# Gathering of Voices 2008-2009
# An Anthology of Student Writing & Art
# Whatcom Community College
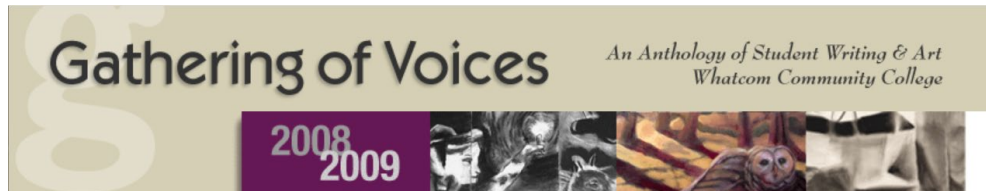


## Table of Contents

# Introduction

Welcome to the first online edition of *A Gathering of Voices*, Whatcom Community College's literary and arts journal. This online format, we believe, will make the excellent student work in this edition more accessible to students, faculty, and staff at the college as well as other readers in our local and virtual communities.

In this edition, you will find an excellent range of essays and artwork. The artists represented, for example, are working in various styles and mediums from acrylic and charcoal to digital illustrations, collage, and mixed media. Some of the art, such as Steffrie Akers' *Study in Charcoal* are traditional studies of the representation of 3-dimensional space and form in a 2-dimensional medium. Other works are more personal in expression. Melissa Watt's *Trapped and Unaware* and Rachel Comchoc's *Dada Collage* are rich in imagery and symbolism. No matter what the assignment, all of the art pieces reflect the artist's sensitivity not only to formal elements such as composition, line and value, but also a sensitivity to the materials which becomes an integral part of the artistic expression.

The writers in this edition have contributed essays from a wide field of study, including biology, film, nursing, communications, English and music, and address a variety of topics from Sieka McCoy's analysis of the relationship between language and culture to Hillary Straatman's investigation of culturally competent health care for Mexican-American women. Some of the writing in this edition addresses global issues, such as Blu Schwarzmiller's excellent analysis of how current economic theory works against environmental needs, while other essays are much more personal in nature, such as Hung Nguyen's moving account of his life in America after leaving Vietnam.

What is particularly impressive, though, is the quality of analysis and sophistication in all the writing included here. Evan Knappenberger's research on the "phytotoxic effects of bisphenol A," for example, is the kind of work one might encounter in a professional scientific journal. Its methodology and research are of excellent scientific merit, yet the results of his study are easily understandable by a lay audience and chilling in their results. Similarly, Robin J. Henley's feminist rereading of Beowulf is sure to impress. Henley demonstrates how translations of Beowulf have traditionally emphasized negative characteristics of Grendel's mother, unfairly and inaccurately labeling her as a "monster woman" or "demon's mother." Henley argues the original language describing Grendel's mother does not reflect that bias and that Grendel's mother, unlike her son, fights and dies by the Anglo-Saxon heroic code.

Unfortunately, there isn't time in this introduction to talk about every essay and piece of artwork in the anthology, but we are certain you will be impressed by how thoughtful, creative, analytical, and talented all these writers and artists are.

Finally, we would also like to thank the instructors who nominated student work for this edition: Courtenay Chadwell-Gatz, Susan Lonac, Lori Martindale, Matt Rager, Guy Smith, Darlene Wagner, Christopher Roberts, Wendy Borgesen, Danielle Gray, John Rousseau, Teresa Pinney, Lloyd Blakley, Gena Grochowski, Pamela Richardson.

Wayne Robertson and Karen Blakley

# A Flicker of Insight: An Exploration of Flickr.com Through a Panoptic Lens

## Sofia Smith

Flickr.com is a popular image hosting website and online community platform for photography enthusiasts. As of November 2008, Flickr is host to over three billion digital photographs (Wikipedia). Perhaps what is more interesting than the fact that Flickr is a storage space for digital images (which can be viewed by virtually anyone with internet access around the world) is the community aspect of the website and how it has the potential to affect the behavior of its participants.

The Flickr community is created through giving each member the ability to create their own Flickr persona and to network with other photographers from around the globe. This is done with the aid of several key features: a contacts list; the comment option; the ability to mark photographs from other users as favorites; the profile page; the ability to create groups of photos centered around a specific theme and the tag feature which allows members to add labels to their pictures. Lastly, there exists an intriguing feature known as Explore which combines data gathered from the other features.

Explore uses an algorithm that auto*magic*ally selects the 500 most "interesting" photographs uploaded to Flickr each day. These images are then displayed on a feature page and ranked in order from 1 to 500 according to how "interesting" they are. So, what exactly is this elusive quality and what makes one photograph more "interesting" than another? Flickr.com explains "interestingness" in the following way:

> There are lots of elements that make something 'interesting' (or not) on Flickr: Where the clickthroughs are coming from; who comments on it and when; who marks it as a favorite; its tags and many other things which are constantly changing. Interestingness changes over time, as more and more fantastic content and stories are added to Flickr. (Flickr)

In other words, "interestingness" is not simply determined by a photo's popularity or professional quality. What is more important is who is viewing, commenting on, and marking the image as a favorite. It matters whose eye the images catches. The image must somehow stand out (whether it be due to the use of bold color, unexpected angles, artistic expression etc.) from the crowd. The exact algorithmic formula and who the "important people" are remains a mystery. Even if someone were to crack the code, it is constantly changing. As a result, images do not simply stay put in their original place in Explore. They can move up or down in ranking and even be dropped from the Explore page, making room for other pictures to be added. Explore is a feature of constant change.

Although Flickr.com and its Explore tool can easily be dismissed as another hobby and networking website, it is perhaps interesting to take a closer look at why it is so popular and attempt to analyze how the Explore feature and the way it is constructed have the potential to influence the behavior of Flickr account holders. The structure of power that Flickr has created with its Explore algorithm can be examined by making comparisons to a structure of power known as the Panopticon. The Panopticon, the invention of English philosopher and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham, was a power structure originally intended to be used as a prison. It features a circular building with a central surveillance tower. The periphery is compiled of a series of individual cells to house the prisoners. Each cell is separated from the other in a way that blocks the prisoner from communicating with or even seeing his fellow inmates. All the prisoner is able to see is the central "tower of power", but not the observer inside the tower (Foucault 213-214). The main goal of the Panopticon was to control the prisoner by creating visibility trap; by making the inmate believe that he was constantly being observed. (Foucault 213-214). French philosopher Michel Foucault used Bentham's concept of the Panopticon to develop his social theory of Panopticism in his book entitled *Discipline and Punish*. In his theory, Foucault examines the effects and applications of the panoptic power mechanism and explores the way power structures evolved between the 17th and 20th Centuries in Western civilization.

Fourcault argued that "Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (220). In other words, the panoptic power model doesn't simply apply to prisons, hospitals, schools or mental asylums, but it can be used in any situation where the goal is to make a group of people behave in a desirable way. Although Flickr.com is far from being a prison like the Panopticon, there are some panoptic elements to the Explore algorithm. One of the major goals of Flickr seems to be to get its subscribers (the multiplicities) to upload a multitude of "interesting" photographs to their website. In addition, the goal may be to have said members be active users of the key features in order to keep the community thriving and to promote the web service. One way this desirable behavior is achieved is through the Explore feature, which has the power to engage the competitive nature of the Flickr user in order to keep them coming back for more. To further explore this strategy, it is important to look at a key feature of the panoptic mechanism.

Foucault goes on to say that:

> …Benham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable.Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes that tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment, but he must be sure that he may always be so. (215)

In other words, the power of the Panopticon lies in the concept that the inmate is constantly aware of the tower and the possibility that he is being observed. It is this idea of constant surveillance that disciplines him to behave in a desirable manner. In the case of Flickr, the Explore algorithm plays the role of the central "tower of power" of constant observation. A

new collection of photographs that represent the "best" of Flickr is posted each day and remains in the archives always to serve as an example of "interesting" photography. The algorithm is unverifiable because it is not made explicitly clear how it chooses the most "interesting" images. It is also unverifiable in the sense that it is constantly evolving. Unlike in the Panopticon, the surveillance of the algorithm really is constant. Each photograph uploaded to Flickr is constantly being evaluated and analyzed down to the most minute detail. The Explore algorithm tracks everything from the number of views an image receives, who is viewing it, the date and time the photo was taken (and in some cases where it was taken), the camera model used to take the picture, how many favorites it receives, who the views and favorites are coming from etc. In short, the surveillance never ceases.

What are the effects of this panoptic system that is the Explore algorithm on the Flickr member? How is Flickr's goal of "interesting" photographs and community activity achieved? The key here seems to be discipline. The desirable behavior is produced when the competitive nature of the Flickr user is activated. She wants her photographs to be featured in Explore and is disciplined to capture the types of pictures that might be chosen by the algorithm. She studies the elements of the featured photographs. She makes new contacts in the hopes of having the "right people" view her pictures and advertises her images by posting them in certain groups. The next time she goes out with his camera, she tries to imitate certain styles which have been displayed in Explore. She improves her photography skills and learns about photo editing. She might even search the internet for tips on solving Explore puzzle. And in doing so, she will find numerous blog entries on the topic where others have posted their theories on the Explore algorithm and how to increase their chances of getting in. She develops he own strategy. She carefully clicks through all 50 pages of Explore each day in search of her image. She uses a third party application known as Scout to search for her precious photographs in Explore. When she finds it, she feels, for a moment, a sense of accomplishment and honor. If she doesn't find it; a moment of disappointment. The key is that the cycle begins again and this is, in theory, why Flickr members keep coming back for more. Eplore becomes a drug and the member, the addict. I know because I am that Flickr user. And I also know that my experience is not unique. The Explore feature creates a frenzy among certain members that leads them to display their Explore accomplishments in their photostream or profile page; come up with theories on the Explore mystery and changes the types of photographs they capture. All of the above-mentioned effects are the result of this panoptic system; the multiplicities are disciplined to please the power.

Flickr relies on the competitive nature of modern American culture and in many ways that is the reason behind its success. This competitiveness is so ingrained in the lives of the majority of Americans today. It starts at an early age when children play games and participate in sports. The idea of a clear winner and loser is established. This follows them through their school years on various levels from competing for grades to competing for popularity. In adulthood it nags at them to perform well in the workplace. It creates the need to strive to keep up with the Joneses. My point is that competition is so highly valued that it even comes to play in supposedly fun activities such as taking photographs to share on Flickr. There

doesn't really seem to be a relief from the pressures of trying to be the best. Even fun is competitive. But is something lost in this constant competition? How does it affect the Flickr enthusiast?

As the Flickr user schemes and strategizes how to get her photographs displayed in the coveted Explore pages and changes her style of photography to fit the standard, is she really losing something important? Do her pictures become less creative and original as she tries to make them fit the mold? Perhaps. And perhaps some of the enjoyment of the hobby is also lost. Maybe she feels a constant pressure while snapping shots and editing them on her computer. Maybe she fears that her images won't be good enough. What started out as a fun, creative hobby might feel more like an obligation. The enjoyment of taking snapshots is gone due to the burden of producing masterpieces. Of course, this might be the extreme case, but I do believe that there is some truth in it. On the other hand, it pushes her to improve her photography skills and teaches her new techniques. Flickr also allows her to interact with photographers from all over the world and to be inspired by their vision. It might even push her own creativity and to see the world through the lens of her camera in a way she has never seen it before. It has the potential to even encourage her to break the mold with a unique style. Ironically, if it makes it to the pages of Explore, the unique style might become the new mold. Maybe the competition makes her a better photographer in the end. Even if her photograph isn't chosen by the algorithm, it does not mean that it is not a good photograph. It doesn't even mean that it isn't interesting. Perhaps it makes it even better.

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

noisywater.whatcom.edu/site_0809/pages_0809/2art.html



Melissa Watt

*Trapped and Unaware*

Mixed media/collage,

23" x 24" x .5"

# Phytotoxic effects of the environmental endocrine disruptor bisphenol A on Brassica Rapa (Wisconsin fast-start® mustard plants)

## Evan Knappenberger

### Abstract

Bisphenol A (BPA), an environmental endocrine disruptor, (xenoestrogen), is a common environmental pollutant as well as a byproduct of plastic and resin manufacturing. As a contaminant, it can be found in household products, sewage sludge, watersheds and many types of plastic consumer products. Studies have documented its clastogenic, teratogenic, carcinogenic and pathological effects on both plants and animals, and have demonstrated its sorption ability into soils. It has been suggested that BPA accumulates in agricultural crops and edible plants, thus entering the food chain and posing a significant risk to human consumption. In this experiment, *Brassica Rapa* (Wisconsin Fast-Start © Mustard) was irrigated with treatments of 10 mg/L and 50 mg/L BPA for 26 days including germination and flowering periods. Evidence of phytotoxicity was apparent at the higher dose of 50 mg/L, including disrupted growth patterns and sexual maturation over the course of the 30-day lifespan. Effects were measured at 4, 8, 10, 15, 19, 23, and 26 days. Generally, deformities and survivability of *Brassica Rapa* were also affected to a lesser degree than height and lifecycle maturity in all doses; though growth-compensation occurred in the 10 mg/L treatment, inducing changes in survivability and reproductive maturity index ratings. These results suggest a potentially harmful accumulation/sorption dynamic which probably extend to other crops and to animals fed on them. More research is needed to determine the dangers of BPA as both environmental contaminant and consumer toxin.

### Introduction

The impact and implications of more than half a century of mass production of polycarbons, plastics, and resins has recently become a hotly-disputed topic within and without the international scientific community. While many plastics have been in mass production for nearly 50 years, only recently have serious objections been raised against the environmental and human costs of such production, described by some as "great environmental concerns." (Purdom et al., 1994; quoted in Ferrarra et al., 2005).

Industry influence and lobbying is not to be ignored either. In March, 2007, the National Institute of Health dismissed their privately-contracted data analysts (previously in charge of analysis related to BPA and other potentially pathological byproducts of plastics) for conflicts of interest (Sissell, 2007). Industry-led misinformation is also prominent. The website for the "Bisphenol-A Organization" claims that "products made with BPA are safe for their intended

uses and pose no known risks to human health" ([http://www.bisphenol-a.org/](http://www.bisphenol-a.org/)). On the same website there are links to the NIH's National Toxicology Program review of BPA; a 1982 study which found that "the evidence is suggestive of a carcinogenic effect [of BPA] on the hematopoeitic system" (NTP TR-215, 1982): a conclusion which is not mentioned on the website. The NTP report also concluded that "Leukemias in male rats occurred at an incidence that showed a statistically significant positive association with the dose of bisphenol A" (p. 45). A 2001 opinion published by the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology stated that "reassessment of models used to test xenobiotics for oestrogenic potency is overdue" (Speraow & Barkley, 2001). A brief review of research linking BPA to animal and plant pathology reveals an extensive corpus of literature: (ECSCF, 2002; EDSTAC, 1998; Staples et al., 1998; Safe, 2000; all quoted in Ferrara, 2006; Ferrara, 2001; B. Scmidt & I. Schupan, 2002; Smith & Taylor, 2007; Stoker et al., 2003; Schirling et al., 2006; MSDS-Sigma-Aldrich, 2006; Atkinson & Roy, 1993, 1995; Hanioka et al., 2000; Nakagawa & Tayama, 2000; Niwa et al., 2000; Colborn et al., 1993; Rice, 2000; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 1996) to name a few.

According to the Google Trends website, searches for "BPA" and "Bisphenol" have jumped exponentially in 2008, likely due to news that Nalgene Brand water bottles were being recalled from the market due to BPA leaching (sales were banned by law in British Colombia shortly thereafter as well) (http://trends.google.com).

Meanwhile plastics and other polycarbons and resins continue to be mass-produced and marketed in many consumer products ranging from water pipes to babies' bottles, regardless of potential dangers by proven BPA presence (Brede et al., 2003). BPA production in Japan in 1997 was about 400,000 tonnes, and is probably much more than 500,000 tonnes /year worldwide for the last two decades (CMC, 1999; Nakajima, 2004). A German study (Furhacker et al.. 2000) found levels of contamination high enough to pose a danger (especially to aquatic organisms) "emanating" from mostly industrial sites. Especially hazardous were the wastes of paper factories. The study concluded that a significant portion of the BPA was not fully removed through wastewater treatment methods. This study was confirmed in (Hermann et al., 2002).

Environmental BPA contamination is a cause for great anxiety, and so is its presence in consumer products. Many studies have confirmed endocrine disruptor presence in aquatic systems (Dorn et al., 1987; Nasu et al., 2001; Staples, 1998; Cousins et al., 2002; Suzuki et al., 2004; Yamamoto et al., 2001, Ternes et al., 1999). BPA is permittably discharged in some countries (Schmidt & Schupan, 2002; Lobos et al., 1992; Hanioka et al., 2000) and used in all manner of dental sealants and fillings (Ike et al., 2000; Suzuki et al., 2002). Several studies have linked BPA and other hydrophobic plastic by-products to the contamination of the world's oceans to a high degree (Ying & Kookana, 2003; Teuten et al., 2007; Derraik, 2002). Even seals in the pacific northwest have been touched by the contamination (Ross et al., 2004).

According to another article, the presence of other contaminants –heavy metals and metalloid compounds– increased the rate of soil sorption of BPA, indicating what might be termed a 'co-morbidity' of BPA presence in conjunction with other industrial pollutants (Li et al., 2008). Seeming to confirm this idea is (Sun et al., 2008) which concludes that different forms of BPA are absorbed into soils at different rates, with soil organic matter playing a key role in the process.

Understanding the chemical dynamics of sorption of BPA into various soils is the focus of much ongoing current research. Hollrigl-Rosta et al., (2003), discovered that adding additional dissolved organic material did not significantly effect the sorption of BPA in some soils, but did in others. Ying & Kookana (2005) found that aerobic conditions significantly increased the ability of high-concentration organic material soils to degrade BPA and other environmental endocrine disruptors. The authors add that endocrine disruptors (EDC's) should not last long in well-aerated soils, but their persistence "in anaerobic soil may affect soil and groundwater quality and ecosystem." Kang & Kondo (2002) confirms that degradation of BPA by several strains of bacteria is generally better under aerobic conditions. At least one study questioned the safety of BPA presence in sewage sludge used in agriculture (called biosolids) (La Guardia et al., 2001), and the ability of sewage bacteria to degrade environmental estrogens (Lee & Liu, 2002).

*C. Fusca,* a microalgae, can remove up to 85% of BPA under ideal photoautotrophic conditions and in certain small concentrations of 40μM and less (Hirooka et al., 2003), but it is unknown if this is possible under more realistic conditions to the same extent.

BPA presence in the rhizospheres of plants seems to cause several different interactions which result in a net phytotoxic effect. First, it probably has adverse effects on the bacteria essential to nitrogen uptake in plants. Many microbes can "detoxify" BPA ( Kang et al., 2006 ) but some cannot. The bacteria *Lactococcus Lactis [712]* was tested by (Endo et al., 2006) and could remove less than 9% of BPA from media solutions, but could not degrade it without significant additional chemical assistance. This study suggested that "hydrophobic proteins on cell surface may be involved in the BPA-adsorbing ability of *lactococci."* Indeed, it is the hydrophobic nature of the chemical xenostrogen compounds that has made them worrisome to researchers. Overall there is some evidence to support a theory of environmental 'co-morbidity' when assessing the hazards of BPA contamination and its phytotoxicity where overall environmental damage may be grossly effected by a multitude of hazards to include EDC's.

Other phytotxic outcomes of BPA sorption in soil have been less well-documented. A handful of studies have demonstrated the negative effects of xenoestrogens on plant cell suspensions and cultures, and fewer still have demonstrated it on plant systems grown hydroponically or in soils (Ferrara et al. 2006). Of these, there have been surprising results. One NATO-funded study compares BPA exposure to gamma ray exposure using Tradescantia micronucleus assays to measure clastogenesis and carcinogenesis, concluding that a relatively small amount of BPA (11.8 mM) has the same cumulative effect as 25 cGy of gamma rays (Kim et

al., 2006). This is a strong and telling indictment of the phytotoxicity of BPA. Ferrara et al. (2006) found that BPA exposure did not significantly influence germination or early growth in hydroponically-grown broad-bean, durum wheat, or lettuce plants, but did inhibit tomato root length significantly (p. 3). In their experiment, crops treated with 10 mg/L and 50 mg/L bisphenol A showed many phytotoxic and systemic negative effects, apparent after 21 days. These included morphological alterations of shoots and leaves, soot-blackened roots, leaf chlorosis, and reduced number and size of leaves and roots (ibid). The conclusions drawn by the above study and confirmed by others (Schmidt & Schupan, 2002; Nakajima et al. 2002) seem to indicate that various plant species can absorb large amounts of BPA, and that it should be considered phytotoxic; that EDC's can translocate within the plant, and that "complete biotransformation and detoxification [of BPA] do not occur either in the roots or in the shoots [of some plants]" (Ferrara et al., p. 4).

As the empirical evidence of the phytotoxicity of bisphenol and other chemicals begins to accumulate, it is becoming increasingly concerning (given the ever-increasing contamination of the natural and human environments with that and other harmful chemicals). To prove the toxicological net effect of BPA has been the task for many researchers for the past decade; now the task turns to assessing the full magnitude of the possible environmental crisis, as well as finding means of remediation. Currently, there are few studies which have begun exploring the possibilities of phytoremediation of bisphenol A in the environment. These include Hamada et al., (2002) and Iimura et al., (2007).

The purpose of this paper is to add to the evidence an incomplete analysis of the phytotoxicity of BPA in *Brassica Rapa* (Wisconsin Fast-start ® mustard). The objective of the experiment performed was to measure only phytotoxic outcomes of BPA contamination through a multi-stage environmental simulation, with the inferred soil sorption, plant uptake, and internal transfer having an end result in visible plant development. By proving the phytotoxicity of EDC's in an easily-reproducible and cost-effective manner, it is hoped that an awareness of the hazardousness of environmental EDC contamination can be improved.

**Method & Materials**

Plants.

*Brassica Rapa* (Wisconsin Fast-start ® mustard) seeds were obtained from Carolina Biological Supply, USA. 72 seeds were selected at random from approximately 150 mixed from different containers. All seeds were inspected for uniformity of appearance (size, shape and absence of defects) before selection. Selection and planting occurred at uniform times (within 1 hour for all plants).

*Chemical.*

Bisphenol A [(2,2-(4,4-dihydroxydiphenol) propane)], 99% purity was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich, USA and dissolved in distilled water at room temperature in concentrations of 10 mg/L and 50 mg/L. A total of 1.50 liters of each solution was mixed, and allowed to stand for approximately 1 day in sealed containers before irrigation. Distilled water was used for the controlled variable plants.

*Soil.*

Potting soil mix was obtained from WCC lab stock of a mixture of commercially-available brands. Soil was inspected for uniformity of appearance and consistency before planting. Soil was mixed and moistened with distilled water before selection, and randomly selected for plantings. Amount of soil was standardized at approximately 1.5 g.

*Watering regimes and housing.*

Watering regimes were constructed to form a reservoir (made of sealed tupperware®-brand container) and a cloth wicking system to allow for continuous irrigation. Styrofoam® chambered planters (also obtained from Caolina Biological Supply, USA) with four separate chambers for soil (with holes and additional wicks at the bottom for irrigation) were placed on top of the regimes. All materials were selected at random from lab stocks, and thoroughly inspected for uniformity and pre-cleaned before usage.

*Lighting and temperature.*

Full-spectrum lighting was set up in a lab chamber to allow for thorough lighting and uniformity of light brightness and quality. Lighting was set on a daily timer for 12 continuous hours of light followed by 12 hours of dark. Light was provided during planting as well. All measurements occurred during lighted hours to mitigate external effects, and lighting followed a general daylight schedule to allow for any other seasonal or diurnal cues. Temperature remained at constant room temperature for the duration of the experiment.

*Planting, depth, initial irrigation.*

Planting of seeds was standardized in soil at 5-7 mm depth, and within an hour for all seeds. Initial irrigation of treatment or control water was given via dropper until all wicks and soil were thoroughly irrigated. Two repetitions of three regimes for each variable (six total planters for 10 mg/L, 50 mg/L and 0.0 mg/L, each with four seeds in separate chambers) were planted. Seeds were given separate chambers to mitigate any root or placement competition, and irrigation was checked hourly for the first 4 hours to ensure thorough irrigation. All plants within each chamber were therefor of the same treatment.

*Placement.*

Placement within the lighting chamber was randomized after the first day on a semi-daily basis to minimize any potential effects to plant growth. Watering regimes within treatment groups were randomly switched twice during the experiment to mitigate any potential "block effect" on plant growth.

*Continuing irrigation.*

During the course of the 26 days, plants were continually irrigated through the watering regimes and checked on a daily basis for thoroughness of irrigation. Plants were hand-irrigated on a standardized basis directly following every measurement session to ensure continued uninterrupted growth.

*Measurements.*

Measurements were taken at standard times at 4, 8, 10, 15, 19, 23, and 26 days. Standardization of practices included measurement tools and techniques, as well as timing and thoroughness. Variables measured for analysis were turgidity/flaccidity (subjective yes/no criteria), number of buds (objective criteria), number of flowers( objective criteria), number of leave-halves (objective criteria), presence of obvious deformities (subjective yes/no criteria), and cumulative height above soil top: accurate to 1mm (objective criteria). Height was measured using standardized instrument (ruler) by reading the tallest portion of the plant. Leave-halves were counted in order to reduce the margin of error due to presence of deformities of leaves. Turgidity and flaccidity were subjective criteria determined on the basis of deviation from documented deformities/growth-patterns but not included in the final statistical analysis of the results.

*Analysis.*

Analysis was performed using simplistic variable-analysis in an automated spreadsheet format. See Results below.

**Results & Discussion**

*Definition of terminology.*

Variations in sexual maturity were measured primarily by determination of number of buds and number of flowers. An index of these co-variables was created, termed here "Sexual Maturity Rating," with the mathematical formula of $M = (1/3)$ *Tbuds + Tflowers* where T(buds) is total number of buds and T (flowers) is total number of flowers where sexual maturity reached critical stages on a variable-criteria timetable (budding by day 15, flowering by day 23).

A vivacity index was determined in order to combine multiple variables for single analysis. The formula for this is:

where H is cumulative height in mm, Td is time in days, Nlh is number of leave halves, MS is the sexual maturity rating described above, and Nd is the number, if any, of defects on the plant. Having these multi-variable ratings allowed for a more general analysis of phytotoxic effects of BPA on the plants.

$$V = \frac{H_{mm}}{T_d} + \frac{N_{lh}}{4} + M_S + (2(N_d))$$

Results and discussion.

Generally, the phytotoxic effects of BPA were apparent at 50 mg/L levels in all measured variables, but they were also apparent in the sexual maturity ratings and late growth curves for the 10mg/L treatment. The overall germination of *Brassica Rapa* was not significantly inhibited by BPA presence but early growth differentiation began emerging by day 10. By day 19 there is a significant difference in height, producing a growth-equilibrium shift that lasted through the rest of the experiment (see figures 1, 2.)

(Figure 1.)



(Figure 2.)

Only one negative value appeared in growth charting: control treatments on the last measurement. This apparent "shrinkage" in the non-BPA treated group is actually the result of the weight of buds and flowers bending the plants slightly downward as well as a halt in the growth patterns of the plants. Whereas the sexual maturity of the control group was greater at this point in the experiment (see figures 3 & 4) and the growth of the BPA-treated plants was somewhat retarded, it can be said with some assurance that the shrinkage in the control group was quite a natural occurrence.



Interestingly, the growth of the treated plants did not stop as did the control, though the 10mg/L treatment plants did slow significantly between days 23 and 26. This may be due to the BPA inhibition of cell-elongation and / or division (Vaughan & Ord, 1990: as quoted in Ferrara et al., 2006)
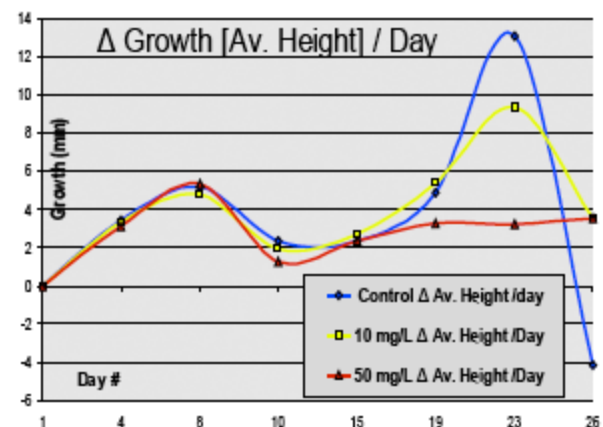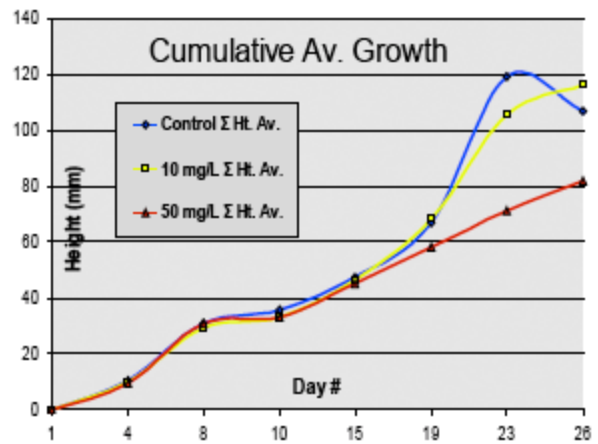
because generally the plants' sexual maturity stages still occurred in marked stages transcending treatment variable. These findings seem to corroborate those of Ferrara et al. (2006) in the assessment of the effects of BPA during germination.

Sexual maturity ratings (see definition above) demonstrate more contiguous changes by addition of BPA. Because of the time-specific categorization of the sexual maturity ratings (i.e. flowering or budding by a set number of days) the differences between the 10mg/L treatment and control plants becoming more acute, while the obvious interference of BPA on the reproductive maturation at the 50mg/L level is rather obvious.

(Figure 3.)

Because the number of flowers reaching maturity is a function of the number of buds, and because of the fact that not all buds reached maturity to become flowers, there is a slight drop sexual maturity curves between days 15 and 19. However, most plants had flowered by day 23 in all variables, and the disparity in ratings can be clearly correlated to BPA presence by that time.
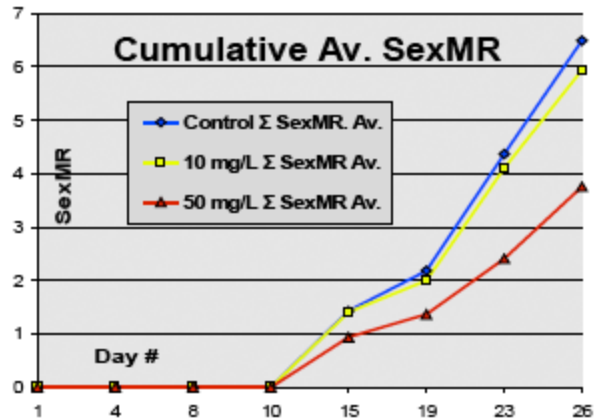


(Figure 4.)

The overall vivacity rating (VR) was a rating combining most of the dependent variables in such a way as to determine systemic effects of BPA presence in plants. The results of that are as shown in figures 5-6.
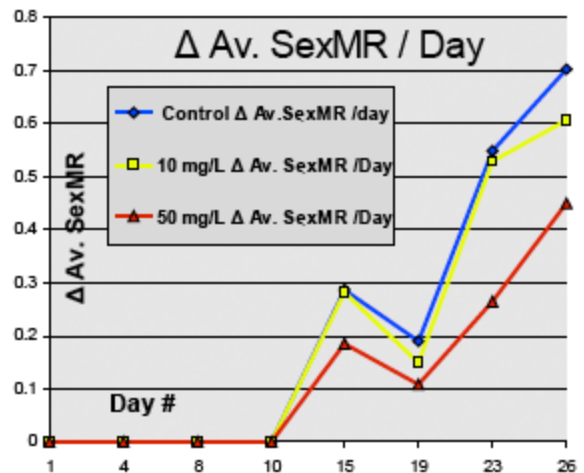
(Figure 5.)



(Figure 6.)

Overall, more visible deformities occurred in BPA-treated plants than in control plants, but the same level of correlation between treatments that was evident in the sexual maturity ratings is not apparent in the vivacity rating. (Although the net phytotoxic effect of the 50mg/L treatment is still evident). This change is most likely due to compensation of growth rates as a function of BPA presence.

The reasons for the demonstrated overall net phytotoxicity are probably multi causal with regards to bisphenol A presence. While full analysis was avoided in this study, it is suggested by Ferrara et al. (2006) and Schmidt & Schupan (2002) that there are various aspects to BPA toxicity, possibly including the release of acidic root exudates, and changes in the rhizospheres including microbial and electrolyte concentration changes. Further analysis is needed to determine specific pathology of all xenoestrogens in plants.



## Conclusions

While the exact pathology of Bisphenol A disruption to plant organisms is still somewhat unknown, the evidence of its phytotoxicity is relatively abundant. By empirically measuring the systemic effect of BPA in a simulated natural environment, we can conclude that the results of previous research in hydroponically-grown plants and other lab settings holds true in more natural ones as well. There is strong



evidence that BPA contamination of the environment plays a 'co-morbid' role along with other hazardous contaminants; there is also strong evidence for a theory of EDC bioaccumulation in crops and non-crop plants. More importantly, as the specific science of the phytoremediation, degradation, and complete detoxification of BPA and its metabolites remains unknown, it posses a possible threat to human and animal consumption through the food chain. More research is needed in order to determine the true extent of this threat.

It is hoped that this experiment can be used both as a demonstration of the systemic effects of the environmental contamination of BPA, and as a simple way to prove the general phytotoxicity of synthetic estrogens and other EDC's produced by man.

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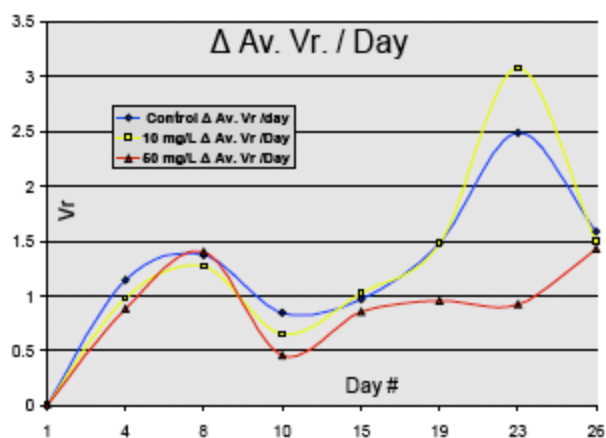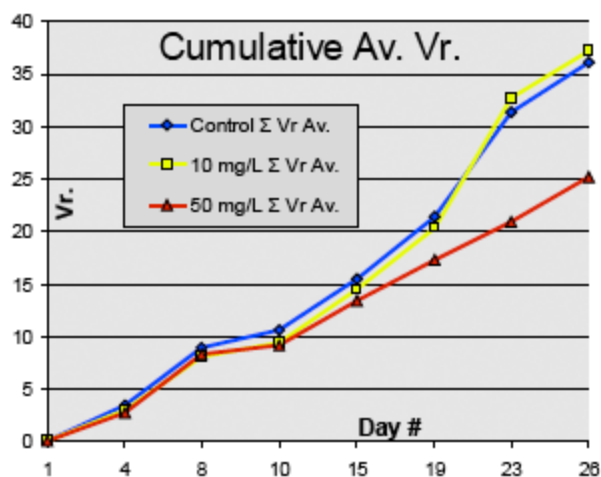
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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Study of Picasso's *"Minotauromachy"*

A collaborative drawing by Students
in Gena Grochowski's Art 112 class

Charcoal, 36" x 48"

# Still Fishing for the Right Words

## Seika McCoy

I was born in the U.S.—Bellingham, WA, with a Japanese mother and an American father. When I was in preschool, my mom enrolled me into a Japanese bilingual school in Bellevue, WA. Every Saturday, I would ride down with my mom and little brother to the school to meet and study with other kids my age. At this school, we utilize the textbooks imported from Japan and learn math, science, social studies, reading and writing as a child in Japan would —just five times the speed, in Japanese. Because of this, I am able to participate in the normal schools in Japan when I visit; we normally go quite frequently. Since the Japanese population in Bellevue isn't extremely large, I grew up with the same kids; it started out with a couple classes of 20 in preschool but gradually the numbers decreased and now, there remains one class in my grade of 15 people. This group, to me, is where I truly belong, where I fit in, and what I love.

Maybe I feel like I belong in Japanese School because it is a place where others like me gather; all students at Japanese School are bilingual—they speak both Japanese and English, and have experienced both cultures as well. This is the interpretation that my friends who are not associated with Japanese school seem to take. Unlike my high school in Bellingham and my experience in schools in Japan, all kids at Japanese school have grown up, or are currently surviving the "space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" or the "contact zone" (Pratt 1) between their two worlds and are finding a comfortable middle ground in their language, actions and thoughts. This middle ground is hard to find—neither culture is "correct" or "better." But as we grow up, we started discovering and finalizing how to be a contact zone that is able to communicate and live with people from either culture—or many cultures.

I clearly remember that day a few years ago when my brother had received a new Nintendo DS. I, enticed by the magical touch screen, kindly asked my brother if I could see the product. Obviously, having been the receiver of this device, my little brother announced his answer —"NO!" Suddenly, I felt the need to grab it out of his hands. We grappled and shouted words of insult and pain, struggling to grip the DS with our flailing hands.

The reason why I mention such a common and seemingly insignificant event is because this was this day that I noticed the true difference of the English and Japanese language. You see —when I had asked my brother for his DS in the first place, I had asked kindly—in Japanese. It is natural, you would think, to use Japanese when referring to an electronic device made in Japan. But this, apparently, wasn't our reason. My brother had enunciated "No!" in the crisp, clear English language, and we both felt the necessity to use the English language to express our insults. On the other hand, despite the hassle, we still utilized Japanese grunts and

phrases to convey "ouch." Why would we use both languages in such a situation—a situation in which we were neither thinking consciously about our word choice and rather, reacted upon instinct? Might my brother, Japanese school friends and I, as contact zones of the American and Japanese culture, use the two languages unintentionally for a certain reason? That day, I discovered a deeper reasoning to answer this question.

I think that many people think of languages as things that can be translated—a collection of words that have a certain definition and that can be portrayed with the same, exact meaning in another set of words. I understand that people who have learned new languages know that different languages have different connotations in their words, and that some words might not even exist in another language. But language isn't as simple as this. If this were the case, there would be a lot less confusion in learning a new set of words and it would be a lot less difficult to understand people from different countries. Instead, I imagine words, as a bilingual, as if all languages were combined in a pool of words. One can reel out their preferences when trying to communicate a feeling. In other words, if one language had 100 words in it with 100 meanings, and you knew three languages, you would know 300 words with 300 meanings. *Each word* in one language differs in definition from every word in any other language, period. So, if someone understood *all* the languages in the world, they could express *any* emotion, using whatever words they pick from the pool of languages, and wouldn't be able to convey the exact feeling again with another set of words. This concept is not explained when you learn a new language in high school or college; we learn language as a different way of saying what we want to say in our own language. I have tried to explain this concept to other people in both Japan and the U.S. I have tried to convey this to all my friends, relatives and peers. It's a difficult concept when you can't relate to it.

Let me give you an example. The word, "*hello*" in English, is commonly known to translate into the word "*konnichiwa*" in Japanese. But this isn't exactly true. I have probably never actually used the word *konnichiwa* towards one of my friends. *Konnichiwa* is simply a word used in more formal occasions. *Hello*, too, is also more formal than, for example, *hey*. But *konnichiwa* has more than just the meaning of "hello!" behind it. It literally has a little slant towards "Hello. How are you today?" For this reason, it is unusual for people in Japan to ask how you are. They say *konnichiwa*, which implies that you one, respect the other person, and two, care for them. I have noticed that people in the U.S. greet each other saying more than just "*hello*." They normally say, "Hey! How are you?" even if they are not very familiar with the person. When a Japanese exchange student sees this, it's hard to understand. Why would you greet someone and then ask how they are doing afterwards—especially a stranger? Wouldn't this just be repetitive? It seems so unnecessary. Such differences are very common.

Some words don't even exist in other languages. For example, there is a word in Japanese, *yoroshiku*, which has no direct translation in English. It's extremely difficult to translate this word into English since no other word explains the feeling, value, and respect that are part of the culture behind this word. I often explain it to my Japanese learning friends as a way of saying "Nice to meet you," "Thank you," "Please," or "I'm counting on you." Yet, all of these

aren't near what it actually means. For example, if you were at working at the cash register with your friend, and saw that the line was getting long, you might ask your friend to open up the other cash register. In this case, you might "greet" your friend saying, "cash register (in Japanese) *yoroshiku*!" which would imply that you are thankful, are counting on him/her, asking please, and are happy to work with her. There are many words like this.

In fact, there are words and phrases in the English language that are not available in the Japanese language as well. For example, the phrase "*bless you*" after someone sneezes doesn't exist in the Japanese language. No one says anything after one sneezes. It might seem awkward or rude to not comment—to express your worry, but to the Japanese, this has never been an option. They simply have never even *thought* of saying something after someone sneezes because they don't *have* a word for it in their language. Just like we, in English, have never thought of saying something like *yoroshiku*.

Your expressions and feelings that you can convey are limited by the number of words that are part of your vocabulary—your language. In other words, there are more than just the emotions and feelings that you can portray with your own language. There are more ideas—more thoughts, things, descriptions and colors, that you haven't even thought about. Because I, other bilinguals, you, and everyone really, have not grown up with all sounds or words invented *and* yet to be created, we don't even *know* all the ideas in the world—let alone explain them.

People in my Japanese school, as well as my brother, understand this. We, truly, don't understand everyone's viewpoints—no one does, but we can understand how we don't know it all. I talked to one of my Japanese school friends, Miho Saikusa, on the phone the other day. During our conversation, we talked about how we really appreciated each other; we noticed how it was so much easier to communicate to our Japanese school friends. Over years of trying to explain ourselves to others, it is definitely easiest to do so in our small community—in Japanese school. At our school, since everyone is bilingual, we can convey our ideas in two languages instead of just one. We don't have to limit our expressions and explanation of ideas as much, because everyone can relate to and understand two languages. If you listen to our conversations, you will hear a combination of English and Japanese. Sometimes we even use half-words of each language, like, *guesuru*, which isn't part of either language. It is partially English—"guess," and Japanese—"suru," which means something like "to do." We often say, "Test de gesutta!" which would mean that we totally guessed on every question on our test. In this way, by using both languages, we can communicate more efficiently and accurately to each other.

Pratt, when sharing her ideas on language or "speech communities," notes how "descriptions of interactions between people in communication… readily take it for granted that the situation is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants" (Pratt 4). Here, she explains how people who go to international conferences or observe intercultural connections, don't realize how blessed they are to understand both the verbal and physical communication; English, normally the shared language at such gatherings, is only a set of

*rules* that everyone abides to so that the observers and participants can communicate effectively. But is their communication actually effective? If there are so many "speech communities" which are "held together by a homogeneous competence or grammar shared identically and equally" (Pratt 4), such as English, or Japanese, or even the contact zone of the languages—my school, and each word has a different meaning, then wouldn't there be an infinite number of words? If you think about it, words are only sounds which express an idea —nothing more. But each word in every language expresses a different idea; they might be similar, but they aren't the same. So when one at an international conference explains an idea, could they have used another set of words from another language to better explain it to their audience? Unfortunately, not everyone, including me and my friends, understands all languages and, consequently, is limited by the small number of words spoken in their group.

But *why* are these words different? How does each language develop with a different feeling? This is what I learned on the day that I and my brother fought over the DS. Recall, closely, which words are spoken in what language. I realized that words that express respect and encourage empathy are spoken in Japanese, while the words that were definite and sharp-edged were in English. Why might I and my brother have unconsciously used a different language for these different feelings? I related this to what I thought was the best explanation —cultural values set up a language; the words that are created in a "speech community" are derived from the morals that are set up high in the culture.

The American culture seems to focus on "individuality" and "freedom." The ideas developed in the U.S. seem to be centered on the idea of independence; the American flag, Fourth of July, voting ballots, democracy and other such concepts have a lot to do with freedom of choice. To Americans, independence is important. Being firmly grounded in your own ideas and having a defined opinion about controversial topics, is valued since it implies that you are taking advantage of your freedom. I think that most people understand how this comes from the history that the United States has gone through—the civil war, trading, the depression, etc.

The American culture differs from the Japanese culture where it's important to value the opinion of the group more than your own. A common stereotype of the Japanese is that they are very serious, aren't able to take humor and are perfectionists. This, to some extent, might be true to an American. My idea—and many of my Japanese school friends' idea of the Japanese is that the humor in Japan is expressed in a different way; unlike the American culture, it is hard to find humor based off of racial, political or sexual basis. Different puns, jokes, and sarcasm are used by comedians. Also, the connections between strangers in Japan are different. Dave Barry, an American comedian who visited Japan for a month, explains this in his book, *Does Japan*. He notes that "the Japanese [treated strangers] politely; they rarely treated [them] warmly" (Barry 207). The Japanese aren't heartless; the respect that is portrayed in Japan to friends and family often comes from genuine kindness. If a Japanese

person were to see the Americans interact with strangers, they might find the light manner as "rude" and "uncaring" instead of "friendly." (In fact, there isn't really a word for "friendly" in Japanese.)

My point in bringing this up is to explain how the way of thinking is simply *different* in Japan. It isn't weird—just different. In other words, what is weird to one person might be normal for another born with different cultural values. I often think of how there isn't a "normal" person in the world since everyone is different. No one in this world is "weird" either since *everyone* has different values, personality and appearance. It is normal to be weird, and weird to be normal. As part of bicultural group such as my Japanese school, we start to accept this idea to the point where nothing seems unreasonable—there might be someone out there experiencing a "weird" idea already.

Respect in Japan is very important. Bowing, greetings, traditions and language are developed around the idea of "respect." Barry says "you find people respecting each other's property, and respecting each other" (Barry 208). Even a short term visitor like Dave Barry notices this value of respect in a foreign country. This isn't to say that the Americans lack respect. In fact, I shouldn't even refer to this "respect" concept as "respect" since the word for "respect" that I'd like to use in this case, is in Japanese. In Japan, "respect" towards someone expresses more than just "politeness." It has a feeling of affection, care and warmth. So, as a tourist, Dave Barry might have been seeing what is very kind and caring to the Japanese, as detached manners. This cultural value of "respect" and "politeness" generates from the generations of history and change that a country, city or person goes through. Just like individuals are different because of their genetics as well as how they grow up, countries and cultures are also different because of their history and location. So, as the Japanese culture developed over the centuries, it changed into a society of homogeneous and respect-oriented people.

These cultural differences are actually reflected in the languages of each country. In Japanese, words are developed around the idea of "respect" and "conformity." In America, words are developed around the idea of "independence" and "pride." You can see this in the simplest of examples such as the word, *car*. *Car* in English generally gives people the feeling of freedom and independence because it is the first step to adulthood for many in the United States. Maybe in Britain it would give off a different feeling since they are part of a different "speech community." I certainly know that *kuruma* in Japanese, which is known to mean *car*, to me and many of my Japanese school friends, is defined as a means of transportation but it implies uniformity. This is because we imagine the lanes and lanes of identically white or maybe monotone, small and perfectly parked cars lined up in an inside parking lot in Japan, when we hear the word *kuruma*. The English word symbolizes independence for many, and the Japanese word might imply uniformity for others.

Cultural qualities are hiding behind the dictionary definition of every word. Here, although I don't understand every language and culture, I'm assuming that all languages form around what a "speech community" values the most—its cultural values and way of thinking. James

Paul Gee says that "words have histories; they have been in other people's mouths and on other people's pens." Each word is much more than a simple definition, and instead, is a collection of ideas that the people in the community have hidden behind it.

The language—the culture portrayed behind each word, shades the Japanese school students' thinking—the bilingual's thinking. They are able to understand and respect the individuality in each culture because they realize the complex differences between even the simplest words. But this doesn't start with language—it starts with the culture in the language. I have often asked myself the question—if I had a choice of knowing a language or understanding a culture, which would I want? At the moment, I would reply that I would rather understand the culture. You can't know—truly understand a language, without understanding the culture because culture is what lies behind the "sound" or "noise" that people call "words." When one of my friends is learning a new language I often notice that the dictionaries aren't very useful. Even they, finding out the hard, embarrassing way, notice that translating dictionaries don't do much good when trying to communicate with native speakers. You need to grow up with or somehow understand the cultural values in the speech community to speak a language truly fluently.

By understanding more than one culture and language, one develops the ability to accept cultural differences. They become open-minded. As a Japanese school student, I feel like I relate to my friends—not in how we are bilingual and have experienced the same cultures, but rather, that we can accept more than one correct way of thinking. In other words, the fact that my classmates are open-minded to differences is more important in my relationships than sharing the same two cultures. According to *Writing Analytically*, by David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen, "our opinions are learned. They are products of our culture and our upbringing—not personal possessions" (Rosenwasser and Stephen 23). Unlike opinions, "ideas" are arrived at after a long thinking process. My friends at my Japanese school, my brother, and I, have been developing—and will always be developing, *ideas* about languages and cultures. These ideas might be our "middle-ground"—the talent of being open-minded to all cultures and ways of thinking. Finding the middle-ground is part of our life because we were born in a contact zone of cultures; it's *necessary* for us to develop a key for understanding others to survive the harsh conditions of living in two communities which tend to tear you in different directions.

I am the most comfortable in contact zones. In fact, I *am* a contact zone. I have the privilege of being born in a bicultural family. I can't even begin to explain how thankful I am to grow up with two languages as my first language. I can't explain the gratitude I feel towards my mom who enrolled me in Saturday school so that I can read, write, speak and think as any other16 year old in Japan can. I am truly blessed to live in the U.S. and understand both the Japanese and American cultures. Due to this privilege, I have experienced the cultural tension between my two cultures. This tension isn't a fault. It is merely a side-effect, a

middle-ground, and is a significant part of what makes bilingualism an opportunity. It is one of the factors of understanding which have helped me and my friends develop as open-minded human beings.

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Sandra Vuolo

*End of the Chase*

Acrylic, 18" x 24"

# Economy and Environment

## Blu Schwarzmiller

There are those that believe it is the right or purpose of man to wrangle his environment to suit his needs; or that it is by God's will and by His protection we should not worry about the effects of society on our planet. We have not treated our fair planet as we should, and now live in a time of increasing uncertainty about the future of mankind. As our population grows at unprecedented rates, we see a greater strain on the resources necessary for life. According to the United States Census Bureau's 2008 World Population figures, the human population is around 6.74 billion people, and growing at an exponential rate of 1.188% (CIA world fact book). Those 6.74 billion people depend on the earth's natural resources for life. The resources that provide us with the most basic of human needs; food, shelter, and air, are being depleted at an unprecedented rate. Many resources upon which we depend are not renewable, and can only be used once, including mineral ores and fossil fuels. Those resources that are renewable are being depleted at a rate faster than they can renew, and in the name of profit. The cause of this increasing rate of human consumption is the inherent assumptions of classical economic theory. In our gathering and production of resources, we are dramatically affecting the Earth and the systems by which life is maintained.

The earth keeps itself in a state of dynamic equilibrium, maintaining ideal conditions for life. Since life began roughly 4 aeons ago, the suns output has increased about 30%, yet the global climate has not changed, fluctuating plus or minus 2 degrees, keeping a constant ideal environment for life (Lovelock 21). Furthermore, for the past 3.5 aeons the earth has maintained a constant atmospheric gas ratio of 20% oxygen, 79% nitrogen and .03% carbon dioxide since the beginning of life (Lovelock 22). Recent scientific theory suggests that microbial and coccolithophoride life forms present worldwide in the oceans act as an active control system for atmospheric gasses and temperature, maintaining the aforementioned characteristics (Lovelock 43-45). Doing so creates the conditions that allow for the diversity of life we now enjoy, and are a part of. However, the outputs of our society are overloading the planet's check systems.

In 2007, the International Panel for Climate Change, composed of thousands of scientists from dozens of nations worldwide, concluded "Both past and future anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions will continue to contribute to warming and sea level rise for more than a millennium, due to the timescales required for removal of this gas from the atmosphere (IPCC)." Basically, humans have put more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than can be broken down, and as carbon dioxide traps in solar energy we see an increase in temperature. These carbon dioxide outputs result from humans, specifically the burning of fossil fuels in the forms of oil, coal and natural gas. The known results of an increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide are an increase in temperature on a global scale causing the exponentially

increasing rate at which the polar ice caps are melting and ensuing rise in sea levels. However, global climate change is only a fraction of the problem, as we are disrupting countless other cycles and processes of the earth. Notably, we are now seeing the hypoxia, the loss of oxygen in a system, in the Gulf of Mexico from an overload of nitrogen, a result of fertilizers used across the Midwest carried downstream by the Mississippi (Withgott 175). An increase in nitrogen allows aquatic algae to grow much faster than nature intends, depleting the water of oxygen, thereby killing all other forms of life present in those waters.

The long term effects of this upset of the oceans dynamic equilibrium are still unclear. While we pollute the waters that first gave us life and maintain the aforementioned atmospheric balances, we cut down the forests that aid in the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, deplete the soils that grow our crops of their nutrients. Let us not forget that even a 2% shift in overall global temperature gave us the last ice age (Lovelock 61). Should oxygen levels decrease minutely, we lose the air we breathe. Conversely, a 1% increase in oxygen levels leads to a 70% increase in the chance of forest fires, and should oxygen levels increase from their current levels to above 35% all organic material on earth would simultaneously combust (Loveloch 27) By upsetting the dynamic equilibrium of our planet, we have put ourselves on the brink of a system's failure, in which drastic global changes could occur, brought about by the consumption and wastes of modern society.

As a species, it is time we start questioning why we continue to use fossil fuels if we know they are heating the earth, causing changes in the ecological processes upon which life is based? Why do we allow our population to ever increase, further straining the earth and adding to pollution? Why do we use non-renewable resources at an increasing rate? It is becoming clear that as a species, we may be our own undoing; the creativity and innovation of human kind so prized by society that led to our current technological achievements may have allowed us to exceed our resource base. Our lack of foresight stems from the economic theories upon which the overall global economy is based; and the subsequent assertion that humans are not subject to the laws of nature, or that they do not apply to us. Economy and environment form a paradox, for our economy is dependent upon the natural resources of the environment, yet depletes that same environment and harms the global ecosystem that supports the natural resources upon which we depend.

Current economics is based upon Adam Smith's idea that when people are allowed to pursue their own economic self interest in a free market, it will benefit society as a whole (Withgott 38). Smith's ideas provide the basis of free-market capitalism, an economic system in which resources are privately owned and traded. Furthermore, Smith noted that we are most concerned with that which directly affects us, and those close to us, reflecting anthropocentric worldviews. The ideas of Smith in tandem with the inherent anthropocentric worldviews led to the four assumptions underlying current economic theory, as identified by Jay Withgott and Scott Brennan, who say that resources are infinite or substitutable, that costs are and benefits are internal, that long term effects should be discounted, and that growth is good (41). To think otherwise in economics would limit growth and expansion,

which is traditionally considered a negative effect. Furthermore, the anthropocentric worldview inherent in capitalism puts emphasis on the individual bettering themselves through economic means. Though these concepts and world view allowed for our rapid economic expansion, they are at the root of the aforementioned environmental issues.

The assumptions of economics no longer apply because the social context in which they were created is much different than today. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, Earth's resources were virtually limitless, considering the relatively low population. At the time, civilization depended on natural processes to provide our basic needs; the sun to grow the food eaten, the grass consumed by the animals we ate, and to provide us with the natural fiber for our clothing. Industrialization, and the accompanying technological advances allowed for the ongoing exponential increase in population. Modern manufacturing techniques increase our ability to produce food and material goods, therefore allowing our population to continue growing. With every individual trying to better themselves within a system that puts its emphasis on material possessions and money, the Earth is exploited. Classical economic theory may apply to a population of one billion people, as in 1800, but not to today's population of 6.74 billion.

In nature, a population is limited by its food source and will only expand until it can no longer feed itself. This forms a balance within the natural system. These natural limits are directly opposed to the limitless growth encouraged by current economic theory, which has led to constant economic and population growth since the eighteenth century. A constantly expanding economy always needs more workers. A constantly expanding work force always needs more food, more resources and more land. Yet this constant grow contradicts the basic principles of species expansion. Our species is still feeding itself, but only by exploiting our natural resources, and at a price. Already, the effects of constant growth are manifest on the anthropocentric level, in the poor living conditions of developing countries due to overpopulation. It is becoming apparent that an economy must be developed that mirrors the cyclic aspect of the natural world, one that fluctuates slightly yet overall maintains relatively stable, as opposed to our current economy that is expected to constantly grow.

The idea of limitless resources is also obsolete as the earth itself is a finite resource. The earth has a total area of 510,072,000 km2. 70.4% of the earth's total surface is water (CIA). Of the remaining 29.2% (148,941,024 km2) of surface area, part is inhospitable by traditional means as it consists of deserts, mountains, or ice. According to the CIA's World Fact Book, only 10.57% of the world's surface is arable, or suitable for growing crops (CIA). Considering those 6.74 billion people worldwide, the world is a very small place; the 12.5% of the planet not covered by water, ice, mountains or deserts (CIA) has much demand upon it. It is this 12.5% of the earth's surface that produces the crops we eat, grows the timber we use, hosts the livestock we raise, and provides the habitat for humanity.

The notion that costs and benefits are internal is another cause of the major environmental issues facing us today. Economics uses a cost to benefit ratio to determine whether or not to do a transaction. For example, the cost of plowing, planting and watering a field is weighed

against the expected profit from what is grown on that field. Together, these costs form the internal costs. Economics places emphasis on the cost to benefit ratio of producing and selling a product, not the basis of the resources necessary for production. Current economics does not put value in natural capital, defined as "the myriad of necessary and valuable resources and ecological processes that we rely on to produce our foods, products and services" (Miller 201 By ignoring the cost of natural capital in relation to its abundance and the time it takes to renew, short term costs are minimalized. This results in an externality, defined as "cost[s] or benefit[s] of a transaction that involves people other than the buyer or seller" (Withgott 42). Externalities can be things such as pollution and secondary effects such as global climate change, deforestation from over harvesting. The reality is that we are now paying for using our natural capital in an unsustainable manner, and paying with interest in the long term. It is universal law that an action has an equal and opposite reaction, and we have largely ignored this in our dealings with the environment.

When looking at natural processes, we see there is no waste. A forest has no waste; as trees grow, die and rot, they become the soil for the next generation. Everything works in a state of relative harmony, and though fluctuations in this harmony occur, there remains a state of general equilibrium. Nature forms a negative feedback loop, one in which there is no waste and entropy. All products of every system eventually return to that system, be it the soil cycle, carbon fixation cycle, nitrogen cycle or any other natural process. A positive feedback system does not stabilize a system, rather is drives it towards one extreme or another. Post industrialization, humans cause a positive feedback loop, in terms of pollution, depredation of resources and waste output being the flow through of our positive feedback. The initial examples, global climate change, hypoxia of the Gulf of Mexico, and deforestation can be viewed as outputs from positive feedback. These positive feedback cycles throw off the balance of our planets systems

It is clear that there is a need for a shift in the underlying economic principles backing capitalism, or destroy our own habitat. The answer may be a sustainable society, as defined by Tyler Miller, professor of Ecology and President of Earth Education and Research, "an environmentally sustainable society satisfies the basic needs of its people without degrading its natural resources and thereby preventing current and future generations of humans and other species from not meeting their basic needs." This society would give full value to natural capital and look at the long term effects of actions. An environmentally sustainable economy would be the root of a sustainable society. Such an economy would not be expected to constantly grow, rather it would fluctuate slightly but remain level overall. This economy would have to operate on a global scale to be effective, and have global benefits. If, for example, China and India, who compose roughly half the world's population, were to not take part in a sustainable economy these problems would go on. A sustainable economy would take into account the true cost of natural capital and would hold industry accountable for its use of resources and any negative effects caused by production.

Furthermore, for a new sustainable economy to work it is necessary for a shift in the dominant worldview of the human population from anthropocentric to ecocentric; from being concerned about oneself and those close to us to being concerned with our effects on the planet as a whole. In doing so, we would be protecting the future of mankind, providing habitat for future generations. In anthropocentric terms, we all want our children, their children and their children's children to be able to enjoy the diversity of life we do now. For that to be possible, action must be taken on the individual, governmental and global levels. It seems as though this is happening, with the current attention being paid to the environment and our impacts upon it. Most importantly, we must live within the dynamic equilibrium of our planet to remain a part of it. It may well be that us living in harmony with our environment is the final step in the evolutionary process.

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Mandy Cramer

*Heavy-handed*

Pencil, 24" x 18"

# Transitioning to Life in America

## Hung Nguyen

Like many people living in developing countries, I also wanted to come to America to see what it was like to be in one of the richest country in the world. And like them, I had to pay an expensive price for leaving my country in which there are still many people needing me.

Maybe I would not have been too miserable if I stayed in my country with a regular job, a house, big family, good friends, etc as almost everyone living in the world wished. I decided to move to America with my wife and two kids.

The first hindrance I've had is American English even though I studied it a long time in Vietnam. I can't understand what Americans say to me, and they can't also understand me. I had to come back to school as freshmen even though I am over forty- year- old. I had to go everywhere with my mother- in- law's help or walk or take the bus when she was busy for work. I walked over 3 miles a day from my house to bus stop round trip. With the cold weather in Bellingham, (Vietnam is hot) my family had to walk too much to complete our first goals in America. We had to check our health, apply for Social Security Card, get interviewed by DSHS (Department of Social and Health Services). Though most Americans are kind and friendly (especially the officers in DSHS) we still see many problems due to difficulties in language.

To learn English again, I have to forbid myself of all of my hobbies and just invest for English. When I learn high school, then university, I hated literature and foreign language the most. The more I love math, the more I hate them. But now, I have to learn English as a way to exist in America, if I don't want to become the deaf and dumb in this new country. How will I be if as I can only communicate with the Americans by body language and can't understand any messages due to difference in language? That is also a reason why I have worked very hard for my English skills.

I am very happy when I have studied in WCC. There are many good teachers and staff who are very kind with me. In scholar environment of WCC, I have been encouraged to study again by their helping (ESL, ABE teachers, work- first officers, students in learning center). They gave me the support that I will not forget in the first days in America. I can't say any words to thank them better than this: I will try to study with my best ability. I am improving my English little by little in other classes (ENGL 92, 95). More than one time, I thought I would quit class, but a good teacher in ENGL 92 helped me to gain everything in that course, and finally, I passed that class to enter ENGL 100. There are still very many difficulties for me in next stages, but I can't forget about the help from this school.

I am also lucky to have job on weekends. However it is too hard as I must work twelve hours a day on weekends whereas I often worked five hours a day in Vietnam. Riding my bike about five miles for work in early morning for job, I have felt too tired, especially when I went up on the slippery roads because I was over forty years old and had not ridden a bike more than fifteen years.

Every time I get a call from my family in Vietnam, I don't dare say anything about what I have been experiencing in America. I always say that everything is fine even though more than one time my eyes have filled with tears. In my first snow season in America (staying in my house when it was snowing) I saw my wife going to work as if there was a vague cutting in my heart. She didn't work over 10 years after she got pregnant with our first child. We often stand at the bus station under snow weather. I forgot feeling cold in Bellingham as I think how I was treated (most things are good, a few things are bad) and how I need to strive more in the first days in America. Though most Americans are very kind and America is rich and modern, it does not mean my family will be easy to find happiness unless we study and work more and more. Those are also things in which almost all Americans have been doing.

Finally, I can't know how well my family will do in the future. But surely, moving to America will be a big lesson about life that I will remember forever. And I think that WCC will be place which will still help to change lifestyle of many students, especially, the people have just come to America like my family.

# Barack the Vote: Advertisement Masquerading as Music Video

## Conrad Wrobel, Ashley Adams and Kristen Buck

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to distinguish hidden agendas observed in political advertisements through analyzing Will.i.am's internet-based video, "Yes, We Can." We examined this video using four communication theories: Semiotics, the study of signs; Agenda-Setting, the media influencing public interests; Two-Step Flow, the transfer of media through opinion-leaders; and Medium Theory, the medium is the message. We applied these theories by investigating the media content and its use of language, symbolism implied by the involved celebrities, persuasive abilities, filming techniques, and use of the internet and video as specific communication media.

In order to better understand the current system of political campaigns and agendas, we investigated an Emmy award-winning music video which emphasized a political candidate, his catchphrase, and his campaign theme. Considering the ground-breaking nature of the recent presidential campaign/election and the potentially far-reaching impact it might have on not only the United States but the world as a whole, it is in our interest to see how we could have been influenced or manipulated into supporting a particular candidate.

### Introduction

#### *Description of Advertisement*

"Yes, We Can" starts with an acoustic guitar strumming a slow, sweet, and simple melody while the camera captures in black and white its primary creator, the hip-hop artist Will.i.am, preparing himself for the song. He adjusts his hat, wets his lips, strokes his chin, and fiddles with what appears to be a pin of crossed golf clubs on his jacket. During this "warm-up," the screen briefly shows actress Scarlett Johansson taking a breath and raising her eyes as if mentally preparing the lyrics in her mind. After Will.i.am adjusts the pin, he stares straight at the camera and sings these words in sync with the voice of then-presidential hopeful Barack Obama: "It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes, we can" (metrolyrics.com, 2008).

At the point when Obama's voice joins Will.i.am's, a clip of Obama giving the original speech from which the lyrics in the song are taken appears on the right portion of the screen against the black background. When the catchphrase "Yes, we can" is spoken, Obama is replaced by the large white words "Yes, we can." When the next lyrics are sung, the clip of Obama takes the center of the screen, split to the right by the basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and

then to the left by the hip-hop artist Common. The video progresses in this fashion with the screen split between Obama, thirty-eight different celebrities, with white highlighted words, and the chorus "Yes, we can" repeated and sung after or during each line either by Obama, the celebrities, or the crowd that attended the original speech (Heng, 2008; WeCan08, 2008). Each celebrity adds to the song, either by playing a musical instrument, singing the lyrics, or adding to the "Yes, we can" chorus by linguistically mingling English, Hebrew, two forms of Spanish, and American Sign Language, while smiling or staring directly at the camera. As the song fades out, the video ends with Will.i.am's gaze avoiding the camera while the word "HOPE" appears in white letters to his right. As his gaze finally turns to the camera, the letter "H" is replaced by a red "V," the letter "P" is replaced by a red "T," and lastly the "O" and "E" both turn red, changing the white word "HOPE" into a vivid red "VOTE," giving contrast to the black and white theme used throughout the video.

### *History and Background*

Among the candidates of the 2008 presidential election, a relatively new political leader emerged, a young (for a presidential contender) Illinois Senator by the name of Barack Obama. Obama was the first African American Democratic nominee for President in U.S. history. He had a simple slogan on which he based his entire campaign: "change."

During the Democratic primaries on January 8, 2008, Barack Obama lost the state of New Hampshire to New York Senator Hillary Clinton (NBC, 2008). It was that night when Obama delivered a very powerful speech to the public. His catch phrase, "Yes, we can," was born.Following this, celebrity musician Will.i.am, video producer Mike Jurkovac, and director Jesse Dylan (son of the famous 1960's folk singer Bob Dylan) created a four-minute, black and white, celebrity-filled music video to express their support for the candidate.

> The "Yes, We Can Song" was recorded… on [the] 30th & 31st of January 2008, [and was] posted [online in the form of a music video] on the 2nd of February of the same year right before Super Tuesday, a pivotal time in the Presidential Primaries. (Heng, 2008)

The music video gained approval by being showcased on video share web sites popular among young viewers: "The song was released on 2nd of February 2008 by the Black Eyed Peas member Will.i.am on [the websites] Dipdive and…YouTube under the username 'WeCan08'" (Will.i.am, 2008)."Yes, We Can" became an instant phenomenon. By the election in November the video had over 15 million views on YouTube alone (this figure does not include viewings from the original website, television spots, or other featuring websites, which are said to increase the number to over 25 million views (Heng, 2008)). Following this online recognition of "Yes, We Can," the video entered the mass media and was in the global spotlight.

According to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1978), presidential campaigns are controlled by the media and their propaganda. Their theory was confirmed with studies during the 1968 presidential race. The study proved that when a story is covered in the

media, people are more likely to be influenced by those stories.

## *Why We Are Interested*

While Will.i.am mentioned in his interview that his video was an impartial advertisement to raise voting awareness (ABC News, 2008), it had elements that arguably promoted the election of Barack Obama, making this in actuality a privately produced campaign commercial for the Democratic Party's candidate.

Considering that Barack Obama won the presidential election of 2008, it would be a tremendous oversight *not* to analyze the political campaign factors that contributed to his success. It is our belief that the "Yes, We Can" video played a crucial role in popularizing both Obama's catchphrase, "Yes, we can," and his main campaign slogan, "change."

The four theories applied to this study are semiotics, agenda-setting, two-step flow, and medium theory. These theories are all relevant steps in the approach to analyzing the video because they cover four distinct aspects of how a video medium can affect its audience. Each theory helped to examine how the content of a message can be manipulated by the way it is presented.

## Theory Review

## *Semiotics*

Semiotics is the study of language, often used by advertisements to construct and organize reality utilizing signs and symbols in a way that moves people toward a universal understanding.

Semiotics is the study of the symbolism attached to a communication system by a series of signs that have been assigned meaning. It differs from language in that language is the systematic medium that reflects a body of words with meaning assigned by cultural "norms" (Fiske, 1989). Language is the system of signs that makes the world intelligible, and allows us to communicate with one another (Language, 2006, para. 1-7). The denotation of a word is the literal meaning, or the primary definition that one might find in the dictionary. The word, however, only holds meaning to those who use the language because the connection between a word and its meaning is arbitrary. There is no concrete evidence that a word and the meaning attached to it must be related, it is only through language and a shared sense of meaning that the two appear to be so intimately related. Gestures, expressions, body language, and fashion are a few areas where one may encounter signs. One word or sign may hold more than one meaning, and the secondary meaning is known as the connotation. This can include individual thoughts or feelings evoked from certain words due to past experiences or encounters, making symbols more personal for each viewer. Connotations alter one's surroundings into symbols that make life intelligible and meaningful (Chandler, 2005).

To interpret signs, semioticians look at their signifiers and signifieds. Signifiers are the words, sound-images, or visual-images that convey meaning (Fiske, 1989). The signifier represents the signs that can be perceived through the human senses: what we see, feel, hear, smell, or taste (Chandler, 2005). The Signified represents any alternative concepts we may associate with the sign. A sign must have a combination of both a signifier and a signified to be considered a signification (Nowlan, 2008). For example, when we think of a "bald eagle" we may know that denotatively it is a large predatory bird with a white head, brown body, and talons; thus the word "bald eagle" would be the signifier, or the denotative way of viewing the sign. The actual bird itself is the signified. However, Americans may also associate the bald eagle with the United States of America, symbolizing freedom, pride, strength, and democracy. As a nation and as a culture, Americans have assigned it these meanings. Secondary meanings are the "ideas being conveyed" or its connotative meanings.

In order to properly analyze the signs and sign systems in media, one must be familiar with the codes that are expressed (Nowlan, 2008). The codes are the techniques used to form mutual or reciprocal relationships between the signifiers and signifieds (Chandler, 2005). A code can be anything that is believed to be open to interpretation as meaningful, providing a source for and a stimulus to the process of signification (Fiske, 1989).

### *Agenda-Setting*

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw developed their theory on agenda-setting in the belief that the media have the ability to tell the public what issues are important. The term agenda-setting refers to the creation of public consciousness and concern of issues that are considered to be imperative by the news media.

> In agenda setting, two basic assumptions must be understood; First, that the media does not reflect reality, but does sort and mold it, and second, the public is led to believe that some issues are more vital than others because of the media's focus on a few issues or subjects. (Griffin, 2006)

McCombs and Shaw focused their research on the 1968, 1972, and 1976 presidential elections (U. Twente, 2004). Their hypothesis predicted a cause-and-effect relationship between the agenda of the media and the public's agenda after viewing media messages (Griffin, 2006). During the 1968 election between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, their research focused on the elements of awareness and information and studied the relationship between what voters in a community said were significant issues of the campaign, and the content of the media messages throughout the campaign. Their research found that the mass media indeed had a significant influence on what issues voters considered most important (U. Twente, 2004).

Depending on how the information is released (through different media, news outlets, and/or companies), different media outlets will have different agenda-setting potential. The media tell the public what is important, but this begs the question: who is telling the agenda

setters what topics to concentrate on? Scholars have targeted major news editors, politicians and their "spin-doctors" as agenda setters, but recent findings suggest the focus should be on public relations professionals (Griffin, 2006).

Not only does the media tell the public what to think about, the media also make some issues more salient, suggesting to audiences that those issues are more important and deserve greater attention (U. Twente, 2004). Through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration, the media do more than tell the public which issues are most important, they transfer the importance of said issues' specific attributes (Griffin, 2006). The media's powerful influence goes beyond telling people what to think about, by telling the public what to think about it, and even giving suggestions on what to do about it. This goes beyond merely affecting attitudes and opinions; McCombs believes that the media may even affect the public's behavior (Griffin, 2006).

### Two-Step Flow Theory

Initially introduced in 1944 during the Roosevelt vs. Dewey presidential election, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet performed a study focused on the decision-making process throughout this campaign. Their study, titled "The People's Choice" (U. Twente, 2006), hypothesized that the researchers would find a direct influence of the media's messages on voting intentions. Their experiment revealed that informal yet personal contacts influenced voting behavior. Based on these findings, Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz founded the actual two-step flow theory (U. Twente, 2006). The theory maintains that information from the media moves in two distinct steps. The initial step in the spreading of information consists of individuals who pay close attention to the media messages and then pass on their own interpretations of the media content. These individuals are known as opinion leaders (U. Twente, 2006). "Personal influence" was the term chosen to refer to this process of intervening between the media's message and the audience's reaction to the message (Center for Interactive Learning, 2008). Opinion leaders can be extremely influential in getting people to shift their attitudes in accord with those they influence. This theory has provided a new perspective on how the mass media influence public attitude, and has helped to explain why some media messages may fail in attempts to change audience behavior.

### Medium Theory

Medium Theory, "also known as channel theory, …media formalism" (Medium Theory, 2008), or "media ecology" (Griffin, 2008), is based on the idea that "the medium is the message," a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan (1964), the creator of the theory. This concept is based on looking past the message presented to the medium in which it is being presented. McLuhan believed that technology is an extension of the body and mind, specifically by the unique medium utilized by the chosen technology (Gordon, 2002). McLuhan theorized that the medium is the message because it reshapes the information being presented in a way that differs from traditional tribal (face-to-face) communication. Where communication started as a personal interaction based around an oral language,

advances in technology have created new methods of transferring information and meaning. This includes, but is not limited to, artwork, written language and literature, pictures, radio, television, internet, and various combinations of these channels. Essentially, the medium is a container that holds the message. Unless one understands the particular container being used, the message is useless. Metaphorically, if a person was given a decoratively wrapped box (a present or gift) for their birthday, unless they, the person in question, understood what a present was, they might not know how to open it. Concurrently, unless one knows the box was hollow, would they be able to even imagine something inside it? Truly, unless one understands the package, they cannot even imagine the meaning(s) it could possibly hold.

**Theory Application**

*Semiotics*

The rapidly varying images in the music video resonate with Barack Obama's message of "change." Ironic to its nature, change is one of the only constants in life. Because of the video's constantly changing visual images, we can all relate to it because we can all relate to change. "The momentarily changing nature of phenomena is like a built in mechanism, and since it is the nature of all phenomena to change every moment, this indicates that all things lack the ability to endure" (Lama and Cutler, 1998, p. 163). This is similar to how some believe Americans cannot endure four more years of the same failed Bush-Cheney policies because in accordance to their nature, people demand variety. Since things are not able to remain the same under their own independent power, this suggests that all things can be influenced by other factors—perhaps even influenced and changed by a single person, a single candidate. The signifier at play here is the use of the word "change," as well as the changing camera angles, celebrity faces, and environments. The signified is this: change will come from Barack Obama (presumably change for the better).

An additional signifier that stands out is the use of first person plural linguistics. "We-language" can be used to brace the viewers for a persuasive ending. The words "we want change" are repeated numerous times during the "Yes, We Can" video (Obama, 2008). "We" means "oneself and another or others" (We, 2008). The repetitive use of this language creates a sense of belonging and closeness that intentionally moves the viewer in the direction that the creators of the video desired; in this case, voting for Barack Obama. The secondary idea associated with "we" is the signified, or the message being conveyed. By acknowledging Obama's catchphrase "we want change" as truth, the viewers follow their natural inclination and imitate the motto by agreeing with it and accepting Obama as the choice candidate. Thus, the sign is the word "we."

The 4 ½ minute long music video was filmed in black and white. With all of the color drawn out of the images, it minimizes perceptions of racial skin tones and attempts to create certain impressions: serious, determined, contemplative, and genuine. This appeal to emotion causes viewers to keep an open mind, judge less critically, acutely embrace the video and to ultimately receive the message that voting for Obama will bring change and hope.

At the end of the "Yes, We Can" video, the word "HOPE" is seen repeatedly in white across the screen (WeCan08, 2008). While the music is still playing and the background remains black and white, the word changes from "HOPE" to "VOTE" in contrasting red letters (WeCan08, 2008). Possibly because it is breaking the color-scheme of the entire "Yes, We Can" video. First, the creators get viewers to focus their attention on the white lettering of a word that everyone is familiar with: hope. Then the words slowly changes to the color red and reads "VOTE" (WeCan08, 2008). The word "HOPE" can be seen as the signifier. When the viewer sees these words appear on the screen in white lettering, they may actually think of something different than the word "hope," itself. Instead, it could imply a united nation, economic stability, or a new tomorrow. In other words, it makes one think Barack Obama is the candidate for change, who is also the signified in this situation; therefore, the signification is: voting for Obama.

### *Agenda-Setting*

Simply stated, the agenda-setting theory describes the media's ability to tell the public what issues are most important to focus their attention on, how they should feel about those issues, and what to do in response to them. The 2008 presidential election was a historic event. The United States had been at war with Iraq for five years under the leadership of President George W. Bush. With a new president about to be inaugurated into office while the country is still reeling from the recent turmoil, another war for the White House raged on (Washington Post, 2008). During the election process, the power of the press was incredible, according to this theory, because the public looks to the news to judge what essential information is and where to focus their attention (Griffin, 2006). During the 2008 election, news sources flooded the public with information pertaining to the Democratic and Republican parties. With Senator Barack Obama being the first democratic African American candidate for the presidency, the election received ample attention from a variety of media sources.

The initial release of the "Yes, We Can" video was through the internet on community websites where users could upload and share videos (Huffington Post, 2008). With the internet being one of the top choices of media for exchanging current information and events, YouTube and other popular video sites are a perfect media tool. The video also received ample attention from other news and media sources; for example, it was featured on "What's the Buzz," a television show on the ABC News channel (ABC News, 2008). Since the election pertains to all Americans, this issue is highly important to all citizens. Even so, not everyone paid as close attention to the election before the video went viral and the media made it so widely known (Griffin, 2006).

According to The New York Times (2008), the video was viewed over 21 million times by July 2008, and the large number of views this video received suggests that since this video had so much publicity, more of the public decided that it was worth their time to watch. And, according to this theory, the public sees issues and candidates that are paid closer attention to by the media during the election as more salient or significant (U. Twente, 2004). Since

others were paying so much attention to the video, and most likely were sharing it with friends or family who, in turn, shared it with others, more and more of the public viewed the video each day. It makes sense that the viewing audience was led to believe that if the news is sharing certain information with them, then that information must be most deserving of their attention.

This video not only tells the public that they should be paying close attention to the presidential election, it also tells them they must vote. The video features the phrase "Yes, we can," being chanted and repeated at a near constant pace by Obama, the crowd attending his speech, and the featured celebrities (Dipdive, 2008). The words "CHANGE" and "HOPE" are displayed as the song goes on, implying to the public that change is possible. At the end of the video the word "HOPE" is shown on the screen and morphs into the word "VOTE," suggesting that the public vote this election day. The public may infer from the video that if one is unhappy about the situation that the United States is in, it is not too late to change; but in order to create change, the public must vote for Obama.

As mentioned, the "Yes, We Can" video is 4 ½ minutes in length. As such, it does not conform to the typical time constraints of a standard commercial. Using a music video format grabs the viewers' attention, forcing them to stop and listen to its message. By incorporating multiple diverse musicians, it greatly increases the video's interest for music-lovers. Instead of pointing out the flaws (negative campaigning) of the other candidates or discussing Obama's stance on particular issues (as is typically done in the final stretch of campaign commercials), the video works on an emotional level, aiming to be empowering and uplifting. This refreshing change of pace, along with its unusual length, made it stand out among other political advertisements. The video is successful in getting the viewers' attention. Of the millions who watched the video, a younger generation was being targeted; as evidenced by a website frequented by this youthful age group, as well as using celebrities who are recognizable to and popular with this same younger audience.

McCombs and Shaw realized that some of their viewers might be more susceptible to the media's suggestions than others (Griffin, 2006). They suggested that the viewers that would be the most willing to let the media alter their thinking would be those who have a high involvement and high uncertainty of the issue (Griffin, 2006). The voters who have the highest levels of relevance and uncertainty would be young voters who are still developing their political stance. The youth of America who are of voting age but have not yet committed to a political party or are not yet sure of their political standpoint would be the most likely to be swayed by a video such as "Yes, We Can" because of their increasingly typical obsession with current and/or popular music and celebrities. This video targets these young viewers with the hip-hop style overlaying the voice of Senator Obama's concession speech for the January 2008 New Hampshire primary (Culturekitchen, 2008). The featured celebrities in the video also appeal to a younger age group, including current actors and pop artists such as Scarlett Johansson, Common and Will.i.am, who also produced the video (Time, 2008).

When young, undecided voters see the artists and celebrities that they admire supporting Barack Obama, they will be more likely to support Obama as well through their infatuation with celebrities even though they may not be true experts on the subject.

This video not only appealed to younger viewers, but also those who already supported the Democratic Party. These previously committed viewers would be more selective in the media they are watching, and since they already have an established point of view will be more likely to resist the media's suggestions.

### Two Step Flow Theory

After watching Obama's concession speech at the New Hampshire primary, Will.i.am and Jesse Dylan were inspired to make "Yes, We Can" (ABC News, 2008). The pair wanted to raise public awareness of voting, and decided to take an original approach in comparison to the "Rock the Vote" project that started in 1990, which includes short celebrity-endorsed commercials focused on motivating youth to register to vote, among other things (Ayeroff, 2008). In an article from ABC News, Dylan said that "The speech was inspiring about making change in America and I believe what it says and I hope everybody votes," (ABC News, 2008). Will.i.am looked to other famous faces to join his cause, and received ample assistance, saying:

> I'm blown away by how many people wanted to come and be a part of it in a short amount of time. It was all out of love and hope for change and really representing America and looking at the world. (ABC News, 2008)

He took words directly out of the speech Senator Obama gave at the New Hampshire primary, carefully selecting which parts of the speech would be the most inspiring to others.

Will.i.am had a previously established following in today's popular culture and is well known for his work with the hip-hop group "Black Eyed Peas," who have sold over 18 million albums worldwide (Will-i-am.blackeyedpeas.com, 2007). He is also a well-known producer and has collaborated with artists ranging from Justin Timberlake and Busta Rhymes, to Mariah Carey and Michael Jackson. In the case of the music video, Will.i.am would be considered the opinion leader. By making the video, he took the information that he received from Obama's concession speech and is literally filtering it and sharing it with his fans. Lazarsfeld, one of the creators of this theory stated, "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (Center for Interactive Learning, 2008). This describes "Yes, We Can" perfectly. Will.i.am shared an altered version of the speech he heard from Obama with his audience, including the parts he considered to be the most influential.

### Medium Theory

Considering that videos would not exist if it weren't for the invention of the picture camera and later the video camera, it could be said that the camera itself is directly responsible for the medium of video. An irreplaceable tool in the process of making videos, the camera's direction affects how the video medium influences society. While the video itself is essentially the message, since it can only capture the audience's attention for as long as they maintain conscious awareness of it, the medium is essential to maintaining audience focus on the message it is presenting. This means that the medium must be innovative and attractive at all times. However, this can only be achieved if the camera films in such a way that maintains an unwavering interest. Regardless of the actual message endorsed by the commercial – "to vote for Obama" – the camera is utilized in conjunction with the celebrities, Obama, and the highlighted words in a way that it becomes a unique medium used to maximize audience retention through the duration of the video in itself. This means that the camera is the medium, and because the medium is the message, what it captures is also part of the medium, and thus deserves analyzing.

The camera angle constantly incorporates "the gaze," also known as "the direct (or extra-diegetic) address" (Chandler, 2000), a term used in reference to a direct look from the person(s) in an advertisement straight towards the audience. This makes it appear as if the celebrities are trying to establish a direct connection or relationship with the audience through eye contact. A relationship is a connection or association, and "an emotional or other connection between people" (Relationship, 2008). Eye contact is important in establishing trust because every relationship involves some establishment of trust, meaning the knowledge of whether a person can or cannot be trusted, and to what degree. One person who is known to the other is often believed to be more trustworthy than a complete stranger. These celebrities employ "the gaze" in an attempt to create the illusion of eye contact; this mixed with the initial recognition via celebrity status, builds a false relationship with the audience, providing a false semblance of trust. By utilizing this impression of trustworthiness, the creators of the advertisement can persuade the audience on an unconscious level to believe what they say, which in this case is to vote, and as implied in the video, to vote for Obama. Only through the use of video or photos can "the gaze" be utilized. Because of the subliminal effects of this strategy, it becomes an extremely effective tactic for widespread persuasion. This approach requires the camera, and the camera requires the celebrities to perform the gaze, so the overall mechanism of the medium is the complete projection of these combined factors. The medium is employed as the message in only such a way that this medium could portray it.

However, "the gaze" is not the only subtle effect attributed to the medium of the camera. Color tone plays an important role in the social influences of the camera. Being filmed in black and white allows for perceptions to change about the skin color of the celebrities involved. During the campaign, a controversial subject that arose was race. Obama, being the first Democratic African-American presidential candidate, faced a lot of controversy through

his campaign because of his ethnicity. "Yes, We Can" was filmed in black and white film, with the single exception of the word "vote" at the end of the video, which was bright red. Because the entire film is in grayscale, it can be interpreted three different ways:

1) Since all the actors' skin tones have been reduced to shades of grey, it could be contrived that we, as a people, are not black, white, yellow, brown, or any of the colors used to describe skin tones, but are essentially the same, neutral shades of grey.

2) The use of black and white film increases the obvious difference in the skin tones of the celebrities to reflect exactly what the camera filter is used for, to distinguish the world in shades of black and white, emphasizing the importance of race in the election.

3) The black and white filter could be a reference to grayscale film used from the 1920's to the 1940's, during the time of the American Great Depression. By using it in the "Yes, We Can" video, it could be construed as a comparison to the current economic regression. By highlighting the word "VOTE" in red, in comparison to the rest of the black and white film, it is like saying that this election will bring the "color" back to this nation. Essentially, voting equals change, and with Obama being the "courier" of change: voting for Obama is voting for change, which will "fix" the economic problems and restore "hope" to the nation.

Either way, the use of the filter in the film removes color, which itself is an interpretation of the medium: this issue is beyond color.

On the other hand, this method is also used to emphasize the word "vote" at the end of the film, which is highlighted in red. The color red is, in American politics, related to the Republican Party, while the Democrats use blue. By using the opposing party's color in a Democratic nominee's video, a link is built between the parties that could be construed as Obama's acceptance by the Republican Party, which further strengthens the concept that he is the ideal candidate that will, in a way, unify the political factions.

The video is filmed in such a way that it distances itself from political parties, which implies that the candidate's "side" is not important, but that the candidate is important. It suggests that Obama is above the political party he represents to the point that he is not even part of it; he is simply the candidate of choice. In fact, the video never states, verbally or visually, the name "Barack Obama." It simply says "vote" at the end, not "vote for Obama." This makes the commercial superficially appear impartial or nonpartisan; giving the audience the impression they are in control of their decision for choosing a candidate to vote for. But the fact that the video incorporates images of Obama, quotes Obama's Nashua, New Hampshire speech musically while Obama speaks the phrases in the background, and constantly repeats Obama's catchphrase "Yes, we can," implies that instead of the act of voting in itself being important, the act of voting for Obamais important.

Another influential factor in the video is that it makes no references to particular issues that Obama or the Democratic Party stand for, but encompasses widely acceptable notions that most people would agree are important. Topics such as getting youth off the streets, addressing the importance of education, and "repair[ing] th[e] world" (Metrolyrics.com, 2008). In comparison to using objectives that solely represent a democratic ideal such as spreading the rights to abortion, the promotion of gay rights, or removing the American troops from Iraq. The words on the screen are carefully selected to acknowledge current social worries and essentially encompass what the public wants to hear. However, the concepts shown do not necessarily mean anything by themselves, but only in what they imply: ideas like "hope" and "change." Hope for what? Change how (aside from political leaders)? The video never addresses what anyone is hoping for or what is going to change; merely it implies that Obama is the hope and will create the change, in such a way as it will fix all of the United States' problems.

All of these elements are presented through video in a way only video can convey. "Yes, We Can" uses the camera's medium to emphasize points that could not be made in any other medium. In the case of this political campaign, this advertisement uses the channel combination of auditory repetition combined with visual emphasis and effects, shown through websites that are extremely accessible to the public. The entire combination of media here is the message because it incorporates so many more persuasive factors than some people singing a song based on a speech would.

**Conclusion**

In recollection, four distinct communication theories best analyze the "Yes, We Can" video. Semiotic patterns devised and delivered by biased advertisers can be analyzed to uncover hidden agendas and techniques used to intentionally manipulate the viewers' perceptions. The Agenda-Setting theory demonstrates that this video, along with other political campaigns, influence the audience's perceptions towards a biased opinion provided by a media outlet. The Two-Step Flow Theory presents the idea that Will.i.am, as an opinion leader, obtains information from an impartial news source and shares a distorted version of the information with the audience to convey his own personal bias. His strong influence over his fans in particular and young audiences in general, makes for an especially persuasive campaign. Lastly, Medium Theory analyzes the use of video as a medium, how the messages presented by it are unique to video, and the influential effects of these elements.

Through analyzing the video "Yes, We Can," we were able to uncover substantial evidence that Will.i.am's video was not simply an impartial advertisement designed to raise voter awareness, but a privately funded campaign contribution. This substantiates that everything political, whether impartially based or not, is nonetheless biased to a degree. It is impossible not to be slanted towards one side or another because it is also impossible to ensure impartial information, whether in receiving or providing it. All information has to come from somewhere, and every time it is transferred, it is slightly altered or tailored to reflect the opinions of the courier. This is important because it emphasizes the influential powers of the

media as a whole, and raises awareness to look for hidden agendas in all news outlets and advertisements. As far as the expectations posed by the media are considered, the only question left is: now that Obama has won the election, can he?

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Billy Scott

*Year of the Frog*

Digital , 7.5" x 4"

# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Steffrie Akers

*Study in Charcoal*

Charcoal, 18" x 24"

# Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, Opus 49 (Original Scoring)

🌐 **noisywater.whatcom.edu**/site_0809/pages_0809/13essay.html

## Albert Clay

When I was young, I spent a fair part of my early adolescence fascinated with armed conflict, the space program, and the pyrotechnical devices used in those fields. Due to a series of misunderstandings the nature of which I am not able to quite reconstruct, I managed to conflate the father of Russian rocketry Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky with the Russian Romantic composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Sometime later, when I had realized that Tchaikovsky was not a great pioneer in astronautic theory but was simply an acclaimed composer, I realized how marvelously appropriate my confusion had been, particularly in context of the 1812 Overture's explosive ending. I have most often heard this work performed for the Fourth of July, its grand finale punctuated by sixteen cannon shots, and at times further accentuated by a fireworks display going off in time with the majestically bombastic coda. Ever since I first heard it performed by the Boston Pops for a Fourth of July, I have been intrigued and impressed by how the piece seems to tell a story through representative musical themes. In the next few pages, I will touch upon the historical background of the work and its composer, delineate the structural elements of the Overture, and share my own general analyses of the work.

Tchaikovsky was born May 7, 1840, in what is now the Russian republic of Udmurtia, and died November 6 1893, leading a life rather fraught with discord. For example, though he displayed musical talent at a young age, his parents decided that a career as a bureaucrat would be ideal for him, and enrolled him in a training academy for the civil service, which forced him to seek musical instruction from outside the school. He graduated from the school as the lowest possible rank of civil servant, and served a mere three years in the Russian bureaucracy before further pursuing musical instruction. This sort of not quite ideal path seemed to establish an ongoing pattern of not quite fitting. In many ways, Tchaikovsky's circumstances and career lead to him uneasily straddle parallel yet not quite congruent worlds, and this kind of torn and conflicted experience was a driving force in his artistic expression. As a Russian composer, trained at the cultural crossroads of St. Petersburg in its conservatory, he was strongly influenced by Western ideals. Although he was of Russia's musical elite due to his education by Anton Rubinstein and eventually became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, his own Russian contemporaries (known as the Five) found him to be far too Western and not sufficiently Russian enough. This is particularly ironic in how he is viewed today as quintessentially *the* Russian Romantic composer, as exemplified by the 1812 Overture (with its use of Russian folk songs and patriotic themes) and Swan Lake (derived from Russian folk-tales). Another source of conflict in his life was his homosexuality, which he attempted to conceal by engaging in a doomed loveless marriage with a student of his from the Moscow Conservatory, a marriage which ended

unconsummated and in short order. Given the social mores and laws of Russia, which frowned upon homosexuality, Tchaikovsky's own emotional lability (as demonstrated by the strong emotional content of his music), and his lack of true acceptance by his own Russian peers, this would seem to indicate that Tchaikovsky was a man that walked a conflicted path. However, in the end, his efforts on behalf of Russian music were recognized and he was given the Order of St. Vladimir by Tsar Nicholas III, which more than symbolically gave him the royal stamp of approval.

Originally commissioned as a work to be presented for consecration of the Cathedral of the Saviour in Moscow (which was constructed in honor of the liberation of the Russia from the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte) which required the work to be populist and patriotic, and by all measure, the 1812 Overture certainly qualifies.  Instead of being a dirge lugubriously mourning the horrific slaughter of the loss at the Battle of Borodino in 1812,  the Overture is rather a commemorative piece, full of fervor and vigor, which makes it seems like the aftermath of that battle was a grand Russian victory against the forces of Napoleon.  In actuality, the end result of the Battle of Borodino was a French pyrrhic victory in that the Russian forces retreated after a horrific mutual slaughter, preserving the integrity of their remaining badly mauled forces and opening the road to Moscow, which allowed the French to occupy the city. Considering that Moscow was then burnt to the ground, not providing any useful shelter or resources, caused the already logistically over-extended  French to be in an untenable position, thereby causing a very long retreat in the midst of the Russian winter, which caused the wasting away of the Napoleonic forces during the long, frigid, and bloody retreat. The Russians triumphed by attrition, having more troops available to lose during the long harrying of the French forces from Russia, and also due to the debilitating effects of the Russian winter upon the logistically cut off French army.  Tchaikovsky artfully conveyed the overall idea of a Russian victory in the face of great adversity by presenting the conflict in musical terms, with Russian themes in contrast to the French theme.

The piece opens somberly, with a small group of cellos playing, mournfully and somberly foreshadowing the slaughter to come. According to the liner notes, the music is derived from the hymn, *God Preserve Thy People,* which is quite apropos in light of the great conflict it is foreshadowing. It has a preemptive mourning quality, and is followed by what I believe is a plaintive sounding oboe which quickly segues into strings building up to bombastic horns, creating a theme I shall call the martial theme, building tension all the while. A descending line of strings follows, which quickly leads into   A snare drum beats out a martial rhythm while horns play a Russian military like theme (which felt to me like something that might be played whilst one is readying one's cavalry).  Another theme then appeared, driven by strings and also climbing upwards, like a gathering conflict.  The strings build up to another crescendo, which is then responded to by horns and drums playing a very powerful version of the Marseillaise, characterized by passages in which the horns play the first eight notes or so that melody, and repeat several times, before then playing those same notes and the subsequent ones. This interruption of the expected continuation of the Marseillaise very effectively builds in an expectation of tension. then trails off with repetitions of the same

starting notes in a descending pattern which by elision transforms into the greatly contrasting sound of strings gently playing what is most likely some sort of Russian folk song, that almost positively sparkles in its twee-ness and pastorality (and therefore contrasts very effectively with the aggressiveness of the Marseillaise) with the triangle tinkling away in the midst of it. It slowly declines, repeating itself and then via a repetition of a single note uses what seems to be elision again to into what I am considering to be a Cossack-like song, with jingling yet martial sounding bells, like the jangling of the metal-work upon a bridle and tack upon a troop of cavalry. Then the striving strings and horns appear again, turning in the Marseillaise again, which builds through repetition of the first measure or so, but then rising with rising triplets yet again to a clamorous peak, full of ardor and exultation of the French anthem, then declining into somberness and again transitioning gracefully into the delicate twee Russian folk ditty again. The graceful segue into the Cossack-like theme reappears again, with bells but strangely martial sounding at once. The clamor of the Marseillaise emerges yet again, sounding more strident and striving than before, building with a repeating pattern of 3 or 4 notes, with the feel of quick march or a charge into battle, then quickly punctuated by four cannon blasts, then declining with the repetition of approx four notes in a repeated descending pattern. This pattern here I believe is symbolic of the gradual wearing down of the French forces as they retreat. I may not be catching all of the themes used in this process, but the preceding portion may well be of at least a partial sonata-allegro form, with the theme one of the Marseillaise, followed by the theme 2 of the Russian pastoral melodies, repeated, and this final portion as a combination development leading into a coda. As the Marseillaise declines, the theme from early on I termed the martial theme triumphantly reappears, liberally strewn with the pealing of bells, bells rung as if they were church bells rung in celebration of a grand victory, the Marseillaise is quoted once more briefly, before the triumphant Russian cavalry theme crashes to the fore, punctuated with cannon fire after I believe the fourth repetition, and then after each until, culminating in a crescendo of triumphant fervor (that seems to go on and on) and closing finally with rolling drums and horns stopping at once.

It is not at all surprising why this is such a popular piece, in my opinion. It has a very stirring, emotional quality, that readily lends itself to popular enjoyment even without knowledge of what the work actually means, hence its popularity for Fourth of July celebrations. The use of the strong contrast between the opposing themes, the brassiness of the Marseillaise contrasted against the gentle nature of the folk songs gives an impression of noble resistance against an aggressor. The triumphant Russian cavalry is gaudily celebratory and is quite inspiring. The use of the repeated groups of three or four notes either downwards or upwards also seems to be a particularly effective way of giving an emotional roller coaster ride to the listener.

The version of the performance that I used conducted by Antal Dorati, performed in the University of Minnesota's Northrop Auditorium by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and University of Minnesota Brass Band on April 5, 1958. This performance was designed to be as faithful as possible to Tchaikovsky's original conception of the work. The cannon fire

was added in post-production, as were the Bells of the Laura Spelman Memorial Carillon (The Riverside Church), due to the geographic considerations that the cannon and carillon were not transportable for use in Northrup itself nor would it be practical to do so. Interestingly enough, the cannon used was an actual 12 pound siege cannon courtesy of the Museum of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The poundage actually refers to the weight of the standard cast-iron ball projectile that could be fired from the gun, as the weight of the cannon itself is 3180 pounds. This cannon punctuated the piece very well in that it actually has a deeper sound than that of the more usual variety of cannon used on the battlefield, the more maneuverable six pound cannon (commonly known as a grasshopper), and was also historically accurate considering that it was originally a french artillery piece of that very era. From a performance standpoint, the 12 pounder used in this performance has a more resonant feel to it than the usual 105 mm howitzers used in performances by the Boston Pops. This is due to the slower burning nature (and relative crudity)of gunpowder in comparison to the much faster burning propellant used in a modern artillery round which produces a sharper sound.   Also, a modern artillery piece is constructed of much thinner materials, whilst a cannon of the Napoleonic era is seemingly far more sturdy looking in its construction, which may further contribute a more booming sound. The venue itself is one at which I have attended a few musical events, and I can testify to its acoustic qualities, regardless of what style of music was being played, considering that I heard Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie of folk music fame there, and also the whimsical Southern-fried party rock stylings of the B-52s. Not having heard any symphonic type productions there personally, I can not testify to how the venue might react to that sort of sound, but the recording certainly produced a crisp and rich sound.

The Overture was initially played on a Macbook playing loss-lessly encoded music files transferred from the CD, from which the audio was transferred to a fairly high-fidelity stereo setup with disproportionately large speakers for the listening session. After the complaints about the volume, which apparently was not inconsiderable, the music was replayed on an iPod also using the loss-lessly encoded files for maximum fidelity, using studio-grade headphones, in an effort to maintain the integrity of the listening experience.

# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

🌐 **noisywater.whatcom.edu**/site_0809/pages_0809/14art.html



Getch Poole

*GeePee*

Digital art, 8" x 7"

# Grendel's Mother: A New Light on a Dark Figure

## Robin J. Henley

I read "Beowulf" eagerly, trying to understand the poetry and relate sections to each other and yet I came away with more questions than I answered. What was the original story before the Christian aspects were added, what histories could be referred to in reinterpreting certain passages, and the one thing that bothered me most for weeks-what or who is Grendel's Mother?

First off, she needs a name because she deserves a name. I am betting at some point in the story's oral tradition she had a name and represented a much less mysterious (though possibly more supernatural) being. If I am going to write about her, I'm going to do so seriously and without dim or dismissive titles-from here on out, she is Hulda.

I read other translations of "Beowulf," and while the characterizations of Hrothgar and Beowulf seemed consistent within all of the versions I read, Hulda's characterizations varied. Translations, in my opinion, must always be read with a grain of salt as the translator often lets biases show through. Indeed the majority of the text's translations are prone to these biases thanks to a handful of 19th century scholars.

So I found a barebones translation, and I was surprised at what I found.

"Ides aglæcwyif" is used to describe Hulda ("Beowulf," 1258-59) and early scholars translated this phrase as "a monster woman," or "a monstrous ogress," and "the demon's mother." (Alfano, 2) Actually, when the root aglæc is used in other situations of Old English texts, it refers to a warrior "who goes in search of his enemy...an attacker," (Alfano, 5) and is used in this text to describe Beowulf, Sigemund, and the Dragon. In the three times the word is used to refer to Grendel's mother, once is retranslated as "a monster woman" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1258-59).

Even in David Allen's translation, Hulda is described in similar terms when Hrothgar tells Beowulf "look in...that dreadful dale where the she-demon dwells" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1221-1222). Why the discrepancy? Who knows, but I will use the term as it's interpreted for Beowulf and the other fighters. "Ides aglæcwif" translated as "woman warrior."

Once I had that in mind, Hulda's actions made better sense to me, and shed light on her motivations in the text.

As a warrior, Hulda also follows the Anglo-Saxon heroic code. The code consists of bravery, loyalty, and generosity. A warrior is willing to go to battle for his liege and kinsmen, and believes in a social order that requires an eye for an eye, tit for tat. In the first section of the

text, Beowulf seeks revenge for the death of the Danes of Heorot, as well as his own stature as a brave warrior, in living up to this code.

So when Grendel is slain by Beowulf, Hulda, as a warrior and mother in mourning, seeks revenge for her son's death, and this is reiterated in her later battle with Beowulf-"[A]straddle the hall guest, she drew her dagger, bent on avenging her only offspring" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1269-1271). She went to Heorot to reap her vengeance in kind, and chose the most beloved member in the hall-King Hrothgar's right arm and friend, Aeschere. She kills him, takes her trophies, recovers her son's arm, and leaves the hall.

When Hulda get back to her watery home, she does with her bloody trophy what the fierce Danes did with their trophies-hangs it high in her hall. She hangs Aeschere's head above the mere-"every soldier was stricken at heart to behold on that height Aeschere's head "(Beowulf," Allen, 1259-1260). She also has taken a sword and shield, which is also something the warriors, including Beowulf, had done in their own ventures, and as Scyld Scefing, an ancestor of Hrothgar had also done-"Ambushed enemies, took their mead-benches, mastered their troops" ("Beowulf," Allen, 5-6).

When Beowulf goes to battle the Warrior Woman of the mere, and he swims deep into the lake, Hulda sees him-"she glimpsed a creature come from above and crept up to catch him" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1329-1330). She does not wait for him to get to her-she shows her courage by going to him.

The fight shows some interesting physical characteristics of Hulda. While Beowulf and Grendel's mater struggle, Beowulf finds she is stronger than Grendel. She may not have been the resentful, psychotic, murderous monster her son was, and had not killed dozens without honor, but it is because she operates with a different code-the warrior's code. She fights when challenged, or revenge is required. Grendel was truly monstrous and did not fight fairly, and had to be trapped. Hulda took her revenge in kind and no more, and when challenged by Beowulf, meets him directly in the mere on equal footing.

Hulda's strength becomes apparent when Beowulf cannot kill her. The sword Hrunting cannot pierce her flesh, "He swung his sword for a swift stroke...the whorled blade whistled its war-song, but the battle-flame failed to bite her" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1346-1349). He then tries to kill her with his bare hands, and he discovers that she is even stronger than Grendel-he cannot tear her limb from limb, and she gains the better of him (he even fears his own death): "[w]ith her grim grasp she grappled him still...weary, the warrior stumbled and slipped; the strongest foot-soldier fell to the foe" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1364-1366).

Hulda would've killed Beowulf except for the fine chainmail he wears-"[h]is chainmail shielded shoulder and breast...the woven war-shirt saved him from harm" ("Beowulf," Allen, 1370-1374). At the point she would've killed the Geatish warrior, he is saved by divine intervention-"but for armor and Heaven's favor furnishing help"("Beowulf," Allen, 1376-

1177). He sees "in a hoard of ancient arms a battle blessed sword with strong-edged blade... forged by giants of old," and with that charmed weapon is able to kill the woman warrior ("Beowulf," Allen, 1379-1384).

Hulda is certainly a bereaved mother ("maddened by grief"), and acts within the warrior's code in dealing with the death of her son. There is no champion to serve her-who could or would? She does it herself and within the rules of the Anglo-Saxon culture. While she is described as an enemy, she has done nothing that is outside the bounds of the warrior code. She acts with all of the moral sense any of Danes or Geats have. She is within the boundaries. But she killed a beloved friend of the king of the Danes, and so she is an enemy, and the only response for Beowulf was to seek revenge. There is a touch of tragedy here.

She's damned if she does, and damned if she doesn't.

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Further Readings

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Rachel Comchoc

*Dada Collage*

Mixed media, 8" x 10"

# Mexican American Women: Culturally Competent Nursing Care to Promote Physical Activity

## Hillary Straatman

### Abstract

Low levels of physical activity are common among Mexican American women, and they suffer from disproportionately high rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and non-insulin dependent diabetes. Because regular physical activity is associated with decreased rates of chronic disease, nurses can positively impact the health of this population by promoting exercise. Cultural factors play a central role in determining activity patterns in Mexican American women, and understanding these factors will enable the nurse to provide culturally competent care. By incorporating cultural beliefs and values when developing and implementing interventions, nurses can reduce the health disparities seen in this population.

### Introduction

Regular physical activity is associated with a reduction in hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, colon cancer, and all-cause mortality. To maintain and promote health, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days. Low physical activity levels are common among women and ethnic minority groups in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Mexican American women are of particular concern, as they have the highest inactivity level when compared to Black and non-Hispanic White females (Guinn & Vincent, 2008). The prevalence of obesity, non-insulin dependent diabetes, and cardiovascular disease is also higher among this population (Lopez, Bryant, & McDermott, 2008).

Research shows that cultural beliefs and values regarding family, gender roles, and religion influence activity levels of Mexican American women (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2008; Eggenberger, Grassley, & Restrepo, 2006). Participation may also be affected by cultural perceptions that exercise is a prescriptive therapy rather than a health promotion behavior (Berg, Cromwell, & Arnett, 2002). Nurses who honor these cultural views and incorporate them into interventions will be more effective in promoting physical activity among Mexican American women. By providing culturally competent care, nurses can positively influence activity patterns and improve the overall health of this population.

### Methods

Peer-reviewed literature searches of the EBSCO and Medline databases were performed using the keywords Mexican American, women, Hispanic, Latina, physical activity, exercise, adolescents, nursing, and nurse. The Goggle Scholar search engine, as well as the Medscape

and United States Department of Health and Human Services websites were also searched using the same keywords.

**Discussion**

*Knowledge*

For the purposes of this paper, Mexican American women are defined as American women who are of Mexican national origin. Because cultural factors influence activity patterns in this population, understanding cultural beliefs and values will be helpful when planning nursing care. Mexican American culture embraces *familism*, a value that places family needs above individual needs, and women tend to pattern their behavior around themes of family and gender expectations. Women are seen as the force that holds the family together, and traditional roles include cleaning, cooking and caring for children, grandchildren, and extended family (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2008; Eggenbeger et al, 2006). Being physically present is a necessity, and the structure of daily life is often driven by these family responsibilities. In fulfilling gender roles, Mexican American women put family needs first, and little time may be left over for exercise. Approval and motivation from all family members is important, and women are unlikely to participate in physical activity unless they think it will benefit the family unit (Berg et al, 2002).

Male gender roles can also influence activity patterns. Mexican American women may value *mariaism*, a cultural belief in which women are submissive to their husbands and patriarchal authority is favored. If a woman's husband is disapproving or she feels that exercise will make her less available for him, she may not take part (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2008).

Physical activity patterns may also be affected by belief in Roman Catholicism, the predominant religion of Mexican American culture. Some authors suggest that many Mexican American women have an external locus-of-control regarding health status because they believe that God's will controls everything. Individuals with an external locus-of-control are less likely to participate in health promoting activities such as exercise, because they don't believe that health outcomes are in their control (Eggenberger et al, 2006).

Research shows that many Mexican American women view exercise as rehabilitative or restorative rather than preventative. Notions that current behaviors can positively affect future health outcomes are not consistent with Mexican American's cultural view of health (Cromwell & Berg, 2006). Physical activity is therefore seen as a prescriptive treatment for an identified health issue, but may not be valued for health promotion. These beliefs may contribute to lower activity levels in this population, as women are less likely to take part if they have no identified health problems (Berg et al, 2002).

There are additional cultural factors that nurses must consider when working to promote physical activity among Mexican American women. The cultural values of *respeto* and *simpatía* (respect and congeniality) should be used to guide communication with clients and

families. Nurses can honor *respeto* and *simpatía* by using social greetings, providing care in an unhurried manner, demonstrating a willingness to listen, and incorporating the client's beliefs into the treatment plan (Padilla & Villalobos, 2007). By engaging in small talk about the family or community before providing care, the nurse develops a sense of *personalismo* or becomes friend-like with the individual and family. Developing *personalismo* builds trust and forms *confianza* or mutual reciprocity, which ultimately leads to improved health outcomes (Zoucha & Broome, 2008). Because physical activity may not be viewed as a priority in Mexican American culture, gaining trust and respect is important to enhance the efficacy of future interventions.

**Discussion**

*Application*

Nurses can apply cultural knowledge when working to promote physical activity in Mexican American women. A comprehensive assessment will be necessary before developing further interventions, because individual factors including age, acculturation, and personal views will affect each woman's perspective. Asking questions about perceived benefits and barriers, past and current exercise patterns, and ideas about acceptable and enjoyable forms of exercise will provide valuable information (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2008). Using this information to create client specific interventions will lead to better outcomes.

Much of the research shows family and gender role commitments to be a primary cause of sedentary lifestyles in Mexican American women. Knowing this information, nurses may come up with interventions that are framed within the context of family. Nurses can help the woman identify activities that do not interfere with care giving, and suggest activities that involve family members and can be done at home (Berg et al, 2002). Compliance may also be increased by encouraging women to view exercise as a means to becoming healthier and hence better able to care for family (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2008).

Including family members when teaching about the about the benefits of physical activity will improve outcomes. This may be especially true of the husband, being that the male is often dominant and in charge of health care decision-making (Eggenberger et al, 2006). If family members understand that the health of the woman will positively affect the overall health of the family, they are more likely to value physical activity. Knowledge about the benefits of exercise will lead them to be more supportive of the woman's efforts, and increase the chance that they will participate along with her (Berg et al, 2002).

Developing nursing interventions that honor a woman's religious views may also result in better outcomes. If a woman believes that God has control over her health status, the nurse can work collaboratively with the community church to promote physical activity (Eggenberger et al, 2006). Churches may be used as effective sites for publicizing and holding physical activity programs, and recruiting participants. Women are more likely to extend their time at church to participate then to making separate time for exercise, and the

implied support of the church is a motivator for participation (Berg et al, 2002). Incorporating physical activity into church events will encourage family involvement, which also provides incentive to take part (Cromwell & Berg, 2006).

Nurses who consider that health promotion is not consistent with the traditional Mexican American cultural view of health are able to better design interventions. Women may be less receptive to interventions that are framed as self-care, and more receptive to those put in the context of treatment (Berg et al, 2002). Identifying and providing education about specific health issues can increase compliance with a physical activity program; for example, the woman with hypertension will be more likely to exercise if the nurse explains that exercise can lower blood pressure. Because culture is dynamic and acculturation levels will vary among women, nurses should assess each individual's view of health and encourage exercise for health promotion when appropriate.

It is also important that nurses recognize and suggest culturally appropriate activities when promoting exercise. One study determined that gardening and walking are preferred leisure activities of Mexican American women (Wood, 2004). These activities require little cost, and can be done at or close to home with other family members. Dance, tai chi, and yoga are also culturally acceptable, and are beneficial for their ability to increase strength, balance, flexibility, mobility, and aerobic capacity (Cromwell & Berg, 2006). Nurses can help the woman identify types of exercise she prefers, and work with her to develop a plan to incorporate it into her daily routine.

Outside the clinic or hospital setting, nurses may promote physical activity in the community by working collaboratively with lay health advisors, also known as *promotoras*. Because they have an intimate understanding of their community's sociocultural background, experiences, challenges, and strengths, *promotoras* are in a unique position to provide peer education. One study, which included mostly women of Mexican heritage, used lay health advisors to deliver messages about the importance of physical activity among other topics. Significant increases in participants' physical activity levels were seen after three classes, suggesting that *promotoras* have a positive health-promoting influence among Mexican American women (Kim, Koniak-Griffin, Flaskerud & Guarnero, 2004). Nurses can play an integral role in this type of community based approach by organizing the outreach programs and recruiting and training the lay health advisors. By working closely with one another, nurses and *promotoras* can effectively generate educational materials that are linguistically and culturally relevant to Mexican American women.

Low rates of physical activity are also seen among adolescent Mexican American females, and studies show that this group has disproportionally higher rates of inactivity and obesity than its non-Hispanic white counterpart (Grieser, Neumark-Sztainer, Saksvig, Lee, Felton, & Kubik, 2008). Because lifelong activity patterns are influenced by habits developed in earlier years (Cromwell & Berg, 2006), it is important to promote the value of exercise in this adolescent population. It has been noted that cultural factors contribute to low physical activity rates in these girls, and adolescents in one study reported lack family support as a

reason for decreased participation (Grieser et al, 2008). Based on this information, many of the previously mentioned nursing interventions could positively influence activity levels among adolescents. If women and families participate in regular exercise, they may be more likely to support and encourage the same behavior in their adolescent. Additionally, healthy activity patterns in women may be passed down to their adolescent daughters as learned behaviors.

School nurses can also promote physical activity in Mexican American adolescents by working collaboratively with educators. Research shows that Mexican American girls perceive less social support for physical activity from teachers and boys at school than non-Hispanic white girls. Support in this environment is crucial since adolescents spend much of their time at school, and school is where opportunities for exercise such as physical education and sports are available (Grieser et al, 2008). Nurses can educate staff on the importance of both encouraging Mexican American girls to participate in physical education and organized sports, and modeling appropriate and enjoyable activities. Working together with physical education teachers to develop peer-led activity groups during gym class will be beneficial, as these groups are shown to increase moderate and vigorous activity levels among this population (Frenn & Malin, 2003).

Interventions used to increase physical activity among Mexican American women can also be applied when working with women of Asian and African American cultures. These cultures are similar in that they all value the centrality of family, and women are usually the primary care givers (Hahn, 2003). Framing interventions within the context of family and including family members in teaching may therefore enhance activity patterns among Asian and African American women. Research shows that these women respond well to congregational health programs, so working collaboratively with community churches will also be effective to promote physical activity in these groups (Hahn, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Mexican Americans suffer from disproportionately high rates of chronic health issues such as obesity, non-insulin dependent diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Lopez et al, 2008). Regular physical activity reduces the risk of chronic disease, moderates related complications, and improves the overall health of the individual. Very low physical activity levels are seen among Mexican American women, and they are the least likely to participate when compared to Black and non-Hispanic White women (Guinn & Vincent, 2008). Understanding and applying cultural knowledge will allow the nurse to better promote physical activity when working with this population. By honoring cultural values and beliefs and viewing them as strengths upon which to build interventions, nurses will provide culturally competent care that reduces the health disparities seen in Mexican American women.

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Daniel Noonan

*Avocado*

Digital art, 7.5" x 10"

# In Defense of Sherman Alexie: Taking Ownership of Stereotypes

## Michael Dalavaccio

Besides having a reputation of selling out, Native American author Sherman Alexie is considered difficult to get along with. Sherman Alexie is controversial both in his home culture and in the US at large. The films *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, both adapted from Alexie's written works, display Alexie's ability to tell a story and share his view of modern Indian culture while at the same time attracting an audience which would not normally listen. If he were offering the usual cinematic stereotypes, and speaking of the magical qualities of his life, and how his only problems have been holding onto tradition in a world of change, Alexie would neither be so amazing or so well beloved. Neither would he be so detested. In a world where people commonly take the path to greatest gain and abandon principles for greed, it is impossible for minority artists to escape the insinuation that they have abandoned their culture for personal gain. Yet one can not teach without gaining the trust and willing participation of an ignorant audience. Therefore, Alexie should not be discarded as an "Uncle Tomahawk" (110 Meyer), but rather as a necessary figure in the continuing struggle for minority rights.

Sherman Alexie is unusual for an American film maker. In both films made from his work, he has made an effort to hire Indian actors and technical crew, insisting later that there were "No Italians with long hair" involved (Rolling Stone). *Smoke Signals* was directed by Chris Eyre, an award-winning director and film maker. The film was received well by the general population, and received nine awards and six nominations from various film festivals (IMDB). *The Business of Fancydancing*, directed by Alexie himself, was the winner of six awards which had little if anything to do with Native American groups. By winning mainstream awards through making a distinctively modern story of Indian life, as well as hiring mostly native actors and crew, Alexie forged breakthroughs for many Native Americans which might otherwise never have existed. Yet controversy exists with his treatment of his heritage.

Critics have accused Alexie of ensuring that stereotypes of Native Americans as unemployed alcoholics will never die by creating a film centered around the effects of alcoholism. *Smoke Signals* is the story of Victor Joseph, a young Coeur D'Alene man who must take a journey to the last resting place of his father, as well as come to terms with his heritage and past. He and his companions Thomas-Builds-The-Fire must travel to Phoenix, Arizona in order to collect the older man's remains and an old truck. Though it is only implied as a possibility in the book, in the film Victor learns the reason that Arnold, his father had disappeared many years ago. Guilt over having caused the fire which resulted in the deaths of Thomas' parents and

nearly killed Victor had overwhelmed him, eventually driving him to flee. Due to his father's drunkenness, and the general prevalence of alcohol abuse that Victor has seen, Victor professes with pride that he has never touched a drop of alcohol in his life.

Despite the well deserved complaints about common Indian portrayal in film, Alexie should not be cast off so easily as an unprincipled author and director seeking to exploit modern stereotypes. Alexie speaks of problems he experienced in his own childhood, or has taken from the experiences of others. According to an article by the Rolling Stone website, "Alexie risks pissing off the PC cavalry as he explores the humor and heartbreak of being young and Indian and living on a reservation ('the rez') at the end of the twentieth century" (Rolling stone). In this case, the 'PC cavalry' refers not only to relatively uninvolved outsiders wishing to ensure rights for others, but also tribes across the US, including his own. By speaking of problems which actually exist upon reservations, such as widespread unemployment and alcoholism, within the context of a compelling story, Alexie takes ownership of the issues. Though it is unfortunate that modern Indians have been led to such problems by fate and ill-treatment at the hands of a hostile foreign government, the current problems will not go away by being ignored. In order to prevent one's story from being co-opted by unwanted forces, one must tell it without pretense.

Though Alexie was not the first to tell stories of modern Indian life, he has told them from his own perspective without sanitizing them beyond all recognition. *Smoke Signals*, well received by critics and film-goers, tells a heart warming coming of age story, and rightly belongs within the road trip genre. Yet it gives in to western ideas of storytelling, and offers the happy ending which Americans are so noted for desiring. In the end, Victor Joseph has come to know that his father loved him, and returns home presumably to resume life within his culture as he should have done all along. Though stereotypes are removed, relatively few are explored in depth in favor of telling the story of a young man in search of himself. As a universal story, it speaks to those who have been estranged from loved ones, and rests upon its own merit. In particular, Thomas-Builds-The-Fire's speech at the end about how to forgive fathers offers what American audience has come to expect: Wisdom pulled from native histories that are whispered with dearest reverence, and suitably placed upon placards and postcards for consumption. Despite a scene where typical film interpretations of natives are explored, involving Victor and Thomas speaking of how best to deal with white people, immediately afterward putting their beliefs into play with two hostile older white men on the bus ride up to Phoenix, these myths are not utterly obliterated.

The film version of *The Business of Fancydancing* performs much better as an introduction into modern Indian culture, as well as offering other minorities the spotlight. Jokes and references which will be utterly missed by the unfamiliar are offered without explanation or apology. In essence, it is a film for members of the minority communities themselves to enjoy, rather than seeking applause from the general viewing public. During the rituals which follow the death of the talented violinist character Mouse, Agnes Roth, the former girlfriend of Polatkin, performs various spiritual activities. When she reads foreign words from a book,

many will assume that ancient native incantations are being offered. Jewish individuals will recognize the language of ancient Hebrew, however. As with the shawl dance, the knowledge that Roth is both Indian and Jewish offers a simple yet complex description of the duality of modern native lifestyles. The audio commentary reveals removed material involving a female Unitarian minister falling in love with Mouse, the childhood friend of Polatkin who has recently died. Unitarians have a reputation for appropriation of religious cultures, similar to the reputation the white, middle class members of Polatkin's audience would have. In particular, cases involving time honored rituals being used in an improper manner and performed by unqualified individuals has shown a lack of understanding and respect by some Unitarians for the cultures from which the rituals were taken. While such judgments can not necessarily be verified as more than opinion, the idea of a person so committed to tolerance that they would become involved with a person of another ethnic group, literally proving their love for their fellow man, is a gentle way of pointing out the limits of tolerance when true understanding are lacking.

In addition to race and religion based cultures, the film also explores the scrutinized culture of both celebrities and authors, many of whom live in both worlds. In a scene where Polatkin signs his books for adoring and most likely pretentious fans, he is the only person heard to speak. He offers platitudes and answers well-intentioned but utterly ignorant and assumptive questions. The viewer can infer the general cliche of a person Polatkin is speaking with based upon the answers he offers. Outright lies which conform to pre-ordained ideas are told with a charming smile. Additionally Polatkin speaks to a symbolic interviewer, who also asks questions of other characters, eventually replying with anger to increasingly callous and dismissive questions. In this way, Alexie has offered insight into the world of writers, minorities and the daily politics of conversation, as well as showing how these intertwine together.

*The Business of Fancydancing* is also well rounded in its subtle approach to gay themes. The credits open with the main character, Seymour Polatkin, performing a women's shawl dance. Those who are unfamiliar with native dances will most likely see nothing strange about this particular activity, yet those who are knowledgeable receive a strong symbol which deepens when Polatkin's sexuality is offered to the audience. Though Polatkin does write of his experiences as a gay Indian male, the gay culture is utterly lacking in the film. His interactions with others are limited to scenes with his boyfriend, the Indians on the reservation, and his mostly white, middle class audiences. Though a dance club is present in one scene, it is not necessarily a gay or straight club. Whereas many films portray characters as gay by association, Polatkin's sexuality is normalized as merely another facet of his character. It is not incidental to his life story, yet he is not defined by it. While also lacking in the typical angst-ridden coming out story, *The Business of Fancidancing* also offers insight into the role race plays in the gay community. While the absence of typical gay themes may seem to say nothing of gay culture, Polatkin's lack of involvement speaks volumes about the lack of racial diversity in representations of queer life.

Though all the cultures presented in *The Business of Fancydancing* may seem incongruous to one another, their presence all mixed together provides another often ignored idea. Though Native Americans have preserved their culture as much as they could manage, there are many who belong to other cultures as well. Alexie deftly and unapologetically announces that one may be native and gay, or Jewish, or an eminent poet, or any other combination of cultures. During the audio commentary track of *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie describes the precarious place which the film holds. A friend is cited as stating that the film will be "too white for Indians, too Indian for white people, and too gay for everybody" (*The Business of Fancydancing*). By offering a cross-section of cultures, Alexie endeavors to remove the small boxed-in area which Indians and other minorities have often been placed into, and introduces the freedom of choice. Furthermore, the choice to leave or to stay, or to take part in other cultures, is given respect.

Racism and intolerance are current buzzwords for the lack of understanding of large groups, which precludes the understanding of individuals. The controversy of Sherman Alexie and his works is not merely about the representation in the works themselves. Alexie himself represents the personal and self-enclosed struggle of breaking away from an unwanted set of ignorant obstructions only to find more waiting. Old misconceptions are slow to die, even as minority groups gain ground and find stronger voices of representation. Individuals capable of pointing out lingering fallacies and stereotypes are all the more necessary at this stage, as majority groups begin to take interest in the uncorrected opinions of minority figures, and minority individuals increasingly seek out lives of their own design. As Alexie hearkens back to the past with his portrayal of common thought and stereotype, interspersed with compelling story and filmmaking, he also presses forward to ease the passage of the disenfranchised into the future.

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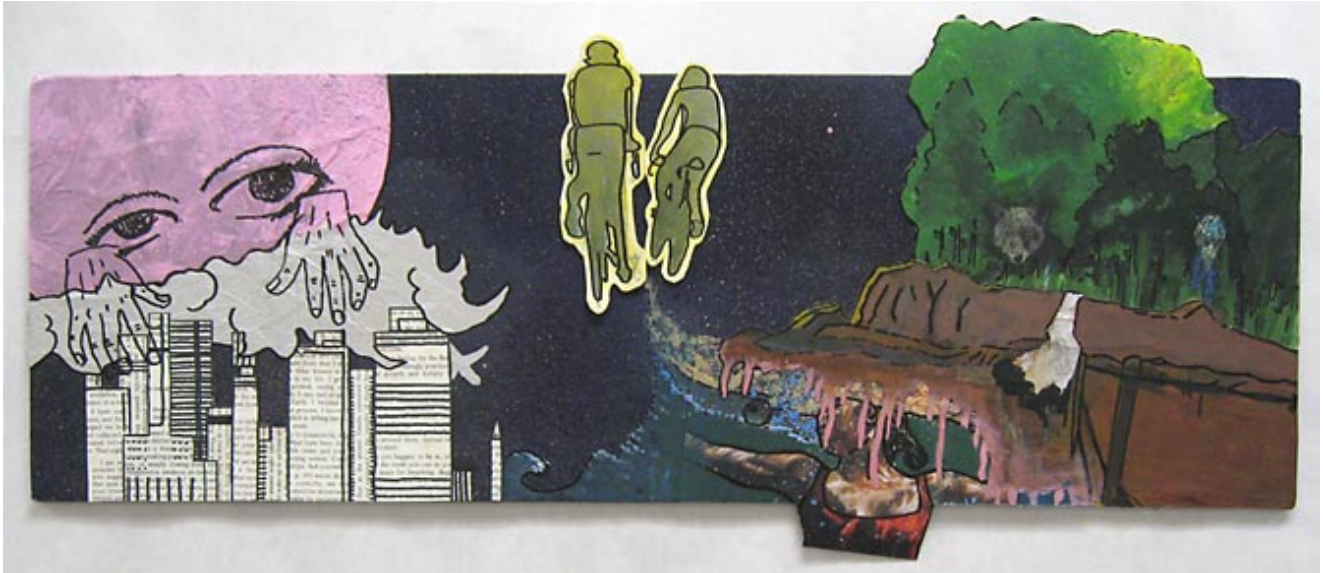
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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Sanja Pisker

*There Is An Objective In Every Late Night Ride*

Mixed media, 24.5" by 8.5"

# Why is Big Brother Watching and What the Hell Does He Want: The Place For Dystopian Novels in Our Society

## Sarah Rice-McDaniel

"Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress toward more pain"(Orwell 220). This is the world that Winston experienced in George Orwell's *1984*, a world of surveillance, fear, control, and loss of freedoms. In this world there was little hope. Is our society like this? There seems to be no concrete answer to that question but there are elements of dystopian society all around us, from ATM cameras to banned book lists. The question then to be asked, is why the fixation on dystopian elements in our artistic outlets? What do we gain from it? There is a long history of these artistic outlets from George Orwell's *1984* to novels like Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. With as far reaching as dystopian elements are in our well-known novels there must be a reason? First, before questions about the role of the novels themselves are asked, definitions will need be clarified.

A dystopia is essentially a utopia gone horribly wrong. A utopia is basically a perfectly harmonious society. Another definition is that "a dystopian society is one in which the conditions of life are miserable, characterized by human misery, poverty, oppression, violence, disease, and/or pollution"(Dystopia1). Specifically, there is also, surveillance, control and loss of freedoms as well as the component that in dystopias, there is also commonly a character who we can identify with that is being watched, chased down, persecuted, demoralized, and sometimes killed or made docile through drugs or surgery. So we have a society that is controlling and chasing down progressively/different minded people.

Utopian elements dove tail wonderfully with the ideas that Michele Foucault brings up in his essay *Panopticism*. In Foucault's essay he posits that Jeremy Bentham's Plan of the Panopticon is a pragmatic model of discipline. The Panoptic model can be best explained with the idea of a building. The building would be circular with individual cells and in the center would be the tower. The tower could see into each cell but in the cells the prisoners could not see into the tower. The building individualizes the person, makes ultimate isolation. The person in the cell can always been seen and heard but can never see or hear the person observing them. The panoptic machine when running correctly should be self sustaining, simply because if the prisoners always believe they are being watched they will not see any opportunity to step outside of the machine. People police themselves in order to

avoid the real police, knowing they could be surveilled at any time. It is the power of fear and the idea of ever watching eyes that lead to a efficient model of discipline. In our lives the panoptic model is not confined to a building but is applicable to our society as a whole.

All three of our original elements are present in both Panopticism and Dystopian theory, those being surveillance, control and loss of freedoms. The goal of both is power. Whoever is in the tower of the panopticon, whoever is "Big Brother" is trying to carefully keep control of his/her power. These elements previously stated are also present in our daily lives in one way or another. As previously mentioned we have things like ATM cameras, banned books, GPS devices, phone tapping, the list could go on. Control and loss of freedoms are dependent on perceptions but even in the most conservative estimates we can see them somewhere in our lives, whether necessary or not. The feeling of being controlled also comes when we realize we have been trained as a society to perform in certain ways. We just know we are expected to go to school for at least twelve years in training to go to work for the rest of our lives. Through societal pressures we can feel sameness pushing in on us forcing us to conform to a general idea of everything from ideologies to moral ideals. All of these things tend to lead to frustration among people who become aware of it, and the more people dwell upon it, the more frustrating it can become. But art has often been seen as an outlet for people. So how do we as a people release some of our tensions over these fears. One way is through the writing and reading of dystopian novels.

One of the most famous dystopian novels is *1984*, it is the ultimate dystopian society. It coined the phrase "Big Brother is Watching"! In George Orwell's *1984*, a totalitarian government rules over the make believe territory Oceania which encompasses London. Winston, the protagonist of the story, is working within the system but begins to feel unrest and seeks to join the rebellion. He eventually is tricked by a double agent, captured, and tortured. The story is filled with surveillance. We get a sense of the desolate world ruled by invisible and often random surveillance of individuals, much like in "Panopticism." As the narrator writes, "there was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everyone all the time"(6). This shows us that even at the beginning of the novel the reader is introduced to a sense of chocking restriction. There are even more examples of control of the people through the invented language of the novel. Doublespeak is the use of language to misrepresent and twist a message. One instance of this in the novel is when Winton sees the governments slogan on a sign. It reads, "WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (7). These examples are of course extreme, but often it is not so hard to link them to our current lives, keeping in mind the past examples used.

Another dystopian novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry is a children's book filled with similar themes found in 1984. The main character Jonas seems to live in a utopia, no pain, nobody out of place. One example of the sameness is that nobody calls out unique differences in others, Jonas talks about how his sister Lilly was teasing him for having an unusual color of

eyes, "No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Lilly, he decided would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her behavior" (20) Sameness is not only the normal behavior; abnormal is embarrassing. An ultimate form of control is to take unique traits away or make them abnormal. But as the novel goes on and Jonas is chosen for the job of holding all of the past memories being hidden from the community, he learns what has been withheld in the name of Utopia. Color, music, joy, and pain are all withheld in order to achieve sameness. This leads Jonas to leave the community for a better life. This is where the book is revealed to be a dystopia. If it was a utopia there would be little reason to leave.

Books reflect society. They hold our ideas, fears, and voices. So what does that mean for the dystopian? The major role of dystopian novel seems to be to allow us to have an awareness of fears. To see what societies can live up to if not governed by an aware populous. In many of the novels including *1984* there is a lower class or a controlled class. In the case of *1984* the lower class is named the "Proles" (Orwell 71). They are uneducated and living in poverty. There is a similar situation in *The Giver* where rather than poverty there is lack of choice or control. All the children are carefully controlled and jobs are chosen for them. These instances can teach of lessons and inform us of things to be mindful of. When we have an uneducated largely poor populous it can be harder to fight the powers controlling the society. In part of Foucault's essay "Panopticism," there is an example that might help explain why we should be wary of the powers that be trying to expand our lower class. He explains that the point is to, "Treat 'leapers' as 'plague victims,' project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment…to individualize the excluded" (212). The point of the control, of the segmentation and distinction, is to hold power through discipline. There is also the example with lack of choice for the children in *The Giver* for their future job, all of it is chosen for them. When choices are taken away from us we lose our power. They want us docile and unaware. A backlash of us thinking about these complicated problems presented in dystopian novels is paranoia. People reading science fiction and dystopian novels can begin to become frustrated and paranoid believing they are stuck in a dystopian society. But that essentially brings the problem full circle. If we allow ourselves to become obsessed and paranoid then we are as paralyzed as someone who doesn't know about the problem at all. If we cannot move and be free within the system no matter the reason we are not solving anything. So, then, what next?

There are ways to combat the panoptic models and dystopian elements we can see in our lives. We can look at the work of french philosopher Michel de Certeau. Certeau was a philosopher who thought and wrote on social and cultural studies and was well known for his novel *The Practice of Everyday Life*. *The Practice of Everyday Life* was an answer to the idea that we are stuck in the power machine (call it panopticism/dystopias), but while it acknowledges those forces, Certeau proclaims that we are not without options. He goes on to talk about "strategies and tactics." Tactics are ways we can create space for ourselves within the power structure of our society. Strategies are what the powers in charge use to keep the

society in order. Strategies like surveillance, loss of freedoms, and control. The metaphor Certeau uses to explain this idea is a city block with a square grassy knoll and a path going around the square. The powers used 'strategy' to show us where to walk by putting in the path, but a 'tactic' to carve out our own niche would be to walk across the grass. One of the points taken from his piece is that while we might feel isolated and controlled by the structure of the city (a metaphor for the powers in control), we can find our own space through 'tactics'. Certeau gives one example of carving out our own space by continuing the metaphor of the city walker, "And while, on the one hand, he makes only a few possibilities set out by the established order effective (he goes only here- not there), on the other hand, he increases the number of possibilities (e.g by making up shortcut or detours) and the number of interdictions (e.g by avoiding routes regarded as licit or obligatory)" (Certeau 107). This opens up completely new possibilities into the problem of the panoptic/dystopian elements in our society.

What now? We fight? Not physically of course, but mentally. That is all we can do in the end. We are not in a full blown dystopian society but we are in a society filled with panoptic rule. How do we know we are not in a full blown dystopian society? You are reading this paper, and the author of this paper was blessed with the ability to read the novels being presented. That is how we know (or hope we know) that we are not completely ruled. We do, however, have controls all around us. We have gps tracking, controlling laws, paths which to walk on, paths which we must NOT walk on. But we also have tactics. We can walk off the path. We will always be in the machine, in the system. Every society is a system. There is of course no research to be present here that can prove the validity of the claim that we will win anything, the point is not to win. The point is that we are aware and through awareness we can possibly find some semblance of peace and percieved freedom. The point is to not end up like poor Winston, to not live in his universe where the powers can say,

> "There will be no art, no literature, no science. When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no employment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always--do not forget this, Winston--always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler" (Orwell 220).

There is an end to this quote but before that is presented there is one last point to flush out. The other option. That other option rather than trying to take the advice of Certeau would be to simply ignore the existence of the validity of these elements. To simply argue that no dystopian/panoptic elements are present. And if this can be argued then the next question would be are the authors of the dystopian novels crazy, or visionaries? The path of this paper is that these authors were visionaries and there is no sane reason to ignore the power elements in our lives. We must live with them. To go then back to our first question, "why the fixation on dystopian elements in our artistic outlets? What do we gain from it?" The answer might be that without these works of art the level of awareness might not be there. Without the words of Orwell, Lowry, and countless others we would have one less reason to lean about

and employ 'tactics', one less reason to walk across the lawn of the park, one less reason to be aware of the powers and make sure they are in check. The final reason for cherishing and reading the aforementioned novels is that without using the freedoms to read, write, and think, we might lose them. We should use what we have, lest we lose it. To end this thought somewhere, this quote from *1984* should help explain and compound the urgency to walk our own path. "Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face--for ever"(220).

We must not allow the boot of power to stomp on our faces, hearts, and minds. And if there is no way to stop it, we must at least not lay down and allow it to happen without squirming out of the way, we must become a moving target, when we are not moving (or feeling, or thinking), we have lost.

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Connor Adams

*Untitled*

Charcoal, 23" x 17"

# Our Brothers Will Live Forever

## Johnny Runge

In the movie *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision,* we observe some of the initial negative reactions Maya Lin, at the time a young, architectural student at Yale University, was subjected to following the release of her design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Critics often connected their judgment to the person Maya Lin and thus interpreted the Wall's meanings based on her ethnicity, gender, age and experience. However, the design - and the very purpose of the memorial – was meant to allow an *individual* interpretation of the war; Lin's ambition was to provoke visitors to explore their deepest emotions in order to heal. Instead, the neutrality of the Wall caused a wide range of political and social interpretations. One veteran insisted on interpreting the dark color of the Wall as a symbol of the process of the war. Others perceived the Wall's refusal to rise above the earth as a symbol of defeat, while people interpreted the V-shaped plan in various ways from declaring that it contained an anti-war statement to considering it standing for victim, victory, veteran, violate, valor and some even found it symbolizing the female womb, declaring that the memorial celebrated women.

In her essay "The Wall, the Screen and the Image," Marita Sturken argues that the discussions and negative reactions were a result of the Wall being placed at the center of a *struggle between narratives*: on one side, there was historical attempt to rewrite history and focus on the great power of our country and then; on the other side, there was a focus on remembering American soldiers and an opportunity for those affected by the war to seek, speak and understand *love, pain* and *futility* (501).

Sturken states that "the importance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial lies in its communicability, which in effect has mollified the incommunicability of the veterans' experiences"(493). The soldiers will, although participating in the same war and maybe even the same battles, have a different understanding of their experiences and thus their memories and losses may influence them differently. These different memories, influences and interpretations are what Sturken refers to as the *incommunicability* of the war. The end of the Vietnam War didn't offer the soldiers a mutual understanding, nor a victorious outcome of their struggles, but instead left them alone, one by one, with their own individual experiences and memories – and thus left them with difficulties in communicating with others about their struggles. The memorial has, however, arguably worked to address this problem by focusing on aspects such as *neutrality, individuality, remembrance* and *dynamic*.

As the title *The Wall, the Screen and the Image* suggests, one of these major aspects of the memorial evolves around the black surface which causes a reflection, allowing the visitor to see his *own* image. Thus, the memorial does not tell the official story of society, nor the story which is presented in the history books. Instead, it allows the visitor to seek and explore their own personal stories, to participate in the process of never forgetting, and therefore in an extraordinary way allows the individual to confront difficult issues.

Lin says in the beginning of the movie that she wanted people to go to the Wall, touch the names of their relatives or friends, and *feel* the pain. She states that "death is a personal matter." Thus, according to Lin, a memorial should not revolve around politics, but instead focus on the *people* involved in the war: the soldiers, the people left behind – the Americans and their destinies, sorrows and their search to heal the wounds. Lin states:

> "I thought about what death is, what a loss is. A sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you cut open the rock and polished it" (Campbell, Robert).

Thus, she created the memorial in a way opposed to the traditional memorial, the kind that tends to focus more on remembrance and the art of creating and writing history.

However, as a response to the initial negative reactions towards Lin's design, it was – against her will – decided to place a more traditional memorial next to the Wall: a bronze statue called *The Three Soldiers*, showing three young men, dressed and armed for war. Frederick Hart, the designer and one of the strongest critics of Lin's design, says in a press conference following the release of his design:

> "There is about them the physical contact and sense of unity that bespeaks the bonds of love and sacrifice that is the nature of men at war. And yet they are each alone. Their strength and their vulnerability are both evident. Their true heroism lies in these bonds of loyalty in the face of their awareness and their vulnerability."

*The Three Soldiers* doesn't set out to keep its neutrality, nor allow the individual to explore his or her own feelings. Instead, Hart's statue contains a message about the heroism, the sacrifices and the strength among the American soldiers throughout the war. It attempts to write history – a history in which only *one* single truth seems to be acknowledged. Even though Hart singles out three individuals, he describes the experiences of societyand the country as a whole, without focusing on the many individuals, whose lives changed dramatically or ended during the war.

On the other hand, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial contains *no* stories about the society, *no* reports of political aspects of the war, *no* subtle messages. *Nothing*. Only the thousands and thousands of names etched on the dark surface – and the reflections and images of those left behind.

Of course, the wall is not completely free of bias, politics, and history. As Sturken points out, the wall indeed constructs history because all decisions and priorities exclude other aspects. For example, the memorial only lists the death of American soldiers and thereby excludes the struggles and suffering among the Vietnamese people. "Thus, remembering is in itself a form of forgetting," Sturken writes.

Over the years, another aspect has been added to the memorial: people have intentionally left possessions, which are now culturally categorized as historical artifacts.The manager of the archive responsible for maintaining the memorial writes:

> "These are no longer objects of the Wall, they are communicators, icons possessing a subculture of underpinning emotion. They are products of culture, in all its complexities. They are the products of individual selection. With each object we are in the presence of a work of art of individual contemplation. The thing itself does not overwhelm our attention since these are objects that are common and expendable. At the Wall they have become unique and irreplaceable, and, yes, mysterious" (498).

The artifacts add an anonymous, mysterious, and ambiguous aspect to Lin's design, reinforcing her original intention to create a *living, dynamic* memorial, which through the dark reflecting surface continuously developed and told new stories through its interaction with visitors. The artifacts left at the Wall emphasize this aspect of her masterpiece, constantly telling new stories and thus reinforcing itself. Lin intentionally focuses on the importance of involving the visitors in an *ongoing* process, where the purpose and messages within the memorial constantly changes and is redefined according to the needs of the visitors. "You make it come alive,"she says in a speech following the release of her *Civil Rights Memorial*, where the visitor can touch the water and change the stream of it. Thus, symbolically, one can argue that the American people have the power and authority to defend fundamental values in our society.

The Wall as well as the *Civil Rights Memorial* is not *telling* history; instead it is *creating* history, by provoking people to tell and explore their stories about the most important aspects of life: friendship, love, pain and futility. The Wall thus arguably exists *beyond* time and space. It allows the visitor to wander into their past, observing the memories of their lives, participating in the process of never forgetting, in a place "...where, by implication, the dead are present"(497). The memorial is a mysterious link which connects two different places, two different times. A meeting point between people whose destinies turned out differently. One of the many letters left in front of the Wall says:

> "Dear Sir: For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Why you didn't take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long, armed with your AK-47, and yet you didn't fire. Forgive me for taking your life, I was reacting just the way I was trained, to kill VC" (496).

Thus, the memorial doesn't only serve the purpose of not forgetting. The unique design also offers people the opportunity to confront personal issues, to face and understand their pain in order to heal. One can argue that the Wall somehow makes a connection between our physical lives and the more abstract element in our lives – the aspect we are not sure we understand, yet we often refer to as our *souls*. It shows the real strength of art: the ability to let us keep our physical existence, even after our death. At the end of the movie, the Veterans acknowledge this fact by commenting that through the memorial "Our brothers will live forever!"

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# Gathering of Voices | Student Anthology of Writing & Art, Whatcom Community College

Tina Stannert

*The Artist*

Mixed media, 9" x 6"