methodology, I have augmented it and made room for what I have learned. These changes were initially intended for the English 9 curriculum, but I very quickly found that I needed to act upon these new realizations in my other classes as well. I originally wanted to start with one class, fearing that it would be too much to take on across all four grade levels. When I returned to my classroom,<sup>13</sup> however, I found it necessary to make use of these changes every time I was teaching writing.

*I don't know why, but it is so much easier for me to write at home. I feel like I waste class time, but I just can't think about writing here.* --Beatrice, a Sophomore

I am fostering the relationship my students have with writing as well as how they initiate the process of writing. Beatrice's blockage with writing in class is not a result of her environment; she is expressing the results of having time to consider the topic before writing. She is, although she doesn't realize it, expressing the need for pre-writing. While she is in school, in her other classes, and walking home, she is ruminating over the prompt she has been given and how she will approach it. My previous (and misguided) teaching style did not allow my students to validate the necessity of the prewriting stage. I was not allocating the necessary time, and therefore, my students did not think of this stage as part of the writing process.

Now that I have shifted from a product-driven to a process-driven writing program, I have changed the timeline for the assignments that I give. The goal of my new instructional model is to lead with the writing task. The task should drive the discussion, which would then

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<sup>12</sup> I was granted sabbatical leave during the 2017-2018 school year to pursue the bulk of my MA work. I would begin implementing these changes during the following school year, i.e., 2018-2019.

<sup>13</sup> i.e., the 2018-2019 school year, after my year-long sabbatical leave.

contextualize and situate the brainstorming and responses that the students generate.<sup>14</sup> This moves the discussion away from a mere “rap session” and creates a purpose for the discussion. The engagement increases because the discussion now has a stated objective; daydreaming and working on last night’s math homework will put the student at an obvious disadvantage because we are no longer “just talking about the book.”

As the order of assignments is remodeled, the time allotted to the assignments is remodeled as well. When I distribute 85% of the time to prewriting,<sup>15</sup> then individual, small-group, and whole class discussions/explorations can easily fill multiple class sessions. As my English students spend more time prewriting, they have more ideas to choose from and to organize when they start writing. The threshold between prewriting and drafting will also expand. As Demetrius indicated, I have been engaging my students in appropriate thinking and questioning, but as Beatrice indicated, I was not providing the right amount of time for the different phases of work.

My English students (most likely) have not spent much time thinking about themselves as writers. They have, if past experience is any indicator, become obsessed with sentence-level errors and internalize the corrections on their papers as definitive statements about their writing ability. In order to shine light into the unexplored cubby holes and crawl spaces of each student’s sense of self, I have created and currently use reflective exercises to build a writerly self-

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix A for sample question and writing structure.

<sup>15</sup> This is a scheduling/organizing suggestion taken from Donald M. Murray’s “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product.” *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, 3rd ed., edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristen L. Arola, NCTE, 2011, pp. 3-6.



perception. I modified the reflection exercises I was given in Graduate Writing<sup>16</sup> explicitly for this purpose, and they work wonderfully in this capacity.

My final exam utilizes and directly engages the self-reflection that I wanted to inspire in my students. In lieu of some traditional forms of examination, like multiple choice or essay formats, the students compile a portfolio of work from the semester (of the student's choosing) that is paired with a newly-written reflection upon the assignment they have chosen.<sup>17</sup> The opportunity to write these reflections in a safe space creates a rather brave space where students examine what they have done and who they want to become. The new writing pieces for the portfolio allows the student the space to think about who they have become as a writer, what changes they have made in themselves, their relationships with their peers, and to put into writing what changes they want to make next semester/year.

These end-of-term portfolios have been filled with comments that reveal a shift in their understanding of English, a sense of pride in their work, recognition of poor work habits and the changes that need to take place, a sense of accomplishment over managing extracurriculars and academics, new insights about who they are and what English "is"....in short, these portfolios have been the necessary component to building the writerly self-identification that I desired in my students. Pulling the students back—encouraging them to take the long view of their work—creates a cognizance of the writing process that they did not possess before. The portfolio is certainly disruptive (phrases like *I didn't think I could...* or *I didn't know how...* abound in their

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix B for an example.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix C for the outline and guidelines to this project.

projects), but in the end, they understand who they are and their relationship to what they are doing a little bit better than they did before.

At the beginning and end of the cycle of disruption is the writer's sense of self. Initially, the writer is disrupted by the notion that they can indeed write. This new perspective arms the student with the capacity to speak and to write in response to the texts they read. As they write, they generate new insights into the structure of the literature, which in turn correlate to developments in understanding human interactions. The student gains new perspective of themselves by gaining new perspectives of the culture they live in. By restructuring the way in which I utilize writing instruction in my classroom, I have fractured the self-perception that my students come to me with: *I am a bad writer*. I created objective-driven discussions and discussion-oriented reading assignments, and the purpose of the writing changed. The writing is now less expository and more exploratory; the writing is less summative and more formative.

The guiding ethos of my English classes is more generative in nature. My feedback is focused on accentuating the bravery and risk-taking in the writing I read. Positive feedback that celebrates the ideas the student writes down is designed to equate *student* with *writer*, and the *student-writer* does have something important to say.

My Feedback Analysis assignment from Teaching of Writing<sup>18</sup> is a perfect example of my mode of feedback delivery. In the sample, I highlighted words that indicate the student's unique word choices and phrasing. I wanted to push the student forward, so I offered suggestions about specific details and setting. I even noted places where the student had (perhaps

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<sup>18</sup> I have attached this assignment for ease of reference in Appendix D.

unintentionally) used important narrative devices to create a foreboding atmosphere and palpable tension. I wanted to celebrate the bravery of telling this story (do his parents even know about this event?), which transformed into a sense of writerly selfhood.

My new English curriculum includes writing assignments that showcase various rhetorical situations (letters, product reviews, texts, op-ed style opinion pieces, &c.) and we discuss how our voice, potential audience, and purpose all affect the choice of media we use. The purpose of these writing exercises is multifaceted: to show how much my students write every day, to develop an awareness—or to engage a pre-existing awareness—of the different situated writing opportunities, and to break down/discard the notion that writing is an all-purpose activity. The beginning months of the class focus on the writing process and develop an identity as a writer, and then new applications of writing (like responding to or explicating a text) follow.

### It's Alive!!!<sup>19</sup>

High school English students may not be firmly situated in the perception of self qua writer, but it is a start. I am building a writerly identity that will develop and grow throughout the successive years of high school. In order to augment the student's development as a writer, I have incorporated other pedagogies into the instruction, particularly the collaborative writing, feminist/queer theory, and new media pedagogies. These pedagogical approaches all feature necessary ways to build the students' relationships with writing, and as a result, their relationship with themselves and the world around them.

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<sup>19</sup> Apologies to Mary Shelley for perpetuating the existence of a line that is nowhere to be found in her classic work of hubris, Frankenstein.

I am working towards—even though I will never fully achieve—a more expressive form of writing. Through collaboration, troubling normative institutions, exploring new forms of communication, peer review, and reflective writing, I am striving to bring more of the writer’s self into the work they produce. I realize this means that I have to put some of my compositional aesthetics aside. I was working in a model that molded my students to write like me, which is not something I had ever wanted to do. When I returned to my classroom, I made sure I did not squelch the voices of my students; indeed, I was on the lookout for those distinctive moments when my students wrote something that was truly unique and I made sure I responded enthusiastically. As a result, my classroom is less like an assembly line and more like a garden of scattered seeds.

In “Expressive Pedagogy,” Chris Burnham and Rebecca Powell make brilliant use of Peter Elbow’s statement on recognizing the power of the writer’s voice: “Resonant voice manages to get a great deal of the self ‘behind the words.’ Discourse can never ‘articulate a whole person,’ but at times we can ‘find words that seem to capture the rich complexity of the unconscious... that somehow seem to *resonate with* or *have behind them* the unconscious as well as the conscious...” (119). The early drafts and thoughts from my students contain so many potent examples of this “resonant voice.” Referring back to my Feedback Assessment,<sup>20</sup> I drew attention to the words and phrases that indicated that “self ‘behind the words.’” As I actively celebrate the translation of self into words, I continue to foster the student’s budding sense of identity as a writer. I can put off sentence-level errors—the kind that bask in a proliferation of red ink—until much later in the process. First, we acknowledge what works—what rings true—

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<sup>20</sup> In Appendix D

and then we slowly begin to work on the organization, and then (finally!) we work on mechanics and syntax.

### Conclusion

I used to see myself in the role of lecturer and dictator; now I see myself in the role of facilitator and encourager. Now that I have become aware of the profound hypocrisy of my former instructional practice, I have altered how I see myself and what it is that I do in the classroom. It is not just a matter of accumulating information and practice that I wish I had at the beginning of my MA program; I have accumulated information and practice that I wish I had 15 years ago.

Moving forward, there are so many shifts that I would like to see take place in my school. I would like to see more writing instruction in other courses. Both Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing In the Disciplines (WID) instructional models would greatly benefit our students. Currently, I am the only person who teaches writing in my high school,<sup>21</sup> and this is a great disservice to the multiple rhetorical demands that writing places on our curricula. I cannot overhaul the entire school at one time, but I can start by suggesting some of these changes and explaining the rationale for the changes at staff meetings. For now, I need to work on my instructional practice, and in another year or two, when I have grasped and integrated the pedagogies that I have read about throughout my MA in English, I can start to bring them to my colleagues and work on building the WAC/WID school that would benefit our students so much.

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<sup>21</sup> I work in a small, rural school with one English teacher.

## Appendix A (Sample Discussion and Drafting Outline)

In my American Literature course, I frequently pair Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as two perspectives on the American Dream. This sample writing prompt, pre-writing and drafting exercise examines a pair of symbols that speak to the destructive elements of the American Dream, creating a contact zone between the novels.

I want the students to ultimately arrive at this question: *How do both writers portray the destructive nature of the American Dream?* Providing this question (or any question that ultimately leads to a writing prompt) first allows the students to see where the discussion is headed. It creates context for the writing, note-taking, and speaking that the following activities will engage.

This may be a difficult question for my students to address head-on, so I give them a way in. First, we compare the symbolic value of two potent symbols from the text, namely, Robert Johnson's guitar and Gatsby's gold-colored Rolls Royce. This leads us directly to the destruction of Coyote Springs and the death of Myrtle Wilson.

Next, we look at the socio-political echoes from these catastrophes: race, gender, and class add to the import of these tragic scenes (some from one novel, some from the other). Taken together, we, as a class, can see how both Alexie's and Fitzgerald's social statements create a more complete picture of American society.

Because these discussion points have been prefaced by the writing task question, the students see where all of this is leading, and at this point, there is generally a sense of how to answer the question we started with. Without worrying about an introduction or formal style

guidelines, the class can now, in the form of individual work or in pairs of students, generate a map or outline of how they want to answer the question. Out of this, the first draft comes together.

Whenever we, as teachers and formally educated people, begin to write, we establish a purpose first, and then we begin to think about the question we are trying to answer or the statement that we are trying to prove. When we engage our students in writing tasks, they need to go through the same procedures in order for the whole process to make sense to them.

In the model described by Murray,<sup>22</sup> 85% of the time is prewriting—this includes the talking, discussion, organization, and mapping that precedes the time for drafting, which does not take up much time at all. This small window for drafting only works when the students know there are multiple drafting opportunities that will arise out of this assignment. The first draft becomes a readable account of the pre-writing stage, and then the revisions shape and polish the initial account.

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<sup>22</sup> See Donald M. Murray's "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, 3rd ed., edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristen L. Arola, NCTE, 2011, pp. 3-6.

## Appendix B (Reflective Coda)

### **Okay, so you've drafted that piece of writing, now how do you feel about it?**

As we write, we vacillate between confidence and uncertainty. It is extremely important for us to account for these moments of comfort and discomfort as we write. Now that we have drafted and revised a piece of writing—something that is finished for now—it is time to recount our *experience* of writing this piece.

This reflection will be submitted as a coda to the third draft of your writing. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you begin writing this piece about your own experience of being a writer:

- Read your writing back to yourself slowly. Recall the experience of writing the piece and note any moments where you felt un/comfortable. (You can use the Comment feature in Docs to do this.) What were you able to do comfortably? What did you feel was difficult? What did you feel confident about? Which part(s) made you feel anxious or insecure?
- Review all of the comments that you have made. Do you see any patterns or common thoughts?
- What have you learned about yourself as a writer? How do you merge these comfortable and uncomfortable moments? How might these realizations help you become a better writer?
- Compose a final reflection about the piece of writing we have been working on. Describe the challenges that you faced, and how you navigated your way through that challenge.

This reflection will count for 10% of the final mark for the third draft. I will not evaluate a third draft without this reflection piece. Here are some of the questions that I will be asking myself as I read the reflection:

- Have you addressed multiple moments in the writing and revision process that lead to moments of dis/comfort?
- Have you thought about why you had these moments of dis/comfort?
- Have you provided an explanation of how you overcame the discomfort you felt? Have you expressed the ways your moments of comfort helped you?
- Have you thought about how you will approach your next writing task differently?



## Appendix C

### End of Semester Portfolio and Final Exam

Context: Your final exam for the semester is a portfolio that displays your work from the past semester. A portfolio, if you have never done something like this, is a collection of individual pieces that show off what you have done—which in turn functions as a statement about what you can do. Artists create portfolios of their work, investors create portfolios of their stock holdings, lawyers create portfolios of their cases, and so on. It is a chance to show off who you are, what you have learned, what you have done, and who you have become.

Rationale: Education is not merely about *exposure* to new novels, ideas, projects, historical periods, writing tasks, chemical formulas, technology, and mathematical equations. Education includes the (rarely utilized) time for *reflection*. In order to really appreciate and understand what we have been exposed to, we must reflect upon our accomplishments. Assembling a portfolio makes us revisit what we have done, and in this process, we must evaluate what we have learned from the collected mass of work. Our reflective evaluation of what we have produced over the past semester forces us to ask questions like:

- ✓ *What was the purpose of this assignment?*
- ✓ *What did I learn from this assignment?*
- ✓ *What new skills did I have to employ to complete this task?*
- ✓ *What skills did I already have that enabled me to complete this task?*
- ✓ *How does this assignment fit into the overall scope of the course?*
- ✓ *What objectives (from the syllabus) have been met through this assignment?*

You haven't **learned** anything until you have **reflected** upon what you have done.

Procedure: Your portfolio will be entirely electronic. Using Google Sites, you will construct a webpage that guides the viewer through a tour of your work and your responses to the classroom material. You will create headings for the categories you create, and subheadings if necessary. You will upload the files from your Drive and Classroom to the Sites page, and include an explanation of why you included the particular piece. Any work that you use from your Drive can be uploaded to your web page using the embed link. To do this, click the “Share” button on the file. When the Share window opens you will find “Get Sharable Link” in the upper right-hand corner. Copy that link. Click the “Embed” feature in your Sites file. Paste the link into that window. You can move the embedded file wherever you want by clicking and dragging it to the place you want to drop it.

Guidelines: You must decide how your work is going to be presented. That is, the names of the categories are going to be of your creation, and placed in the order and arrangement that you see fit. You may want to use the names of the units as the category; you may want to use the assignment type as the category. All of your submissions will be electronic and included in the webpage that you design. If the work you wish to submit is physical (such as a graphic organizer or a comic), simply photograph the work and upload the photograph. (Note: I have already seen and read these assignments, so I do not need to be able to read every word on the page as it is submitted!) You can create links to other pages where your work is submitted using the “Button” feature. Your written justifications for including these work samples needs to be long enough to explain why it is in your portfolio. You may wish to respond to questions such as these:

- ✓ *How did this assignment challenge you?*
- ✓ *What new skills did you have to use in order to complete the assignment?*
- ✓ *How was this assignment different from other assignments that you have completed?*
- ✓ *How did the assignment build upon what you could already do?*
- ✓ *Were there any parts of the assignment that made you uncomfortable?*
- ✓ *How did you address this discomfort?*
- ✓ *Was the assignment merely a repetition of earlier assignments?*
- ✓ *What new insights or understanding about the study of English did you gain from the assignment?*

Of course, you may not feel like every one of these questions are relevant to you. Additionally, you may not feel like every one of these questions are pertinent to every assignment you include. You may have things to say about a particular assignment that does not fall under any one of these questions, so feel free to include your personal impressions as well.

Expectations: **I expect** the work that you submit in this portfolio will be the best version you can produce. If this means you need to or want to revise the assignment, then so be it. However, if you don't tell me that you revised the assignment, I will assume that you have not done so. **I expect to see** thoughtful and honest reflection on your work. This means that I want to see fully developed thoughts and an overall plan to the layout of your portfolio. **I expect to see** a variety of assignment types. I want you to show off how versatile you are as a student and your capacity to complete different types of tasks. This may even include a sample of your notes. This does not mean that you can only include one sample of each type of assignment; if there are two essays, or 3 graphic organizers that you want to include, that is fine. Just explain to me why/how each one demonstrates different skills or a progression of acquiring certain skills. **I expect to see** work that demonstrates growth and learning. This does not necessarily mean a collection of assignments that you have done well on. Remember that an assignment that earns a low grade because it was late provides a

valid lesson about punctuality. Remember that sometimes we work really hard on assignments that earn a C; our effort defines us, not our grades.

Evaluation: First and foremost, the syllabus states that the Final Exam/Portfolio is worth 25% of your semester grade. I will be scaling it to 100 points. This is indeed a lot of weight and a lot of points; that's why we are spending two weeks putting it together. Obviously, it cannot be revised and it cannot be resubmitted. *It is due at the end of the final exam period on the day your exam is scheduled. It cannot be turned in late. All work not submitted by the end of the final exam period will earn a zero.* Because there is no way for me to determine what you are going to find valuable and important, I cannot base my grading on a minimum number of assignment types (i.e., x number of this type of assignments and y of these assignments). Rather, I will be taking into consideration the following criteria (which you can use as a checklist for your portfolio):

- Is there a variety of assignment types?
- If there is more than one example of an assignment (i.e., more than one essay, for example), then has the student explained what makes each example worth including and what special features that assignment possesses?
- Is there a sense of continuity? Does the arrangement of information on the page create a sense of evolution and development throughout the semester?
- Does the student show weaknesses and room for development?
- Does the portfolio make use of the student's strengths?
- Does the portfolio show that the student has taken chances and risks in their work?
- Does the student reference specific points in the assignment or in the creation of the assignment that illustrate moments of confidence, uncertainty, discomfort, or pride?
- Has the student reflected on the value of the assignment and how the assignment fits into the learning objectives from the syllabus?
- Has the student taken risks in the portfolio itself (i.e., voiced dissatisfaction with a grade, questioned the merit of a particular assignment, etc.)?
- Has the student submitted their best versions of their work, if applicable?
- Has the student taken the time to proofread their justifications for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors?
- Has the student created a portfolio that is visually interesting and easy to read?

I will be evaluating the portfolio holistically, which means I expect these qualifiers to be met over the course of the portfolio, and not necessarily for every sample included.

Conclusion: This is a very elaborate project, which is going to take a lot of time to complete. I have been experimenting with the Slides app, and it comes across as rather user-friendly.

Whenever a question arises, please ask. If you have an idea but cannot figure out how to do it, please ask. This is a first-time experience for many of us, so the exploration is just as much a part of the learning process as the actual project that you submit. Despite the weight of the project in terms of grading, this should not be a particularly stressful assignment. You have done all of the hard work already; now you are picking out the highlights and most valuable learning experiences from the semester. May the Force be with you, and the odds ever be in your favor.

## Appendix D (Feedback Samples)

The following is a link to the Feedback I provided to a student on a narrative. The link goes to a screenshot-video I made of what I would say to the student and it reveals how I would approach evaluating the piece of writing at hand: [Video](#)

Additionally, I composed this written reflection upon my video: [Written reflection](#)

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## Educating Women in Afghanistan: Power, Revolution, and Rebellion

### Abstract

This paper will explore the challenges that face women who seek an education in Afghanistan, the cultural responses to educating girls, as well as the return influence of educated women upon the Afghan culture.

The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) created the model for women's education through Women's Learning Centers, which provided education and skills training. The AIL views change as the product of empowering people; escalating tensions through marches and demonstrations does not actually change the living conditions of anyone for the better.

Schoolgirls are frequently met with acid attacks, while their schools are often targets of bombings and poisonings. The technology and materials, and often the actual edifice to convert to a classroom, is not an economic reality for much of rural Afghanistan. Bringing education to rural Afghanistan takes not only money, as does any project, but also cultural upheaval.

Women lost their access to education when the Taliban's regime came to power at a time when Russia lost control of the region. It is only after the exit of the Taliban that schools have begun to exist for girls, but that does not mean that the whole culture accepts this change.

Part of this paper will attempt to correlate the struggles faced by women in Afghanistan with Second Wave feminist thought. This places the feminist writers in a global context, indicating the universality of problems these writers discuss. However, in order to avoid a reduction to essentialism, the numerous differences and cultural conflicts between these writers and the present situation in Afghanistan will be noted.

The conclusion attempts to use a feminist reading of central Islamic texts as a way forward for Afghanistan. Islam does not enforce any discrimination of women, and all Muslims are called to seek education and enlightenment. Education and literacy brings the ability to read and interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith, and educating all Muslims to see the equal footing that these sacred texts place between men and women is fundamental for any cultural healing and progress to take place.



## Feminism in Afghanistan: Before, During, and After the Taliban Regime

When the Taliban seized control of Kabul in September of 1996, all forms of education for and by women were outlawed. The girls' schools were shut down, female students expelled, and female teachers fired. "In the capital city alone,...106,256 elementary-school girls and more than 8,000 female university students [were immediately suspended]. In the same moment, 7,793 female teachers lost their jobs" (Mortenson 74). The system of powerlessness and terror that the Taliban created was built upon disenfranchisement of women from any form of education. In order for any female selfhood to be wiped out of the cultural identity, women have to be deprived of access to any form of self-development.

Despite the severe injunctions against educating girls—a teacher of a girls' school would be executed, sometimes in front of the girls she had been trying to educate—underground schools began to form. Greg Mortenson reports that by 1999, 35,000 girls were being homeschooled across Afghanistan. International efforts were made to create covert educational opportunities for Afghan girls. However, the forced seclusion that these girls faced, in order to maintain their survival, had dire consequences. The girls suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and many considered suicide. The circumstances designed to foster education were inadvertently creating emotionally hostile environments for the students. The pervasive brutality of the Taliban made it impossible for girls to be educated, whether publicly or privately. The punishments for being caught in (i.e., attending or simply being there) or operating a school for girls were so severe that the schooling environment, instead of being a source of empowerment, became so stressful that any positive measures made by literacy were undone by the emotional damage from being in a "school."

It wasn't always this way. Prior to the rule of the Taliban, Afghan women enjoyed a fairly liberal existence. Women worked, walked the streets unchaperoned and without headscarves, wore Western fashions, and had access to education. As in rural areas of the United States, rural Afghanistan did not provide the same access to education and employment opportunities that the urban centers did.

Women were given the right to vote in 1919, one year prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in the United States. Over the course of the 20th century, women's rights began to expand as the country became more progressively democratic. The practice of *pardah*, which separates males and females in all public social functions, was abolished in the 1950s. By the 1970s, women were commonly seen in professional lines of work, in government positions, and attending universities. Such professional and academic women didn't wear the headscarf as a matter of choice; wearing the *hijab* was neither enforced nor forbidden. Modern Afghanistan has not returned to this level of freedom in employment, representation, and wardrobe.

The West, particularly America, congratulates itself over the removal of the Taliban from power. However, "by bringing the warlords back to power, the US Government has replaced one misogynist, fundamentalist regime with another" (Rawi 117). The Taliban may be gone as a national force of terror, but that does not mean that the situation has improved for women in (particularly) rural Afghanistan. The local warlords (who have resumed control of outlying provinces after the Taliban's exit) instill their own laws, and uphold their laws in their own courts, which gives them the power to justify and to carry out any act of brutality towards the local people—and women are a favorite target. Local warlords still enforce laws that prohibit the education of women.

Even though the official governing body of Afghanistan promises equal education to men and women, this does not match the reality of the situation. The discrepancy between a boy's and a girl's access to education is especially clear in the rural areas. Girls are faced with sexual assault, rape, or even attacks with acid if they attend school. Any time a school for girls is established, it becomes a target for bombings and arson. The patriarchal fascism of the Taliban has been replaced by another similar system—the only difference being that the newer system of oppression claims to be a change for the better.

The political and economic instability that the people of Afghanistan have inherited have placed women further into the recesses of discourse. There are terrorist groups that are still very active in Afghanistan, which is why the US still has 11,000 troops stationed there to carry out counter-terrorist operatives (Cooper). These terrorist operatives have been targeting the educational system—especially the system of educating girls. Now that educating girls is legal and encouraged in Afghanistan, the remnants of the Taliban, in order to preserve their control, strike out and instill fear in the people. Carolyn Kissane cites the bombing, burning, or shutting down of 640 schools in the two-year span from 2007-2009 (18). This works out to nearly six inoperable schools in a 7-day week. While this looks like an attack on the educational system as a whole, and it is, it is important to disaggregate this data: 80% of those schools were schools for girls (Kissane 18). While the Taliban and its allies have made it clear that the modern education system is indeed its enemy, they direct most of their violence at the new systems in place for educating girls.

Educating women is not merely a matter of teaching women to read, to write, and to solve mathematical equations. The manner of education is equally important. The educational system must encourage female participation as well as be based in gender equality. Such political

notions are new and difficult to achieve unless the Afghan government develops connections with secular and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in its reform of the nation's schools.

Education has to reach into the political sphere, and women have to have representation within governmental structure. The Afghan Parliament maintains a quota of 25% (or 68/272) female members. Women that have been educated in a participatory educational model, armed with the necessary rhetoric, cultural analysis, and history, are in a position to challenge the patriarchal systems of oppression. In 2012, there were 69 women in Parliament; in 2017 there were 84 in both houses of the Afghan Parliament. "Moreover, it is equally important that such an increase in female representation at all levels of politics be a cadre of women who are committed to challenging patriarchy; the actual *gender* of those serving in government matters little if their voices echo the status quo" (Kissane 13, author's italics). The growth of women in the political sphere is important, but only if those women are committed to dismantling the systems of oppression that silence Afghan women.

Afghanistan's constitution provides for equal access to education to all people. However, there are many social influences that obstruct the implementation of this ideological plan. Education, and its strong connection to a democratic society, ends up being associated with non-Islamic, and therefore non-Afghan, practices. The rural areas of Afghanistan are run by local warlords, who have no interest in diminishing their political power through restructuring their areas of governance. Their fundamentalist and patriarchal interpretation of Islam removes women from access to an education in the name of preserving their culture and way of life.

As of the 2001 raid in Afghanistan, there has been little sense of security and stability. The judicial system is largely ineffective, and the brief gains made in healthcare and education are steadily deteriorating. "The sense of cultural anxiety created by rapid social change results in

responses that see changes in gender-roles as the paradigmatic symptom of cultural threat and loss, resulting in calls for a return to 'our traditional way of life,' a return that is primarily to be accomplished by returning women to their 'traditional place'" (Narayan 404). Though referring to India, Narayan's statement describes the situation that has come to be in Afghanistan as well.

The "rapid social change" of the last forty years has allowed many of the warlords within Afghanistan to take advantage of the anxiety of the people and to vilify any idea that disrupts their hold on the area. By enforcing a way of life that deprives women of speech or any other self-determining capacity, education for women becomes unnecessary. Educating women can then be maligned with other democratic forces that will destroy "traditional" Afghan life, which in turn strengthens their power to define "traditional life." *Tradition* is a hollow term that can be stuffed with any set of behaviors and beliefs that the central organization of power desires. Religion and nationalism can be used to justify and promote whatever "stuffing" the power structure needs to maintain their authoritative control. The threat of cultural annihilation is perceived as real, and those in official and assumed positions of power take on the role of cultural guardians, preserving the "authentic" way of life (which they have in turn invented) by combining the authority of religion and the pride of nationalism with a system of oppressive practices.

## The Afghan Institute of Learning

The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) was founded in 1996 to provide educational resources to Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Dr. Sakena Yacoobi founded the organization in response to the inadequate healthcare and educational systems in place after decades of war. The AIL, a women-led non-governmental organization (NGO), has impacted the lives of millions of Afghans, either directly through the funding of schools and assistance to expectant mothers, or indirectly through economic growth resulting from workplace training.

Yacoobi was born in Herat, Afghanistan, and emigrated to the United States in the 1970s. She was formally educated in California, receiving a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences from The University of the Pacific and her master's degree in Public Health from Loma Linda University. She returned to Afghanistan in 1992, and soon began working with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. During her time in the refugee camps, she published eight teacher-training manuals in Dari, which serves as the lingua franca in Afghanistan. While working with the refugees, Yacoobi served as a delegate to the UN's Rehabilitation Plan for Afghanistan; Yacoobi was part of the subcommittee devoted to education.

Dr. Sakena Yacoobi's biography establishes the necessary background for understanding the organization she would ultimately found. The AIL does not treat the people it serves as one-dimensional beings with singular needs. The AIL does not merely serve the educational needs of women in Afghanistan, but it also provides medical and health care needs, employment and job training needs, legal aid, and intrapersonal (communication, familial, "love and courage") needs. Yacoobi's educational background joins these separate elements together, arming her with the intersectionality necessary to organize a group that would treat women holistically.

During the Taliban's regime, AIL operated 80 secret schools for 3,000 girls. When the Taliban's governmental control was disbanded by Western armed forces in 2001, the AIL expanded its mission to bring education, healthcare, and legal services to the needy population of Afghanistan.

The AIL has used some unconventional methods to meet the unconventional demands that they face. The AIL provides education and literacy programs that do not rely strictly on the traditional books and classrooms of Western models. They have utilized modern phenomena like texting to improve literacy. In 2012, the AIL began issuing mobile phones to their students as a means to improve reading and writing literacies. However, the communicative aid provided by the phones proved to be just as useful for the female students who received them. While the increased reading and writing skills help build a sense of personhood, the phone itself adds another layer to this development; as a woman develops her voice by increasing her literacy, she is able to maintain and use that voice to connect with other women.

As many educators in the West have found, the use of modern technologies can significantly accelerate the gains made by the students. The Afghan Institute of Learning found that “after about 5 months of class [with the aid of texting], 83 percent of students were able to test out of two levels of literacy courses—a feat which ordinarily would have taken 18 months” (“Literacy and Networking for Afghan Women Through Texting”). The development of literacy is more than just the ability to read—texting creates an intersection of public and private developments. The student's private, internal identity merges with her public identity and she becomes a member of the community. She becomes visible and heard, while simultaneously developing 21st century survival skills through her familiarity with modern technology.

The merging of personal selfhood with public visibility via modern technology speaks to the AIL's holistic pedagogical practice. That is, they treat each student as a whole human being with varying needs, and not just a brain in a jar that needs to be stimulated. When Dr. Yacoobi started the AIL, her goal was to bring not only education to the women and children of Afghanistan, but adequate health care. The women and children served by the AIL learned basic hygiene (a practice that had been completely discarded as a result of despair from living in refugee camps) and education about health care. The women in the classes received job training so they could begin to earn a wage for themselves. The communities seek out the assistance of the AIL because the long lasting ramifications in terms of self-worth, well-being, and economic sustainability are desperately needed throughout Afghanistan. The AIL's goal is transformative, not merely providing a quick source of aid and then moving onto the next community.

Part of AIL's educational outreach is directed at mothers and their children. AIL provides healthcare and information about hygiene, nutrition, and breastfeeding. When mothers have the information to make informed decisions, they make positive changes in their lives and the lives of their children. "Since 1996, more than 2 million Afghan women and children have received health education at [AIL] clinics; education which is helping to create healthier children, families and communities" ("Education is the Way to a Healthier Country"). Proper nutrition and healthcare are fundamental to success in school; the education mothers receive about raising their children in turn helps the children become ready for academic and workplace training programs.

The educational innovations from AIL are cultural as well as academic. AIL funds classes designed to revive the heritage of the Afghan people through classes in carpet weaving, poetry, glass making, silk weaving, calligraphy, and tile making. AIL's educational goals seek to



provide job training on the one hand, but also to immerse potential artisans in the trades that have been integral parts of the Afghan culture.

Alongside of their workforce preparation programs, The AIL also addresses the need for legal representation and enfranchisement. In a joint venture with the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Human Rights Commission, The Afghan Institute of Learning operates a Legal Aid for Women Center. AIL opened the Center in 2015, and it is located near the courts in Herat. The Legal Aid for Women Center recognizes the absence of financial means for many of the women it hopes to serve, so it provides *pro bono* legal services to the women who need them—no woman is refused assistance for financial reasons. The legal services that are offered are another means for AIL to carry out its mission of empowering women. The court cases they serve involve child custody, child marriage (especially when there has been no consent from the girl), prosecuting violence and abuse directed at women, securing rights to property and/or inheritances, as well as navigating business ventures (“Legal Aid for Women”). The lawyers who work for the Center perform the necessary social outreach in order to inform women of their rights. The Center might not operate as efficiently as it could if a) women did not know what rights they had, b) did not seek out legal aid because of their impoverished economic status, or c) women did not know there was someone who *wanted* to represent them. This list of services serves many feminist causes, which will be examined in further detail below.

The Afghan Institute of Learning lays the groundwork for positive cultural change, but their work does not stop here. Education, health care, and even legal assistance can only do so much. A second tier of activism must be in place in order to shift the cultural thinking as a whole. AIL holds human rights training, Love and Forgiveness Conferences, peace training, election workshops, and the Ideation Symposium. All of these social functions are designed to

promote democracy and to “knit together a society that has lost bonds of connection and trust between disparate people” (“Human Rights, Peace and Elections”). The AIL is not just an institution that provides necessary services to empower women; the AIL is an institution that promotes peaceful interconnectedness between all Afghans that begins by empowering women.

The Afghan Institute of Learning is the most sought after and oft-replicated model of social change because of its holistic approach to the human being as a microcosm of the whole culture. Afghanistan suffers from one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. The country is thoroughly impoverished, and even its recent history has been scarred by war, terrorism, natural disasters, and political instability. Education is the cornerstone of developing a country. Education brings literacy, critical thinking, and rhetorical development. This is the basement of civic activism; the edifice of cultural prosperity can only reach as high as the foundation will support. Alongside of the education of Afghan women, the AIL provides legal assistance to combat the present oppression of women; it organizes workshops and conferences in order to combat the oppression of the future.

The act of becoming educated is more than gaining the knowledge to perform basic tasks for survival. Education provides the means through which a person becomes a contributing member to the society in which they live. Gaining a comprehensive education allows a person to evaluate the culture that they live in and to determine their place within it. Familiarity with any subject—literature, history, science, or any other discipline—creates a means for a person to understand themselves, and this is the real danger in providing education to everyone. As people become educated, they begin to grasp a deeper understanding of who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going.

## Connections Between Feminist Readings and the Modern Afghan Reality

The primary tool for gaining access to education is literacy; forced illiteracy stunts the development of a person in such a way that cannot be circumvented. The illiterate masses miss opportunities that they did not know they even had access to had they been able to interpret the texts that surround them. Literacy empowers a person not merely through the ability to read a book, but through the ideas that the book presents. Literacy pulls a person into a conversation that has been taking place across space and time. Literacy is the ability to read the stories of others, and in turn to be able to tell their own story. Literacy is the gift of voice.

Voice is the assertion of the individual self; voice animates the dead clay that might otherwise fall to the drudgery beneath the wheel. Having a voice allows a person to claim who they are and the life they want to live, and education facilitates the activation of one's voice.

If a woman cannot read or write, then she relies on outside forces (i.e., patriarchal social constructs) to author and to authorize her story, i.e., her life and the self that lives it. By removing a woman's access to expression, she is removed from her access to cultural representation. The voice she uses to constructively tell her life—her story—is analogous to the voice she gains control of through literacy; to remove access to literacy is to remove access to her self.

A woman gains access to her *self* when she can write herself outside of the phallogocentric language of control. "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (Cixous 1946). Cixous makes a crucial point here: writing is a political action. When she says that a woman's body has been "*more* than confiscated," she means that a woman's body has not merely been kidnapped or stolen from

her—her body was never really hers to begin with. Her body lies within the possessive territory of the cultural hegemony of masculinity.

Danielle L. McGuire recounts a disturbing similarity among Black women in the South to the Afghan woman's lot. She says, "[In] the Mississippi Delta, if not the entire South, a 'black woman's body was never hers alone'" (156). McGuire recounts involuntary hysterectomies and extreme sexual and physical abuse from the police well into the mid-20th century, but the circumstances in Afghanistan are not terribly different. The Southern policemen and doctors have absolute control over the Black women that they encounter—the woman's life only has value insofar as the White male in a position of authority says it has value. This ownership of one's life by someone else transcends directly to the patriarchal power structure in Afghanistan. White Southerners may have (mostly) reserved lynching for Black men and systematic sexual abuse for women, but a woman in Afghanistan could suffer either fate. Anything from rape to public execution was within limits for a woman who sought an education or a woman who attempted to educate others during the Taliban's regime. The American system of violence lies at the intersection of race and gender; Afghanistan has no such racial division, so the woman bears the brunt of all dehumanizing violence by way of the division in gender.

Even though the Taliban no longer has total control over Afghanistan (there is still a presence in cells throughout the country, but they have no official power), a woman's body is still not her own in Afghanistan. In 2011, a full decade after the liberation of Afghanistan, the UN reports that women are still oppressed and are little more than currency: "Early marriages, exchanging girls for ending conflicts or forgiving crimes, preventing women from exiting their houses, preventing women from work, lack of men's participation in house affairs and raising children are examples of such beliefs and traditions" (34). Even though the Afghan Constitution

makes claims to equality and to end discrimination, there is no change in the behavior of the populace. The government of Afghanistan may claim to be moving towards a pre-Taliban state of social relations, but little more than lip service to these democratic ideals has taken place.

The social mechanisms that influence the way that people think and interact with one another need to change in order for the egalitarian vision of the Constitution to be fully realized. AIL does attempt to meet these needs, particularly through their Ideation Symposiums. These symposiums look to change the way that the Afghan people see each other and to move towards a mid-twentieth century cultural environment. The AIL is able to eschew the problems of global feminism by functioning within a postcolonial context.

Global feminism does not do enough because it does not consider the motivations of postcolonial feminism, i.e., “[concern] with the economic and political challenges faced by women and members of oppressed groups” (Tong 239). Postcolonial feminism examines the way in which women are faced with a political struggle for representation within the Afghan socio-political climate. “A comprehensive understanding of the diverse and critical roles that Afghan women play within their communities, tribes and families is needed to develop a sustainable, responsive, and pluralistic educational system that will best serve all Afghan women and girls as well as the long-term democratic project” (Kissane 14). A woman’s role and place in Afghan society is more complex than being relegated to “mother” and “wife,” but only once this complex role is acknowledged can women be given the agency to enact a shift in the social structure.

Focusing on the health and education of women in countries like Afghanistan is a common tactic of global/liberal feminism. Such an approach bypasses the financial, political, and cultural means of oppression that Afghan women face. The view that education automatically

creates an informed and active populace is naive at best when confronted with the reality of the cultural conditions of Afghanistan. As Kissane points out, using women as vehicles to create the educational momentum in Afghanistan confines women within their predetermined gender role. They are not democratic citizens *and* wives and mothers—they are just wives and mothers.

When we consider the way that women's education is—quite literally—being destroyed in Afghanistan, we are reminded of the early struggles of the women's movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The struggles that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in terms of education, labor, and voting bear direct similarities to the state of women in modern Afghanistan. The Taliban eliminated women's access to economic self-sufficiency, education, health care, and social autonomy, so Wollstonecraft's work is not directly analogous in that context. It is not until after the Taliban's Islamic State of Afghanistan is dismantled that the struggle to regain these lost rights were (nominally) returned to women that the struggle to activate and utilize these rights becomes a reality for Afghan women. Wollstonecraft's work gains relevance within this newer context of social struggle.

Afghanistan's Constitution makes *de jure* provisions for equal education and equal voting rights for women; contrariwise, eighteenth and nineteenth century Western countries did not have *any* legal provisions for education and suffrage for women. These two cultural situations may seem to be at odds with one another, but the *de facto* practices in post-2001 Afghanistan render the two times and places quite similar. The modern Afghan woman has the right to vote and the right to an education, but cultural and traditional realities make utilizing these rights difficult-to-impossible. While the early writers of the women's movement were fighting to earn

their due rights, Afghan women are fighting to use their nominally-issued rights. Their struggles are analogous.

It should be noted, however, that the Afghan Institute of Learning's holistic treatment of the people they serve address the intersections of class and gender; in order for their work to gain momentum, they must also work to shift the thinking of Afghan culture as a whole. Western movements for change have not had the same long-term vision and short-term aid that the Afghan Institute of Learning has had. The American suffragists, for example, did not discuss slavery or the double-binds that Black women bore as a result of the intersectionality of gender and race. Mary Wollstonecraft never addressed the Black woman's complete disenfranchisement from educational systems. Their vision benefitted the white, literate women like them, and as a result, their work sought to shift one paradigm within the culture; meanwhile, the AIL holds conferences and seminars to change the way that Afghan people see themselves. Their classrooms even contain male and female students because it is necessary to educate *everyone*.

For girls who want to attend school, the obligations of family and marriage present their biggest obstacles. Even though men are allowed to teach girls, the reverberations of the Taliban's rule still make such an arrangement seem improper. Because few women were educated prior to 2001, there is a severe shortage of qualified female teachers to fill the needed roles. The UN reports that child marriages and familial apathy toward literacy for girls are significant reasons for the under-representation of girls in Afghan schools. Literacy is not a valuable commodity in a child bride, so being forced into marriage and withheld from educational pursuits are interrelated. This imposed condition upon Afghan women brings us into an intersection with early Western feminist thought.

Mary Wollstonecraft implored women to seek education as a way of gaining autonomy. She relied upon reason at the expense of political and economic activism; economic and political identities were secondary to a woman's ability to escape the cage where she has been housed like a pretty bird. "...[Speaking] of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother" (Wollstonecraft 79). Without attending to herself as a rational creature first, a woman is in no position to be able to uphold any of her secondary social roles. She must reclaim the body that has been more than confiscated from her.

Stripping a woman of the ability to reclaim herself keeps many of the social institutions in place. If a woman cannot read, then she cannot discover that both the law and the Qur'an provide her with equal social footing to men. If she does not know what she is entitled to—what the laws of both Afghanistan and Allah have decreed—then she is divorced from the ability to critically examine herself and her relationship to the world around her. If a woman is unable to find her bearings amidst the culture that surrounds her, then she cannot uphold Wollstonecraft's stated obligation to herself as a rational creature. It is inevitable, then, that she become a commodity to be traded, i.e., married to an eligible (usually much older) man; her youth compounds the social alienation she feels as a result from her illiteracy and disconnection from her true nature.

Wollstonecraft again addresses the necessity of engendered balance in order to preserve morality. "There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one-half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride" (Wollstonecraft 78). Education is the grounds of literacy, and literacy is the



grounds for self-discovery; no society can claim moral decency when it purposefully chains one-half of its population in the dark recesses of silent shadows. It is certainly ignorance and pride that undermines any zealous appeal to moral authority.

Literacy—being able to read and to write—allows a woman to take back her confiscated body. If a woman remains illiterate, then she is authored by the men who can read and write. “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (Cixous 1942). Political action is the ultimate goal of the literate woman. When she can read the referendums, when she can vote, when she understands historical and political discourse enough to make informed decisions that will shape her nation, a woman can write herself into the text of the world and of history.

The modern Afghan woman faces a difficult political conundrum: She has the legal and constitutional protection of her voting rights, but her stunted education, lack of economic means, as well as conservative patriarchal attitudes in her family and in the community at large, all stand in her way of exercising these rights. Much like African-American men during the Reconstruction—who had Constitutional enfranchisement, but faced lynching if they acted upon that right—Afghan women face many invisible obstacles on their path to the voting place. Her lack of education, both academic and religious, places the greatest restraint upon her. In order to counteract these obstacles and bring women into the political process, there are many social programs designed to facilitate the voting process.

A woman’s illiteracy in Afghanistan is understood as a given. Not only do many women receive an equivalent of a 2nd grade education (and thus only the most basic of reading and writing skills) Afghan women do not have the capacity to engage with the political media that is printed and distributed. They lack the educational resources to engage in the debate and the

cultural conversation, which is the very manifestation of the truly self-destructive prison of illiteracy. “Since women have less access to information, organizations relevant to elections try to use media, seminars, poster and journeys to various areas as ways to stress the importance of participation of women and men in elections” (US Congress 41). The Afghan Institute of Learning is one such organization.

The Afghan Institute of Learning has voting drives and workshops as the necessary consequence of the connection between literacy and political power. In the 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan, 2,450,000 women voted—about 35% of the electorate (Yacoobi “7 Million Afghans Vote!”). This is an inconceivable turnout when compared with the 2009 election, which was characterized by fraud and extremely low voter turnout. The efforts of the AIL to mobilize the populace, and especially the massive turnout of women voters, demonstrate the effectiveness of their methods. The AIL has been using radio, speakers, and educational workshops as a way of confronting the poor-to-nonexistent education that Afghan women receive. When we recall the early suffragist movement, their tactics were similar. They did not have radio at their disposal, but they did have large conventions with powerful speakers. Their largely verbal tactics to promote political enfranchisement for women allowed them, as it does for the AIL, to circumvent the difficulties that arise from obstructed access to education.

However similar the initial comparison between the modern Afghan woman and the nineteenth century American woman may seem, they certainly have their differences. Groups like the AIL court all Afghans; in 2014, they reached out to 10,000 women, men and youth (Yacoobi “7 Million Afghans Vote!”). The right to vote exists for everyone over the age of 18 in Afghanistan, but corruption, threat of violence, and fraud created a crippling sense of despair mixed with fear in 2009. In nineteenth-century America, White men could vote and did so when

presented with the opportunity. American women and non-White Americans could not vote, so the struggle is about gaining equal standing—the power held by White men is under threat of distribution. The challenge faced by the AIL is somewhat different; their mission is to empower men and women to exercise the rights that they already have.

The recent shift in the political identity of Afghanistan once again comes back around to education, but educating women is not enough. In order to change the relationships between men and women, there must be opportunities for men to become educated about the social and political roles that women can and should be able to hold. Afghan men have to end their Taliban-induced thinking that education in general, and an educated woman in particular, is a threat to their existence, identity, and well-being. The Taliban dismantled the education and health care systems in Afghanistan, associating them with the influence of Western civilization upon the “poisoned” Afghanistan of the 20th century. Modern Afghans still lack access to schools, and while women are the dominant focus of the AIL’s mission, there are boys who are educated in their schools. “[Men and boys] need to be included in workshops and seminars with women and girls so that they can listen and exchange ideas and know that education is not a threat to them but is something that improves the lives of everyone” (Yacoobi “Teach Men That Education is not a Threat”). In stark contrast to America, the education of the Afghan people is starting from the ground up, with males and females, in order to dispel the dangerous stereotypes and misinformation promoted by the Taliban. Females may be given the bulk of the resources like time and materials, but boys are not excluded. These co-ed learning opportunities (which were completely unacceptable under the Taliban, and have only become a reality through the twenty-first century) provide for a developing consciousness that will allow men and women to work together for common goals. America has been faced with problems of inclusion, which requires a

dismantling of the established system (to some degree) in order for it to be put back together in the desired manner. As with any dismantling ideology, it is quickly met with resistance; contrariwise, Afghanistan is developing a new consciousness in the vacuum that has been created by decades of war and political upheaval.

### Conclusion

Islam became a part of Afghan culture in the 7th century. Since then it has become a unifying cultural identity for the Afghan people. Islam is so deeply imbedded into the culture and history of Afghanistan that it would be difficult and destructive to remove; in addition, such removal is unnecessary. While Islam can be manipulated to preserve fundamentalist oppression, it can also be used as a vehicle to increase the democratic potential of Afghanistan. A feminist interpretation of Islam provides an ideal path towards this democratic realization.

“Islamic feminism” is not the paradox that it might seem; there are many Qur’anic verses that promote equality between men and women, and even secure many legal rights for women, such as voting, inheritance, and education. As early as the 15th century, Al-Sakhawi, a scholar from Cairo, recorded bibliographic information on 1,075 female scholars in his *Al-daw al-lami*<sup>23</sup> (Nashat 69). Islamic feminism is not so much a neo-interpretive branch of Islam as it is a return to the original spirit of equality as outlined by the Qur’an.

As feminist scholarship turns its focus to the spirit of the Qur’an, the infected scab of oppression and silence must be peeled off, so that the viable flesh of Islam can breathe and heal. “Islamic feminist scholarship and gender-aware approaches to reframing the contemporary

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<sup>23</sup> The *Al-daw al-lami li-ahl al-qarn al-tasi* is twelve volumes of biographical material, one of which is completely dedicated to women scholars!

interpretations of Islam throughout Afghanistan may be the most powerful tool to enable credible challenges to arguments against girls' education" (Kissane 20). Islam should be practiced according to the egalitarian freedoms it grants, which allowed for Afghanistan to become the modernized country that it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Qur'an promotes gender equality because it promotes equality among all human beings, or *insan*. Take for example, this passage from 33:35 of the Qur'an:

The submitting men, the submitting women, the believing men, the believing women, the obedient men, the obedient women, the truthful men, the truthful women, the steadfast men, the steadfast women, the reverent men, the reverent women, the charitable men, the charitable women, the fasting men, the fasting women, the chaste men, the chaste women, and the men who commemorate GOD frequently, and the commemorating women; GOD has prepared for them forgiveness and a great recompense.

The detailed and thorough use of anaphora makes it clear that women are on equal footing with men before the eyes of Allah. Such a verse provides a strong foundation for the arguments that promote women's education.

The Hadith, or collected sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), insists that all *insan* pursue knowledge, as this is the only way to understand the meaning of the suras. In some places, the Hadith makes this quite unambiguous: Acquisition of knowledge is binding on all Muslims (1:81 §224). The Hadith places a lot of emphasis on gaining knowledge and Allah protecting those who seek knowledge. By returning to these basic texts and drawing attention to the actual words of the Prophet (PBUH), Islamic feminism promotes a cultural atmosphere where men and

women can seek intellectual pursuits together. As Al-Sakhawi points out, educated women were commonplace during the Golden Age of Islam. The modern efforts of the AIL seek to restore this proliferation of educated Muslims of both genders by educating and re-educating men and women in desegregated learning environments.

Islam is not the source of women's oppression in Afghanistan; rather, it is a scapegoat used to justify the oppression of women in Afghanistan. By promoting the ideals of the Qur'an, Islamic feminism is a tool to maintain the Muslim way of life in Afghanistan *and* to create a society that re-evaluates the roles of women. Islamic feminism combined with the AIL's holistic approach to women as complete human beings may provide the best way for the country to overcome the remnants of traditional patriarchy and oppression.

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## Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Introducing Queer Reading Strategies to the Secondary English Classroom

Public schools serve as a *de facto* battleground for advancing civil rights. While there is a lot of deserved attention given to matters of race in public education, there has not been the same degree of attention given to sexual orientation in the classroom. Queer studies entered into the academic mainstream during the 1990 conference on queer theory at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Barry 138). The newness of the cultural dialogue that surrounds LGBTQ students feeds the reluctance of schools to address the needs of this overlooked population. One way of addressing the needs of LGBTQ students is through representation of queer voices and themes within the secondary English classroom. In addition, questioning all of the literature of the secondary English class through a queer reading lens can provide the perfect opportunity for dismantling the heteronormative and cissexist bias that is (often unintentionally) perpetuated through silence and invisibility.

Introducing queer reading strategies into the secondary English classroom will dismantle the dichotomous thinking that surrounds both gender (i.e., a male/female split) and sexual orientation (i.e., a heterosexual/homosexual split). American public schools tend to assign so much power to these binary models that identities that do not fit within this false dichotomy are relegated to non-existence. This would mean that a lot of adolescents within our secondary schools have been relegated to invisibility, both metaphorically (i.e., via lack of representation) and literally (i.e., via increased absences). Robinson and Espelage cite a nationally-representative

survey<sup>24</sup> that reports that “29.1% of LGBT students had missed a class at least once and 30% had missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns, compared with only 8.0% and 6.7%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students” (317). Truancy rates affect learning potential, and when truancy is the result of safety concerns, the school climate needs to be evaluated.

School districts and their administrative boards frequently construct a guiding ideology that promotes inclusion and development among the students that they serve. However, these ideologies do not always come to life within the school culture and the curriculum of their districts. If LGBT students have more negative school attitudes and are more likely to miss school because of fear (Robinson and Espelage 317), then the inclusion and sense of belonging that the school district is striving for is not present in any actualized form. Bullying, cyberbullying, lack of teacher intervention, and homophobic language from authority figures all contribute to the alienation of LGBTQ youth. These are all complex issues, with no simple one-dimensional solution; however integrating queer reading strategies to re-evaluate the concept of gender is one method to approach the problem.

Gender, as it is represented in the writing tasks and the assigned reading of the English classroom, is treated as a strict dichotomy of “male” and “female” in stark contrast to each other, akin to the black and white squares of a chessboard. There are no blurry edges, no bleed-over between the white and black squares; the colors are hemmed in by straight, neat, defining and

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<sup>24</sup> Robinson and Espelage’s data is cited from their source: Kosciw, J.G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., & Bartkiewicz, M.J. (2010). *The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation’s schools*. New York: GLSEN.

restrictive lines. Turning our attention to some commonly used texts within English classrooms will reveal the same structure and limitations on gender identity.

The “male” and “female” labels for gender identity show little variance through different time periods and countries of origin. Indeed, the literature frequently taught in public high schools comes from the Western tradition/canon, which preserves the hegemony of our narrow gender conceptions. Hamlet, Odysseus, Ralph and Jack, Lennie and George, Huckleberry and Jim, and Guy Montag<sup>25</sup> all possess much of the same “male” characteristics. They possess, in varying degrees, access to travel, introspection, self-transformation, and activity.<sup>26</sup> These become the confining markers of masculinity, and when we look at the accompanying females from these works (when present), we find the confining boundaries of femininity: powerlessness, namelessness, support for the hero’s transformation (while being denied any transformation of her own), and stasis. These images of “male” and “female” delineate the boundaries of approved gendered identities.

Because these texts are part of the educational system, the men and women in these texts are vehicles of expected behavior. They become more than just stories about what men and women *have done* or *could do*, but also about what men and women *should do*. The education that comes with these texts is as much cultural as behavioral. Everything that is read in the classroom has power; the question is: What is that power being used to create?

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<sup>25</sup> English teachers probably recognize every one of these people, but just in case: Hamlet is the protagonist from Shakespeare’s play of the same name, Odysseus is pulled from the *Odyssey*, Ralph and Jack from *Lord of the Flies*, Lennie and George from *Of Mice and Men*, Huck and Jim from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Guy Montag from *Fahrenheit 451*. I selected these characters due to their immense popularity in American English curricula.

<sup>26</sup> Hamlet, of course, shows the dangers of not acting—his tragedy stems from his inactivity.

The generation of power in the educational system is channeled through the larger acceptance and expectation that such works will be read, through the publishing companies that use these accepted and expected works, which in turn passes through the school board's adoption of the materials, into the transmission and exposure of the materials that is created by the teacher in the classroom, and finally through the position of authority that the teacher maintains in relation to the student. The curriculum that is read becomes a means of preserving and transmitting the narrow dichotomous relationship between the social constructs of gender—indeed, the English classroom aids in such construction. When school districts make claims to aid in the self-development of their students, they need to be particularly careful about how they enable and shape that development.

Along with the dominant gendered identities of “male” (i.e., active hero) and “female” (i.e., static support system) comes the dominant portrayal of the relationships between these genders. There is a sort of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>27</sup> among the characters of the literature that is read in American English classrooms. Women, as empty ciphers, are held in the heterosexual identity that is required of them to reinforce the heroic power of their male counterpart. Heteronormative behaviors dominate the educational system and the literature that the secondary English classroom has inherited because “...heteronormativity is an ideology embedded in social institutions ranging from the family, church, and school to the law, media and politics” (“Queer Theory” 26). The gender identities and sexual orientation within the literature frames the reading and interpretation of the literature, which guides the discussion, which in turn establishes the behavioral guidelines for the student body inside and outside of the

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<sup>27</sup> See Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al. W. W. Norton & Co, 2010, 1591-1609.

classroom. A chosen curriculum and the accompanying instruction are not simply matters of gaining cultural literacy; the curriculum and the instruction determine who is seen and who is not.

The works we read create an image of the world we live in. This is the basic philosophy behind multicultural education, which seeks to create curricular materials that represent the world as it is. Nevertheless, it is not enough to just integrate different ethnicities, races, genders, religions, and sexual orientations into what was once an educational system dominated by white males. Indeed, assembling a curriculum needs to consider which texts are used, as well as how they are used within the context of the curriculum as a whole. In this way, reading through the lenses of race, gender, nationalism, and class can be applied to any text, regardless of the race, gender, nationality, or socio-economic class of the characters. Queer theory provides an additional lens, one which often works in tandem with the others lenses mentioned. Similarly, queer readings investigate how we construct gender and sexual identities in a text, regardless of the sexual orientation, sex, or gender of the characters within the text. By applying these critical lenses to the texts throughout an English curriculum, the discussion of any given text can explore the nuances and ambiguities within a text—which is the hallmark trait of queer theory.

Elements of queer theory need to be incorporated into the pedagogy and curricular design of the English classroom, not merely for the sake of modern buzzwords like “representation” and “social justice,” but also as a means of “how best to teach students in a way that does not contribute to perpetuating the silence, the oppression, the imaginary conception of the world proposed by heteronormative curricula” (Lin 23). If we are going to ask our students to read and write in a way that gives voice to the reality they live in, then the rhetorical environments we create for that reading and writing must reflect the world *as it is*. Ignorantly upholding—or even

actively promoting<sup>28</sup>—the invisibility of LGBTQ identities is damaging for all students, as it limits and otherwise obstructs the view of the rich diversity of the culture our students are immersed in.

If we are to trouble heteronormative assumptions and behaviors in any significant way, we cannot fall into the trap of thinking we have dispelled the invisibility of LGBTQ youth while maintaining a dichotomous opposition between gay and straight. While the split between gay-straight identities does create visibility, it also places the identity of “gay” in a position of otherness, and therefore of deviance. Queer pedagogies seek to not only create visibility—and in so doing, create voice—for LGBTQ identities, but also to disrupt the position of cultural authority that is assigned to heteronormative behaviors.

However, inserting a queer text into the English curriculum in the name of inclusion while leaving the traditional presentation of the remainder of the curriculum intact is the quickest way to establish “Otherness” due to the special treatment applied to the queer text. Once we establish an Other in the curriculum, we reaffirm the normalcy of the dominant discourses about identity. Just as there is diversity and individuality within any other demographic label, it is important to remember that “sexual minority youth are not a monolith” (Robinson and Espelage 325). As diverse curricula and instructional models are developed, school boards, administrators, and teachers need to show caution so as to avoid reducing the perceptions of LGBTQ and queer identities to a set of distinct characteristics that are portrayed as representing the whole. Such

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<sup>28</sup> Robinson and Espelage have this to report: “Nearly two thirds (63%) of LGBTQ students in the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s National School Climate Survey reported hearing homophobic remarks from school staff (Kosciw et al., 2008). Moreover, teachers appear to intervene less frequently when homophobic remarks are made in comparison to when racist or sexist remarks are made (Kosciw et al., 2008)” (326-327).

essentialist presentations only reinforce stereotypes and do not combat the invisibility and harassment within the school's culture.

Queer pedagogy, like critical multiculturalism,<sup>29</sup> is an approach that applies to all literature in its attempt to shatter any notions of normalcy. Multiculturalism cannot be used as code for “pay attention to non-white characters and writers,” as this coded subtext others non-White characters and writers. Similarly, queer reading is not code for “pay attention to non-straight characters and writers,” as this coded subtext also others non-straight characters and writers. Queer pedagogy is about *how* we read, not *what* we read.

There are plenty of opportunities for queer reading of traditionally taught secondary texts. A “queer reading” of a text does not necessarily require LGBTQ identities and themes in the text. Because queer theory disrupts the power dynamic of binary thinking, that is, it disrupts any claim to normalcy (i.e., us/them, self/Other, I/Thou, where us-self-I is the dominant discourse and them-Other-Thou assumes the role of suppressed identities), “it cannot, therefore, be limited to queer subjects or sexuality. To disrupt the very notion of normalcy, [queer pedagogy] must also be concerned with ‘normal’ conceptions of race, gender, class, and so forth. Thinking of it this way, queer pedagogy *necessarily* speaks to subjects of concern to critical multiculturalism” (Lin 73-74). Reading becomes a matter of shifting the focus within the discussion of the literature, which then allows relationships—and components of those relationships—that are suppressed or otherwise not explicitly revealed to receive our attention.

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<sup>29</sup> Lin makes great use of this analogy; see her dissertation “Queering the Secondary Classroom or, ‘Why are We Reading Gay Stuff?’” in Works Cited.



To return to the handful of familiar characters mentioned earlier, there are many ways to use a queer lens to disrupt the traditional, dominant discourse about the works they are pulled from. We can take a brief look at how to apply such a critical lens to *The Odyssey* and *Of Mice and Men*, two works that would not fall into the category of “queer literature.”<sup>30</sup>

A lot can be said about Odysseus as the hero of Homer’s epic, but what about Penelope as heroine? While Odysseus is struggling (a word sometimes used rather loosely) to preserve his physical life, Penelope is struggling to preserve her sense of self. We could easily write this off as her desire to remain faithful to her missing husband (which places all of the importance for her character within the importance of Odysseus’s character), or we can recognize that she too is beset by monsters who wish to possess her life and selfhood. Penelope’s struggle for selfhood may be less magical and less violent, but her fight for her life is indicative of so many women—even in modern America—fighting to maintain control over their own life and body against a collection of men who seek to take it from her.

Lennie and George have a deep-rooted affection for one another. The way they care for, think about, and need each other has many of the components of romantic love; however, there is no erotic component to their relationship. As such, Lennie and George can be used to trouble the dominant dichotomy of expressing love in strictly heterosexual/homosexual terms. Polarizing expressions of love in strictly gay-straight terms avoids the complexity and richness of the novel: *Whereas Lennie and George are men and whereas Lennie and George are heterosexual, therefore Lennie and George do not love each other.* Contrariwise, Steinbeck’s characters open

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<sup>30</sup> “Queer literature,” as a categorical label, applies to literature with explicit LGBTQ characters, themes, (and often) authors. Examples of such literature would include James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Allison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Jeannette Winterson’s *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, and E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*.

an entire spectrum of possibilities within that dichotomy where men can have loving feelings for one another, but do not express those feelings in an erotic manner.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Lennie and George trouble the murder ballad theme in American folk music where a man kills his beloved by the riverside. *Of Mice and Men* is a very troubling<sup>32</sup> book, and it should be read as one.

My current institution, Lone Pine High School, in Lone Pine CA, does not offer a class like the Gay and Lesbian Literature course that Kristen Helmer<sup>33</sup> describes, but my classes have opened up opportunities for queering the classroom. Specifically, my students have frequently discarded the invisible yet omnipresent assumption that the characters in the texts we read are heterosexual. Texts like *The Iliad*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Separate Peace*, *Of Mice and Men*, and even *Romeo and Juliet* have all elicited questions of sexual orientation from my students. The students may ask if the characters are gay, but this is the result of being conditioned to think of sexual orientation in binary terms. Queer reading provides a spectrum—i.e., shades of homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality—for the students to utilize so they can better understand the relationships of Mercutio and Romeo or Gene and Finny.<sup>34</sup> The ensuing conversation then opens up a discussion of ways of loving that are not strictly romantic

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<sup>31</sup> Jake and Bill from Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, as well as Gene and Finny from Knowles's *A Separate Peace* would also serve this purpose very well.

<sup>32</sup> The multiple meanings of "causing emotional distress," "questioning moral certainty," and "disrupting the dominant social discourse" are all deliberately implied.

<sup>33</sup> See Helmer's "Everyone Needs a Class Like This" in Works Cited. In brief, the Gay and Lesbian Literature course features a curriculum with explicitly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes and characters.

<sup>34</sup> From *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Separate Peace*, respectively.

or erotic, which in turn creates a relatable experience for the students.<sup>35</sup> Working through the spectrum of intergender relationships and the various ways of expressing love creates room in the classroom atmosphere for acknowledging individual experience and emotional nuance. The dominant gay-straight binary is exposed as a false dichotomy, and an infinite number of “in-betweens” come into existence.

A classroom environment, and larger school culture, that welcomes a variety of different identities may be exactly what creates a sense of belonging among students who identify as bisexual. There are layers of invisibility that obscure the identity of our bisexual students. Not only is the LGBTQ selfhood traditionally cloaked in invisibility, but the inclusive response to this invisibility has created a power dynamic in the form of a gay-straight binary. Our bisexual students do not fit into either of the gay-straight checkboxes, further creating a sense of deviance and non-existence. Until we introduce a spectrum of identities along the gender and sexual orientation continua, there is no place to assert the self that exists along those continua. It is as if creating the space for the spectrum acknowledges the existence of identities along that spectrum, and in turn, our students become cognizant of a place for themselves and for other people; they become cognizant of the relationship between themselves and the people around them.

The double-binds of invisibility may explain the higher rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and truancy among youths who identify as bisexual. Robinson and Espelage’s research (2011) points to a higher rate of depression, suicidal thoughts, and truancy among students who self-identify as LGBTQ; when Robinson and Epelage disaggregate their LGBTQ data, bisexual

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<sup>35</sup> And in the case of the *Iliad*, homosexuality can and does exist within notions of warfare, soldiery, bravery and other characteristics of masculinity traditionally reserved for staunchly and explicitly heterosexual men.

youths outstrip the other sub-categories for all of these conditions. While the presently available research can make no claims to causation, this correlation suggests that the binary model of gender orientation has a particularly devastating effect on the youths who lie along the spectrum of sexual orientation.

Creating space within the classroom for readings that disrupt the prevailing paradigms of orientation and gender in turn influence the school culture. "...[Lesbian], gay, or bisexual (LGB) and sexually questioning students who had experienced homophobic teasing, but perceived their schools as positive, reported less depression, suicidality, and alcohol and drug use than did LGB and questioning students who were bullied and in a negative school climate" (Robinson and Espelage 316). The atmosphere of the school, that is, the school's socio-political climate, has an influence on how well a bullied LGBTQ student can handle the harassment. Schools that actively promote a hostile and homophobic environment create and institution of bias and bigotry. On the other hand, it would seem that a positive and inclusive school environment robs the bully of their power; the LGBTQ student appears to differentiate between the harassment from the school's culture. A school's culture can make the difference for harassed LGBTQ youth between blaming the harasser and internalizing the incident with shame.

A positive and inclusive school environment goes a long way to reduce the educational losses of LGBTQ youth. Truancy, depression, drug and alcohol use, and suicidal ideation all interfere with a student's ability to achieve academic success. Schools that enhance the visibility of LGBTQ issues and dismantle the dominant binary discourse that surrounds sexual orientation can create an environment where LGBTQ students are better prepared to address any harassment they face, even if that means simply knowing they can talk to someone about it. A school culture of LGBTQ visibility does not only affect the LGBTQ subgroup of students. Students who

identify as straight gain the ability to *see* their fellow LGBTQ students, friends, family members, and community members. There may be some discomfort as our students, our literature, our writing, and our discussions come out of the closet and into the classroom, but the positive impact it makes on the entire school—and on all of its stakeholders—is undeniable.

The secondary English classroom lies at the intersection of reading, writing, and discussion, and makes use of these components to examine social politics as well as the cultural infrastructure. The English classroom is expected to address the issues that surround race, gender, and class; however, many schools use silence and invisibility to suppress the civil rights of the LGBTQ community. When given the opportunity to read and to discuss LGBTQ issues, “[students] began to look more critically and develop a deeper understanding of the social processes in their world” (Helmer 416). The social application of critical thinking normalizes differences in sexual orientation, which reduces the essentialism many people place upon sexual orientation. As one student, “Casey”, put it:

Taking this class made me almost...less interested in people’s sexual orientation. Before I would be like, oh, they are gay, or they are straight, and it would be a big part of how I perceive them. ...Now, it less determines how I see someone. ...It’s still, like, interesting, but it is easier to look past that now. (qtd. in Helmer 415)

The reading, writing, and discussion in the classroom shifts the students’ attitudes, which then transfers to the school at large. Introducing queer themes into secondary classrooms is a very powerful first step that reverberates throughout the school’s culture.

When a school adopts a platform of silence, it is unwittingly adopting a stance of complicity. “We must ask ourselves what we can do as teachers to combat such a stigmatic

social issue whose repercussions can be life altering and damaging for any adolescent” (Greathouse 47). The inclusion of LGBTQ literature and discussion is just such a method that confronts the social injustice of students and of the people in our communities. A school’s decision to marginalize our LGBTQ youths “...further excludes students who feel alienated because their norm-disruptive sexualities, genders, or family structures are not valued, respected, or even acknowledged in the heteronormative and cissexist spaces of schools” (Helmer 418). Any attempt to combat the alienation of LGBTQ youths is a positive change for the students themselves. A change in the attitudes of all the students benefits the school culture. A welcoming and inclusive school environment affects the academic achievements of the LGBTQ student subgroup. This spells out benefits for all stakeholders—from the students to the administration—and leaves little room for contrary argument.

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## The Laugh of the Molly-dusa: Cixous as Curator Through “Penelope”

In the beginning of *The Never-Ending Story*, Sebastian hides from some bullies in an antiquarian bookshop. The owner guards the book he is reading and tells Sebastian that it is not like other books the boy has read because this particular book is not a safe book. Sebastian steals the book anyway, and the merging of his imagination with the text of the story is set into motion. The reader of *Ulysses* undergoes a very similar synthesis with the text on the page. *Ulysses*, if it is anything, is not a safe book—it is full of twists and turns, reversals, traps, and shifts in perspective; it blurs the line between interior and exterior realities; it changes form and voice; it can easily set the reader adrift with no bearings for direction of port of shore.

Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” provides an entryway into the final episode of *Ulysses*, if not into the entire work. Cixous creates the means to interact with the woman who has written herself through the internal reality of her monologue. The abundant *yeses*, which are strewn throughout the chapter, affirm Molly’s experience of reality. As we understand Molly’s experience, she becomes a living being. James Joyce has not merely painted a portrait of a woman, but like a literary analogue of Pygmalion,<sup>36</sup> he has created a living woman with a life and a will of her own. Joyce does not own Molly Bloom; Molly Bloom owns herself.

“Penelope,” the final episode of *Ulysses*, is a *tour de force* of stream-of-consciousness. The episode is not merely experimental Modernist writing, but the creation of Molly (Marion)

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<sup>36</sup> The use of the Pygmalion myth in this context furthers the Hellenic-Hibernian intersectionality that *Ulysses* depends upon. Rendering Joyce as a modern-day Pygmalion (alongside of Daedalus) contributes to the interweaving of the ancient and the modern, of the global and the local, of the foreign and the domestic, of the universal and the individual that makes *Ulysses* a tapestry of life itself. Of course, weaving and tapestries brings us to Penelope, and finally back to Molly--the cycle of Hellenic-Hibernian intertextuality continually revolves.



Bloom's reality. Joyce kills himself off as the author,<sup>37</sup> and lets Molly spring fully-formed from his mind. Joyce may have written *Ulysses*, but Molly exists with a reality that is hers alone.

“[...Writing] is intended to be a comprehension of reality, and the form of what is written is a language which resembles the reality, not the writer” (Cixous, *TEoJJ* 687). Joyce is not transmitting his reality through the writing of *Ulysses*. That is, Joyce qua author is not speaking in the text. Rather, he is writing the reality of his characters and the Dublin of his story. The reality of *Ulysses*'s Dublin is convincing; Joyce included so much street furniture that the reader may very easily forget that they are reading the forged consciousness of a people that has been hammered in the smithy of the soul. The writing of *Ulysses* is a form that allows the reader to comprehend the reality of the characters and of Dublin itself. The most significant figures in the novel, Leopold, Molly, and Stephen, are all given a reality that is derived from the writing, and in this way, they become characters that “write themselves.”

Molly Bloom holds a unique place among literary figures—especially among women in literature—because she possesses a consciousness that enables her to write her self. Joyce has used a form that allows us to comprehend Molly's reality; the writing does not inform the reader as to Joyce's reality. The connection between the form and the content of “Penelope” places the reader within the confines of Molly's mental space. There is no reality to the episode outside of what Molly thinks about and her reactions to the events of the day and her surroundings. The words flow like a river (or Molly's menses) without pause, capital letters, or any sort of punctuation. Joyce may have borrowed the appearance of Molly's internal monologue from the

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<sup>37</sup> This allusion to Roland Barthes will be addressed below. First, it is necessary to separate the reality of the literature from the reality of the author, and then Barthes's “Death of the Author” will provide the justification for Cixous's statement.

letters of his wife Nora, but Molly is not Nora. She is a real being within the real essence of the novel.

In order for Molly to breathe her first inhalation of exhilarating vitality, the Author must die. Authorship is ownership, and if Joyce was in a position of ownership over Molly, then she could not live in the text—she makes her own text in her own mind, making Joyce’s author function secondary...or even non-existent. “For [Joyce]...the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and *not of expression*), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (Barthes 1324, italics added). Barthes’s distinction between inscription and expression is fundamental if we are to understand the complexity of Cixous’s statement that writing resembles reality and not the writer. As the writer inscribes the reality of his text upon the void, it is an expression of the reality of the literature—not of the Author. The language of this literary reality *ceaselessly* begs the questions of every origin—“Penelope” is indeed a ceaseless stream of words that points not to Joyce, but to Molly. Her monologue ends where it begins, with the positive affirmation of the universe: *yes*. This cyclical self-similarity conjures up the not-yet-manifested spirit of *Finnegan’s Wake*, which begins in the middle of a sentence, the beginning of which ends the work.

The form of Molly’s monologue demands the continual flow of words. Thoughts do not come with punctuation, so the most accurate representation of Molly’s reality is the uninterrupted flow of words that cross her mind. “[...If] the flow of individual experience is uninterrupted, the system of reference which gives it meaning has been shattered and the fragments strewn about; the reassuring known space of the traditionally-built novel ...is reconstituted by an inner gaze which at once makes it subjective” (Cixous, *TEoJJ* 698). Molly’s

reality, her “individual experience,” breaks up the structure as well as the familiarity of what might otherwise be called a “traditionally-built” novel. Joyce is neither writing for or through Molly; as Molly emerges from Barthes’s *field without origin*, she is writing herself into existence. Because Molly *thinks*, she *is*.

Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” provides a framework for interacting with “Penelope.” As Cixous compels the woman to write herself in order to dismantle the institution of silence, the writing creates a voice for the woman that disrupts the uniform chatter of male voices. “Penelope” contains the single feminine voice, as the other seventeen episodes are explicitly or implicitly written from a masculine perspective. “The Laugh of the Medusa” allows us to uncover the dynamic person that is Molly Bloom. Of course, by the very nature of chronological time, Joyce could not have been directly responding to any notion of *écriture féminine*, as he predates Cixous by over fifty years. Nevertheless, it is Cixous’s text that illuminates “Penelope” from within; Cixous allows Molly to become a living being.

The final episode, which presents Molly’s voice, disrupts the general appearance of the masculine voice in the novel and allows Molly to play the role of the Medusa, laughing at the (male and female) Dubliners who blindly stumble (like Wandering Rocks) through Dublin on June 16, 1904. Cixous explains exactly what a woman such as Molly Bloom has to gain from writing her self as well as why the voice ringing out in the field without origin is necessary:

Writing is “an act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily terri-

tories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) (Cixous, *TLotM* 1947).

By weaving the sext<sup>38</sup> of her self—that is, creating space for her blunt self-expression—Molly is able to own and to repossess the desires that she has been strategically denied throughout the novel.<sup>39</sup> Not only does Molly reclaim her desires, she expresses no guilt or shame in expressing them. “...I can feel his mouth O Lord I must stretch myself I wished he was here or somebody to let myself go with and come again like that I feel all fire inside me...” (Joyce 893). Molly’s thoughts are part memory and part fantasy; she recollects the sexual abandon of the previous afternoon, and longs for the experience to repeat itself. By allowing herself to think such thoughts, in such frank and direct language, Molly creates a reality for her libido to exist in. Even though such behavior is unseemly for a woman to express (then or now!), Molly does not shy away from feeling and reliving the “fire” that burns within her. She has transcended the imposition of the phallogocentric prison that so many of her contemporaries are locked within.

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<sup>38</sup> “Let the priests tremble, we’re going to show them our sexts!” (Cixous 1951) Cixous’s portmanteau of “sex” and “text” demonstrates the very purpose and definition of *écriture féminine*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ulysses* is, to some degree, a novel of avoidance. Just as Bloom deliberately takes the long-way-round to the post office, or his deliberate prolongation of his return home, or Stephen remains in his self-imposed exile, returning to neither his home nor the Tower, Molly’s actual voice is not heard with any articulation until the end of the novel. The Dubliners think of her, talk about her, see her--or at least her arm as she flings a coin to a sailor--but Molly’s voice is deliberately put off until “Penelope.”

The freedom that Molly experiences allows her to understand more about life and men than any of the other women she knows.

When Molly's thoughts do turn to the other "sparrowfarts" (Joyce 905), she is condescending and refuses to allow herself to be imposed upon in the way that she sees other women's selfhood silenced and oppressed. She criticizes the prudish Mrs. Riordan by saying that "God help the world if all the women were her sort...I hope Ill never be like her" (Joyce 871). Mrs. Riordan apparently does not approve of any physical expression of a woman's body; the female body should be covered, that is silenced and removed from view. However, there is no silencing the unsinkable Molly Bloom, who chooses to wear a particular dress for a performance in order to "show off her bubs" (Joyce 905). Of course this is no surprise, coming from a woman who finds her own body to be an erotic dynamo: her breasts are "so plump and tempting...they excite myself sometimes" (Joyce 924). Molly's glorification of her own body, like a Spanish Aphrodite, allows her to "return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous, *TLotM* 1946). Molly does not censor her body, as the Mrs. Riordans of the world would have her do, and thus her breath and speech achieve a liberation that makes Molly privy to an understanding that other women have often been prevented from achieving.

It is not just that Molly understands her husband so well that allows her to achieve her sense of openness and potential power. The men she encounters place her under the male gaze, and she becomes acutely aware of their libidinous thoughts. Her memories retrace the eyes of various men ogling her; being in such a position—the "uncanny stranger on display"—gives her a vantage point that provides an understanding that other women never gain: "they havent

passion God help their poor head I knew more about men and life when I was 15 then theyll all know at 50” (Joyce 905). Sexuality exudes from Molly like perfume from a rose, and when men notice it, they make it clear that they desire her. Molly comprehends their gaze and the desire that gaze entails, which allows Cixous’s words to practically pour out of her mouth: “[It’s] their business to let us know they’re getting a hard-on, so that we’ll assure them (we the material mistresses of their little pocket signifier) that they can, that it’s still there...” (*TLotM* 1956). Because Molly is completely aware of the men around her and their pocket signifiers, she can move her way through the world as a siren (she sings and she’s gorgeous!). She discards the powerlessness that would otherwise be created through the ignorance of this sexual dynamic. Other women do not understand as much about life and men because they have “been turned away from [their] bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty...” (Cixous, *TLotM* 1952). Molly’s thoughts write herself, she writes her body—in turn owns her body and her life in a way that her contemporaries find inconceivable. The text of Molly’s body requires a new language, one which is hers and is neither “threatened by the big dick” nor “impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance” (Cixous *TLotM* 1958).

Molly turns the image of “Blazes” Boylan, the dapper, financially secure young concert promoter, inside-out by exposing his tactless vulgarity. Boylan is the embodiment of the “commotion of the phallic stance” as he struts through the novel like a bantam rooster. Molly’s description of his physical body, “with that tremendous big red brute of thing he has” (Joyce 877), even matches Cixous’s more uncouth depiction of the patriarchy. However, Molly is neither threatened nor impressed by Boylan’s presence, as she remarks that “theyre not all like him thank God” (Joyce 894). She is not remarking on Boylan’s endowment; rather it is the laugh

of the Molly-dusa at work, emasculating the “big dick.” Her laughter robs Boylan of all his machismo, and she ridicules his virility:

...he has no manners nor no refinement nor no nothing in his nature slapping us behind like that on my bottom because I didnt call him Hugh the ignorantus that doesnt know poetry from a cabbage...pulling off his shoes and trousers there on the chair before me so barefaced without even asking permission and standing out that vulgar way in the half shirt they wear to be admired...(Joyce 923-4).

Boylan’s arrogance is exposed; as he undresses, the image he portrays to the world falls to the floor as a lifeless mass at his feet. His flaccid, deflated ego is met with the unkindest cut—Molly remarks how little “spunk” Boylan has in him. Like Perseus, Boylan has come to conquer Molly; however, it is Molly who conquers Boylan in the end. He arrived, like Perseus, with his pocket signifier at the ready, but Molly has the last word. Not only does she provide the last words of *Ulysses*, she provides the only account of the events. That is, Boylan is silenced and swept out of the door.

When Molly provides the narrative that allows her to gain authorship over her own body, she is, at the same time, gaining authorship over Boylan. That is, she authors the story, and in turn, gains authority over the perception of Boylan. By way of contrast, “...women have not only been excluded from authorship but in addition they have been subjected to (and subjects of) male authority” (Gilbert and Gubar 11). *Écriture féminine* defies and dismantles the established tradition in literary criticism of placing the male voice in the seated position of authority and power via the conflation of the phallus-penis-pen.

Cixous's Medusa inverts the male gaze, diminishes the power of Perseus's sword, and humiliates the conquering hero with her emasculating laugh. "See the conquering hero comes" (Joyce 340), a statement of hero worship from Lenehan to Boylan,<sup>40</sup> becomes laden with irony and empty idolatry. "The monster-woman"<sup>41</sup>...embodies intransigent female autonomy...and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained 'place' and thus generates a story that 'gets away' from its author" (Gilbert and Gubar 28). Molly, in the guise of Cixous's Medusa, emerges from her silent, "textually ordained 'place'" and narrates herself into existence. In a reversal of literary tradition, the man is written by the woman while her laughter echoes through the infinite space that the chapter occupies.

According to various schemata that Joyce provided, the time in which "Penelope" transpires is either not given (i.e., left blank) or is listed as  $\infty$ . In either rendering, it is clear that the final episode takes place outside of time, a relationship to space and time that once again looks forward to the construction of *Finnegan's Wake*. Even though Molly records the ringing of the bells from a nearby church, indicating that it is 2:45 AM at one point and 3:15 AM at another, the temporality of "Penelope" is not confined to the ticking of such clocks. In the same way that 3.1415 is part of the infinite stream of numbers that comprise  $\pi$ , the time indicated by the bells is part of the infinite timescape of "Penelope." Joyce's use of the infinite as a time referent places him outside of the creation completely. "...[There] is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is **eternally written here and now**" (Barthes 1324, emphasis added).

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<sup>40</sup> This line is in the "Sirens" episode, when Boylan is on his way to meet Molly. Joyce's use of the Biblical allusion here is apt--it bolsters the image of Boylan as the heroic counterpoint to Bloom. This construction is necessary so that Molly will have plenty of phallogocentric idolatry to dismantle and she issues the final and only account of the affair.

<sup>41</sup> What is Medusa, if not a monster-woman? (This note is my own, and not in Gilbert and Gubar's text.)



By actively engaging the infinite within the eternal present, Joyce has undergone a process of self-disintegration that creates an immediacy in the text, which in turn obliterates the Author/subject to (and for) the text/predicate.

When Barthes likens the text to a performative speech act, the monologue of the subject—that is, of “Marion ‘Molly’ Bloom”—becomes an act of creation. In the beginning was the Yes, and the Yes was with Molly, and the Yes was Molly. The *I* of “Penelope” is the *I* of selfhood; it is not an authorial intrusion or manipulation. “Penelope” reads as if Molly Bloom herself had answered Cixous’s call for authorship: “Text: my body...[that] fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force...that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style” (*TLotM* 1948). By rendering the creative *logos* as Molly’s affirmative declaration of *yes*, we see that the process of coming to the woman’s style of language is a positive experience. Had “Penelope” been riddled through with *nos*, then the text would merely “reproduce the masculine view” (Cixous, *TLotM* 1951) because the negation of feminine self is the necessary byproduct of phallogocentrism.

The affective and psychological power of the word *yes* is worth considering. The *yes* that begins the episode is not merely the voice of assent (“ok, I’ll make him eggs in the morning”), nor are the *yeses* that recur through the episode, and increase in frequency near the end, merely the recollection of fond memories. Molly’s *yes* is the sext that affirms her existence in the cosmos; it asserts her creative force into the void, and it is the castrating laughter that makes the priests tremble. *No* may be the word of Mrs. Riordan, “down on bathingsuits and lownecks nobody wanted her to wear I suppose she was *pious* because no man would look at her twice hope Ill never be like her a wonder she didnt want us to cover our faces...” (Joyce 871, italics added), and “pious” is indeed the word to draw our attention. Mrs. Riordan’s piousness is the

surrender of her self and the denial of her creative force to the men who have written women for their own purposes. Molly's *yes* is a cosmic rebellion which has the power to make a hell of heaven and a heaven of hell, as it were.

*Ulysses* has two completely internal monologues. Stephen Dedalus ruminates over dense philosophical abstractions as he walks along Sandymount Strand in "Proteus," and Molly Bloom reflects upon actual lived experience in "Penelope." These two monologues could not be any more different in topic, and the form that they take is likewise strikingly different. The language that Stephen creates himself in is the very definition of phallogocentrism.

The reader's entrance into Stephen's reality is met with this sentence: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that is no more, thought through my eyes" (Joyce 45). A few pages later, we are met with this stream of esoteric and obscure allusions and neologisms: "A *lex eterna* stays about him. Where is poor dear Arius to try conclusions? Warring his life long on the contransmagnificandjewbangtantiarity. Illstarred heresiarch" (Joyce 47). Stephen's reality is framed in obscure references to Aristotle and the coinage of words to meet his philosophical needs. His head is cluttered with fragments and details. At no point does he ever address his body or his life in any directly emotional manner. Stephen is blocked from experiencing the life he is living because his thoughts are marked by the mechanics of formal sentences. His thoughts may appear as fragments, but they are still marked by punctuation, allusions, and a logical organization that only Stephen can initially make any sense out of. His intellectual constipation locks Stephen up inside his own head, removed from his physical reality.

On the other hand, Molly's language is more like whitewater rafting than the scramble up the rocky cliff face of Stephen's thoughts. From the initial *yes* to the final *yes*, Molly takes us through the twists and turns of her actual lived experience—as well as through the contemplative

calms and orgasmic rapids—which is something that Stephen cannot do. By inviting the reader to share in the physical passions and bodily experiences (even her flatulence and menstruation are made palpable to the reader), Molly’s monologue becomes the writing of her body—the epitome of *écriture féminine*.

A contradiction may seem to arise when we consider that Joyce is indeed a man—how can he write a woman’s body as text? *Ecriture féminine*, however, eschews any binary thinking. Thus, the apparent contradiction of a man writing the text of a woman’s body is part of *écriture féminine*. The ideology of *écriture féminine* promotes a political notion of gender, as opposed to an ideology of gender based on biology or a false sense of essentialism. Gender is treated as a social construct that creates a system of power and enfranchisement within the culture at large. Because *écriture féminine* is not based on an essentialist notion of “woman” and/or “man,” the writer who is employing *écriture féminine* (even a writer who does so unwittingly) does so as a modality of narrative voice. Cixous’s application of such a mode of writing to a writer who predates her implies that this style of writing was not invented by her, nor did she conceive of it. She has identified the characteristics of such a style of writing, of this narrative mode, and thus she can apply it where it appears. Just as Freud’s Oedipal musings created a pathway to understand the inner workings of Hamlet’s anxiety, Cixous’s *écriture féminine* provides a pathway to interacting with Joyce’s texts.

It is worth noting the kinship between *text* and *textile*; we have inherited both words from the Latin *textus*, for “woven pattern and/or structure.” Such a connection allows us to immediately recognize the analogous relationship between the text of Molly’s body and the textile production of Penelope’s loom. Both Cixous and Joyce weave new interpretations of Classical myths with irony in order to create new spaces for new identities. The irony of their

works creates new frameworks to see the Classical myths, thereby creating an established order that is new and ancient simultaneously. While Penelope's loom is destroyed by the usurping conquerors, Molly (as the laughing Medusa) gets her revenge. Perseus beheaded Medusa, but Molly turns her gaze to the suitors, to Perseus, to Boylan and the men of Dublin and objectifies them all as impotent stone likenesses. The accouchement of Molly's sext/interior monologue births a new woman for a new time.<sup>42</sup>

The "problem" of reconciling a male author with a female text is one that assumes gender is an either/or construction. Roland Barthes further diminishes any perceived contradiction of problem because "Molly Bloom" is not a product of "James Joyce." Indeed, Molly has produced a story that has "gotten away" from its author. Molly is completely de-objectified and emerges as the subject of her own life, her own text, her own body. The episode concludes in a climax of life-affirming *yeses*. Molly's orgasmic liberation of self-creation transforms her into the very essence of woman. The power of *yes* emanates from the page, leaving us quivering in the afterglow.

...I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes  
to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew  
him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was  
going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 933)

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<sup>42</sup> With H el ene Cixous serving as midwife, to round out the metaphor

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