

Journal of the Georgia Philological Association

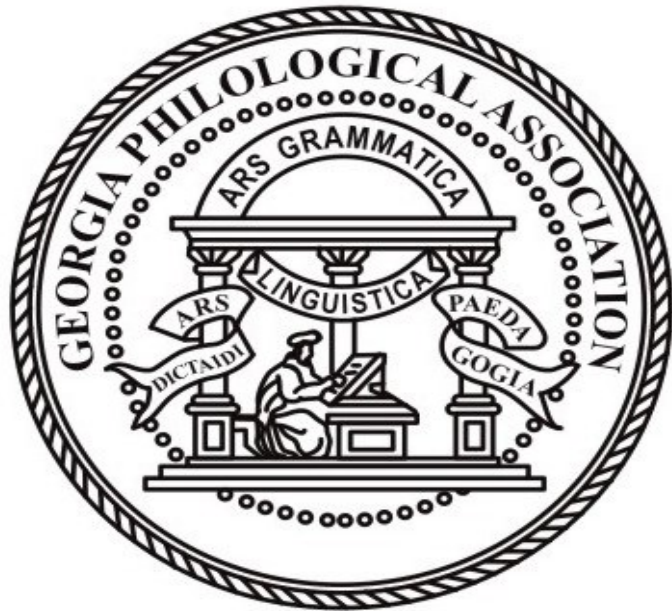


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*Journal of the Georgia Philological Association*

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## Foreword

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*From the GPA President...*

I am honored to be the 2016-2017 president of the Georgia Philosophical Association (GPA) and to be writing the forward to the latest edition of our peer-reviewed journal. I have been a member of the GPA since 2009, serving as an at-large member of the Executive Committee from 2013-2015 and as vice-president in 2015-2016. I can honestly attest that my involvement in this organization has been the highlight of my professional career. I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to present my scholarship in a welcoming environment, to learn from the expertise of others who have presented at our annual conferences, and to meet and interact with academics from the region who have become valued friends.

The GPA remains a unique organization, the only philological association in Georgia as far as I can determine. The association defines philology, the study of languages and literature, “broadly in order to encourage the involvement of academics and laity from across the broad spectrum of the liberal arts.” As a result, the annual conferences include presenters from a variety of disciplines who are researching a variety of topics including history, philosophy, and library science in addition to the investigations of literature that comprise perhaps more expected presentation material.

The GPA is committed to encouraging student involvement, both at the annual conference and in the journal. Each year, a solid number of graduate and undergraduate students (often under the direction of their professors who are also presenting at the conference) present their scholarship to a receptive and convivial audience who is interested in mentoring the next generation of Georgia scholars. I believe this work is among the most important work of the GPA. Providing a space for burgeoning scholars to participate in academic discourse in meaningful ways is crucial to the future of arts and letters in the region.

This commitment to the cultivation of student scholarship has resulted in the Vicki Hill Memorial Graduate Recognition Award, a \$100 award that will be given to the graduate student who presents



the most successful paper at the annual conference. This award will be given for the first time in 2017 to a deserving graduate student in honor of the memory of Vicki Hill who was one of the original founding members of the GPA in 2005. Dr. Hill served as the GPA's first vice-president, becoming the second president of the association in the following year. Members of the GPA who wish to support this award and to ensure its longevity are encouraged to donate money to the GPA which will be kept earmarked for this purpose. The GPA hopes to continue to support the achievements of student scholars for many years to come.

For the last few years, the GPA has held its annual conference on the Macon campus of Middle Georgia State University at the university's Conference Center. This change in venue puts the conference in a more central location, easing the travel burden on many participants. It also offers a professional setting for the conference with on-site catering and other amenities that conference participants can enjoy. I believe this partnership with Middle Georgia State University has led directly to a new era of growth in participation for the GPA.

Another area of growth for the GPA is in the journal. Publishing a peer-reviewed journal has always been part of the GPA's mission; however, for a number of years no journal was published due to waning participation in the association among other factors. I am pleased as this year's president that the GPA is once again publishing a robust collection of scholarship that showcases the spirit of critical inquiry and the intellectual acumen of its members. Each essay published here was subjected to a rigorous peer-review process that underscores the high academic standards maintained by the GPA. I hope that in years to come the journal will continue to grow in size and reputation.

Most of you who are reading this journal are members of the GPA, and so I would like to conclude my remarks here with a charge to you. I strongly believe that the GPA is poised to become a vital and influential scholarly organization in the middle Georgia region. I believe that the GPA has the potential to greatly increase the size of both the conference and the journal in the coming years. However, this growth is dependent on the efforts of the current membership. We must be advocates for the GPA at our institutions. We must encourage

our colleagues to present at the conference and to submit their papers to the journal. We must use the annual conference as a mentoring opportunity for the graduate and undergraduate students we work so tirelessly to educate. We must promote the GPA as a vital contributor to scholarly discourse in our disciplines. If we are willing to do this work, the association will surely grow.

I believe that the future of the GPA is very promising, and I am excited to be a part of an organization with such potential for growth. I congratulate you all for the role you've already played in revitalizing the GPA, and I look forward to seeing you again next year at the annual conference.

Lorraine Dubuisson  
President  
Georgia Philological Association



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## Introduction

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*From the Editor-in-Chief...*

In the business meeting at the conclusion of the Georgia Philological Association's 2016 annual conference, members met to conduct the business of the association, one item of which was drafting a call for papers for the next conference. Discussion ensued about philology, the association, and what direction might be taken in regard to both. As has been the tradition of the association and this affiliated journal since its inception, the members decided to continue the organization's renowned openness. The 2017 CFP reads:

We invite proposals for session topics, panel discussion topics, and scholarly papers in English on any subjects relating to American, British, French, Hispanic, Russian, German, or Slavic literature or language, as well as composition, philosophy, history, translation, the general humanities, interdisciplinary studies, and pedagogy.

As this CFP demonstrates, this is not an organization which defies definition, but one which revels in exploring the undefined, focusing on the blurred lines, and crossing the forbidden boundaries. This concept is underscored further by the articles featured in this volume of the *Journal*.

The manuscript of the annual conference keynote address by Dr. Derrilyn Morrison begins this exploration of the liminal. In "Crossing the Line: Caribbean Poets in America," she discusses the effects of transnationalism on critical reading and reception of Caribbean poetry. She states, "Caribbean writers, especially those who no longer reside in the Caribbean, know that lines are drawn everywhere and you must cross the line come what may."

The next selection extends this concept of boundary crossing into the particular area of philology. Dr. Marcus Johnson demonstrates the interconnectedness of Neitzchean philology, the genealogical approach, Hegelian evolutionary theory, and modern systems theory. Each of the scholars in this remuneration kept crossing their own lines; as they grew and learned as scholars, their ideas took different shapes, changing the way they viewed the world. Preeminently

focusing on Nietzsche, Johnson illustrates how Nietzsche was influenced by and also influenced the worldviews of those around him, and how his ideas continue to impact modern perceptions.

Dr. David Buehrer's critique of Harry Crews's *A Feast of Snakes* again highlights an author crossing the line. Buehrer discusses how Crews uses dark humor and the "delimited condition" of the main character Joe Lon to analogize contemporary American society's constrictions of class, place and race. Though the author's sensationalism and banality were often critiqued for going "too far," Buehrer gives a poignant quote from Crews himself who said, "it took decadence to lampoon decadence;" in essence, it took crossing the line to create the intended effect.

The next two pieces in the issue carry on the motif. First, Dr. Sara Hughes compares the plights of two female characters in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. As Hughes puts it in "'A Girl Gets Sick of a Rose': A Woman's Desire to Break Free," "lying beneath the surface of these neatly formal poems exists speakers who often struggle with the desire to break free from the restrictions that women face both creatively and personally." Comparing the characters Sadie and Maude, Hughes states that "Brooks understands that a person only gets one life, and it is more fun to break boundaries than to always do the right thing." Next, Dr. Lisa Bro compares the female characters of Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica* and Brienne of Tarth in the *Game of Thrones* series. In her commentary, she states, "both series illustrate how traditional gender ideals trap each woman, how neither is fully recognized or celebrated for her boundary-crossing, but is instead punished for doing so." In these two articles, then, the contributors explore how the characters of Sadie and Maude and Starbuck and Brienne each approach their respective perceived boundaries as well as those that others try to impose upon them.

The final selection discusses boundary crossing in pedagogy. Dr. Amanda Allen and Dr. Farrah Senn argue for not only blurring the lines of the traditional and the virtual classroom environment, but also the line between the informal use of social media outside of education and the formal use of social media in teaching and learning. They present current literature on the topic, provide student and faculty feedback on a case study involving the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter*

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in a classroom setting, and situate the case study findings within the context of the literature.

The varied nature of the contributions in this edition as well as our organization's aim to remain openly and purposefully interdisciplinary highlights the fact that philology touches on so many facets of not only literature and the humanities, but academia in general. It might even be safe to assume that we may be adults who as children were those who, even when chided, secretly delighted in colorfully coloring outside the lines.

Farrah Senn

Editor-in-Chief

*Journal of the Georgia Philological Association*



# GPA Annual Meeting Keynote Address– Crossing the Line: Caribbean Poets in America

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Derrilyn E. Morrison, Ph.D.  
Middle Georgia State University

In Jamaica our parents have a saying that is meant to correct us as children whenever we speak or act in a way that smacks of impertinence to them. They look you straight in the eye and say, “But wait, you cross the line!” Caribbean children know that you cross the line at your own peril. So Caribbean writers, especially those who no longer reside in the Caribbean, know that lines are drawn everywhere and you must cross the line, come what may.

The poets that I write about are poets who survive the crossing, as I have. They work and live in America; they are Caribbean, but at some point in the crossing they must also become American, or as mainstream publishers prefer to advertise, African American. Unfortunately, with the passing of time, they become invisible to the Caribbean homeland as their cultural crossing takes them further and further away from local Caribbean concerns. At first, they write for those at home until those at home no longer see them, and once again they know they must cross the line to find a new home for the work they bear. Lorna Goodison, Shara McCallum, and Claudia Rankine, are three Caribbean poets, all Jamaican-born, whose poetic journeys have taken them to this port. In *Making History Happen: Caribbean Poetry in America* (2015), I offer a reading of their work that speaks to the Caribbean elements that shape and influence their production.

## **In Context**

In the past decade or so, Caribbean critics have been drawing attention to the importance of creating a body of critical readings that reflect on the writing being produced in America. Christopher Winks calls this “a transformed space of enquiry and dialogue,” one that embraces the “wealth of thoughts and traditions of the region that inspired the work[s]” (qtd. in *Making History* 80). A growing number



of these critics are calling for comparative readings of Caribbean writing that resist the theoretical ideology of “an all-encompassing Caribbean Poetics” (*Making History* 80). Such readings take into account the way writers from the Caribbean who migrate to America and other foreign countries become a transnational community that is the same but different.

Transnationalism has indeed become common place on the literary scene in American studies in recent decades, highlighting cultural recognizance of the history of migration politics, and especially so as it relates to issues of identity in the global society. It is important to note that the transnational approach allows critics also to demonstrate that the outsider/insider perspectives embraced by Caribbean transnationals allow them to retain strong cultural ties to the Caribbean, which are reflected or inflected in their writing. For Caribbean poets living in America, language becomes a marker of identity in the way it reflects their attitudes to the dominant cultural hegemony.

### **My Work**

The chapters in *Making History Happen: Caribbean Poetry in America* offer a close reading of some poets who carry the double identity as Caribbean and African Americans to give evidence that the Caribbean discourse of identity is shifting gears, moving beyond the boundaries of traditional cultural communities as poets explore their current standing in relation to the wider diaspora. In examining poetry collections written by the three aforementioned poets, Goodison, McCallum, and Rankine, I recognize these Caribbean poets of the region for shifting identity politics as they create works that engage in the task of revising history and re-inscribing the black community as a speaking, subjective presence within the body politic. I introduce the poetics of *re-memory* as a studied approach for reading Goodison’s *Turn Thanks*, McCallum’s *The Water Between Us*, and Rankine’s *Plot*, as well as her collection entitled *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. This opens the way for readers to access nuances of the language that speak to the poetic will, not just to recall history as in the act of remembering a past event, but to create a new body of poetry that calls into question history itself.

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In Lorna Goodison's *Turn Thanks* (1999) collection, she reflects on notable absences and gaps in family histories, gaps that are representative of the repressed past and the conventional erasure of black oral cultures. The poet relies on memory, her own and that culled from the community through oral histories, not just to fill in the gaps but, more importantly, to create a collection that celebrates her heritage and in the process makes space for Caribbean poetry to take its rightful place in world literature. Goodison largely writes in standard English but she deliberately cultivates distinct inflections of the Jamaican Creole in her use of poetic language to create a layering of sensibilities which enriches the experiences being shared. In comparison, Shara McCallum's *The Water Between Us* (1999) generally localizes creolized forms of speech that allows the persona to use the full range of the language continuum, as she easily slides between standard English and Jamaican Creole throughout the poems. Also, while the autobiographical persona of Goodison's *Turn Thanks* focuses on adult memory and its regenerative spirit, McCallum's persona in *The Water Between Us* takes readers through an exploration of the adult's painful childhood memories for most of the collection. The language, carefully shaped by the poet, is filtered through a child's consciousness so as gradually to show the adult's perspective of a world that is deliberately designed to be unstable, and is therefore now recognized by both child and adult as untrustworthy.

The adult perspective of McCallum's persona, that the world we live in is filled with myths that are untrustworthy, comes into conversation with Rankine's persona in *Plot* (2001) who is apprehensive about the possibility of locating her poetic identity within the currents of mainstream culture. The poems as a whole show that the fragmented female experience is already a subjective experience within the subconscious recesses of the poetic mind. It is left to memory as a site of Signifyin(g) to pull such experiences to the foreground of conscious thought and re-position them within the canonical body of American poetry. The same is true of her later collection, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) but this body of writing which proclaims itself "an American lyric" is strident and incisive in its call for change. As a poetic whole, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* relentlessly confronts the way the dominant culture in American society creates cultural myths that help to maintain its status quo. This American lyric collection demonstrates the urgency, and sets about

fulfilling its own demand for a new poetics. In both collections, as in the collections written by Goodison and McCallum, Rankine's personal recollection creates a mosaic of events which serves to reconstruct, even realign, the conventional records of mainstream media.

Rankine's collection of poems laments the way the "world" and its readers --anywhere they are, anywhere they represent-- tend to ignore what they refuse to acknowledge; they "move through words as if the bodies / the words reflect did not exist" (qtd. in *Making History* 129). Poets and writers outside of mainstream literary or cultural circles are conscious of this behavior that excludes them, even when they are anthologized as belonging. In the closing pages of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine offers the collection of poems as a handshake, a gesture that affirms the individual's dignified presence. Citing Paul Celan's theoretical discourse on poetry, she explains, "The handshake is our decided ritual of asserting (I am here) and hand- / ing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that--Here. I am here. [...] Here both recognizes and demands recognition" (qtd. in *Making History* 131-32). The collection noticeably closes with a sense of goodwill, of hope that readers will reach a hand out to receive the gift, not sought but yet extended.

Ultimately then, my work serves as further confirmation that the question of how to read poetry written by Caribbean poets in America cannot be answered by formulaic responses. While some scholars acknowledge the importance of the Caribbean culture in the work of Caribbean transnationals, others hasten to draw a line that separates transnationals from their colleagues who remain at home in the Caribbean and work completely in that field. For some critics who hold fast to the traditional school of thought, the very identity of such transnational poets as "Caribbean" is at best debatable. Lorna Goodison, who has maintained strong ties with the Caribbean and whose poetry collections clearly reflect the poet's concern with Caribbean identity, still receives censure from some critics for not being Caribbean enough. On the other hand, while Claudia Rankine identifies on a personal level as Caribbean "across the poetry landscape," in a 2011 telephone interview, she said she feels "American." To date, by virtue of its poetic oeuvre, her work has

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almost exclusively been received as an American product and she is anthologized mostly as an African American poet and critic.

The reading of poetry collections offered in *Making History Happen: Caribbean Poetry in America* makes visible a growing body of poetry volumes that are marketed in America as African American poetry, but which are written by poets who struggle to maintain their Caribbean identity. Together they make up a new transnational diaspora, as part of the wider black diaspora existing within the geographical spaces of America. This book calls for continued exploration of the kinds of poetic works emerging from within this area of Caribbean poetic studies, and for new approaches to envision them, recognizing and accepting their presence. Critical readings emerging from within discrete literary communities must reflect the texture of richness being produced in the field of studies. It is not enough to speak of Caribbean, or American, or black, or diaspora poetry in today's world, when writers themselves are crossing lines, moving boundaries as never before, shifting the poetics of being/belonging and making history, as they live it, and as it is experienced, in the embodiment of their own creative works.

## Nietzsche, Philology, and Genealogy

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Marcus Johnson, Ph.D  
Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College

### **Introduction via Genealogy**

Nietzschean genealogical analyses examine the evolution of concepts and are especially attentive to the ways in which self and group interest, power, and institutional and conceptual structures influence the adoption and dissemination of ideas. These interdisciplinary analyses combine intellectual history, the sociology of knowledge, and philosophy. Such analyses presuppose that meanings are plural and fluid and do not seek to find the *true meaning* or essence of terms. Genealogical histories are neither moralistic nor didactic, though they often examine values. Finally, genealogical analyses are generally not presented as comprehensive historical truths but are understood to be valuable as insightful and interesting interpretations supported by textual evidence.

The aim of this essay is to reintroduce the readers of the *Journal of the Georgia Philological Association* to Friedrich Nietzsche the philologist and, more substantively, to explain the nature of Nietzsche's philologically-inspired analytic. To that end, I sketch several overlapping lines of influence on Nietzsche's thinking. These influences include French aristocratic genealogists, the Scholastic academic tradition, Hegelian historicism, British progressive moral historians, and finally, Darwin. The discussion begins by examining the French genealogists who sought, amidst the groans of a social and intellectual transition from the feudal to the Enlightenment, to justify and protect their existing privilege by reclaiming the established tradition of drawing lines of descent. The story picks up a century and a half or so later, when genealogy was used once again: this time by progressive, utilitarian moral historians. What is especially noteworthy of these thinkers is that although they endeavored to put genealogy to a rather different use, they retained both the narrative structure and many of the metaphysical

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presuppositions of the old system, including universal forms and the existence of a predetermined moral order. It is explained that these thinkers were influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1802) pre-Darwinian speculation regarding historical evolution, and that Hegel's ideas are a key representative of the then-ongoing shift from a worldview ordered by immutable forms and universal laws to one that embraced change and epiphenomenal novelty. To close, differences between Darwin's and Hegel's thoughts on evolution are discussed, as well as their relation to Nietzsche's thoughts on historical analysis. As these influential views are examined, comparisons, contrasts, and other connections to Nietzsche's philologically-inspired approach are woven in.

### **Nietzsche and Philology**

Friedrich Nietzsche is generally known as a philosopher. He was referred to as such by the likes of Arthur Danto (*Nietzsche as Philosopher*) and Gilles Deleuze (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*). Walter Kaufmann (*Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*) agreed, but added that he was also a psychologist and antichrist. In lesser-known pieces he was labeled a shaman (Land 158-70) and an educator (Schact 222-49). More recently, his connection to philology has been noted (Porter 313-38), although this has been less fully developed. Perhaps Nietzsche is seen as too radical a figure to be associated with the bookish scholarship that philology sometimes brings to mind. Whatever the case, despite his name recognition, less is written about Nietzsche's relatively brief academic career, lasting from 1869 to 1879, as a professor of philology at the University of Basel. During his time at Basel, he produced significant philological works, such as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *We Philologists* (1874). Although he never was a professor of philosophy, from the beginning Nietzsche's work had an interdisciplinary trajectory. His early analyses of the classics addressed philosophical, historical, cultural, and artistic themes, and his later philosophical and historical work was likewise informed by philology.

From his initial lecture in 1869, "Homer and Classical Philology," Nietzsche was less interested in uncovering and identifying universal truths than he was in examining how shifting discourses reflected, and were reflections of, group identities and ideals. In "Homer," for example, he argued that the academic and

artistic significance of the idea of *Homer* changed over time. From a concern with the identification of the material person, interest shifted to an analysis of how Homer functioned as an idealized representation of an aesthetic prototype. Nietzsche reasoned that the change of interest from the person to the prototype accompanied a change in aesthetic sensibilities, especially regarding the poetic, and the Homeric style became a central part of that conversation. As what was deemed important within cultural circles changed, so did the questions that were asked. The scholars lost interest in whether Homer was a historical person, and the dialogue more or less dissolved without achieving full consensus.

This initial paper illustrates Nietzsche's propensity to underscore diversity and complexity rather than attempt to subsume difference beneath and within the universal. Therein Nietzsche contended that philology was not a unified discipline but consisted of three different elements: one part science (method), one part history (interpretation), and one part aesthetic (art/taste). Philological analysis was then understood by its practitioners to be methodical and therefore substantial. Nietzsche maintained, however, that method alone does not necessarily promote *meaningful* analysis. In opposition to the scientism he saw infecting the discipline, Nietzsche contended that meaningful analysis is the result and function of art and creative interpretation, not science and method. The philological interpreter would need to be both scientist and artist.

In the future, he would pit the image of the methodical artist against ideological historians who shoe-horned historical interpretations into prepackaged narratives by arguing that staying close to the texts was a necessary guard against creating overly-simplistic, didactic tales of social and moral progress. The moralistic tales provided by the philosopher-historians were, due to their method, fated to disregard the local, subjective, and petty struggles for influence, power, and self-promotion so that they could weave a tale of Hegelian-inspired, universal moral progress. Though some of these ideas were present from the start, they were not yet informed by the influences of his later, mature thinking. In fact, Nietzsche closed the inaugural presentation by endorsing a Hegelian vision for philological analysis wherein all individuality was to be dissolved within the

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universal, and all difference was to be subsumed within a homogeneous unity. Similarly, a few years later in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche presented the Dionysian and Apollonian forms of art as competing against each other, and thereby constructing one another through time until, at last, a synthesis of the two was reached in the Attic tragedy. The process he described in the book was rather Hegelian. It was considerably later, in an 1888 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, that Nietzsche recognized and criticized his changed beliefs.

Nietzsche's official time as a professor of philology ended in 1879 when he resigned his position at Basel for health reasons. Even before his resignation, however, he had clearly begun to work in the direction of philosophy, creating hybrid works such as *Untimely Meditations* (1876) and *Human, All Too Human* (1878). Today both of these are usually considered philosophical works, but the aphoristic style, the topics addressed, and the methods of analysis are starkly different than standard philosophical work of either the nineteenth century or today. Taxonomy aside, the influence of speculative philosophy on Nietzsche was, during this time, waning. Prominent examples of changing direction include passages from *Human, All Too Human* (e.g., passages 37 and 45), where Nietzsche contended that diverse moral systems develop in different communities and that they do not evolve as part of a singular and universal process. In *Untimely Meditations*, he noted that he would like to see artistry and perspective acknowledged as crucial elements of interpretative endeavors. Supplanting his earlier goal of *subsuming* the local beneath the universal was the goal of preserving the local and the phenomenal by merely *contextualizing* them in relation to broader themes:

So I hope that the significance of history will not be thought to lie in its general propositions, as if these were the flower and fruit of the whole endeavor, but that its value will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it ... and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power, and beauty. For this, however, there is required above all great artistic facility, creative vision, loving absorption in the empirical data. (*Human, All Too Human* 93)



Here we see Nietzsche departing from the realm of universal, metaphysical truths and developing an increased interest in the individual, local, and epiphenomenal.

To recap before moving on, at the beginning of his career, Nietzsche envisioned an approach to philological analysis that was both artistic and scientific and sought to subsume the individual in the universal. Within a decade, he maintained that conceptual analyses of this sort did little more than explain away the relevant change. Having thus become critical of speculative philosophy, he sought to develop an analysis that could explain historical change by attending to the opposite of universals: local realities.

### **Aristocratic Genealogy**

When most people encounter the word genealogy, they understand it to involve tracing one's ancestral lineage back in time. The activity is perhaps as popular today as it has ever been. During the seventeenth century, it was a pastime pursued by academically-inclined, Western European nobility who sought to preserve beneficial elements of the feudal system. The old regime was being torn asunder by a number of factors, including industrialization, religious turmoil, the rise of nation-states, and also by the intentional diminishing, diluting, and otherwise weakening of the aristocracy by monarchs seeking to centralize power. It was toward the end of such upheaval that "aristocratic reactionaries" such as Boulainvilliers wrote to restore their threatened privilege (see e.g., Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy*; Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*). The standard method used by the aristocratic historians was to trace an unbroken line back from the present, through history, to a sufficiently old and claim-worthy ancestor. Not discounting the lure of intellectual study, the practice was largely motivated by self-interest. Most members of the privileged class did, in fact, come from prior privilege, and therefore it made practical sense for the aristocrats to claim, post hoc, that past title should confer present privilege. The aristocrats used this sort of history as a means to an end, but why did they come to use this approach, and why did others accept conclusions drawn from it? These are just the sort of questions

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addressed by Nietzschean genealogies. To illustrate the approach, a partial answer will be offered.

Scholasticism was the primary academic perspective from the origin of European universities up until the scientific revolution. Derived from Christian theology and the writings of Aristotle and Neo-Platonists, the general approach of the scholastics was to use dialectical reasoning to reconcile Christian theology with classical philosophy and science in order to create an explanatory frame that made sense of the tangible and incorporeal world (see Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution*). Among the most foundational principles were Plato's metaphysics and the Judeo-Christian notion of the fallen world. Plato held that physical things partake of an ideal form, or essence. This essence was generally thought to be primordial, to inhabit the highest level of existence, and to precede and establish the nature of all things. This view was enormously influential during the scholastic period, as scholars generally understood the goal of truth-seeking to be the discovery of the Platonic essence of things and/or God's plan for the world. Finding, un-covering, and dis-covering essences and the natural order of things was generally understood to be what one did in the search for knowledge and truth. The presence of these overlapping traditions allowed the search for the *sine qua non* of aristocracy to make sense. As part of the discursive evolution, a self-catalyzing process that seems common to discourses involving the essence of some quality or thing (such as goodness, beauty, humanity, or democracy), the notion of *nobility* lost its status as a hypothetical and was accepted as actual. It was recognized as a real (though invisible) quality that someone might have, even though no one could touch it or feel it or see it. The noumenal idea was reified into a thing in itself, and the quality of nobility became a conceptual attractor, or an absent transcendental signifier, upon which an explanatory narrative of noble *arête* was constructed and disseminated.

A second common belief or presupposition that served to frame the prevailing explanatory narrative was drawn from the scholastic amalgamation of Aristotle's *On the Heavens* and the Judeo-Christian notions of the fall and original sin. According to this account, the sublunary part of the cosmos, inhabited by humans, was thought to be less ethereal and more subject to change and disorder than the upper heavens. Moreover, mankind, through the rebellious

mischievous in Eden, was understood to have ruined the original state of relative grace in which it lived, thereby extending the gulf between the eternal heavens and the entropic earth. Combining a few suppositions such as (a) the earth is in a state of decay from its original pristine state (b) and that essences and perfection are eternal and original, but (c) change occurs in the direction of decay and disorder – ultimately an explanatory cosmic narrative of past perfection and present declension develops. This narrative, in turn, can support the views that that the purest manifestation of some thing or quality should be found in its original state, unaffected by sin and entropy, and that the closer to the present one gets, the less pure and quasi-divine a thing or quality becomes.

Applied to the question of title and privilege, this narrative supported the view that legitimacy was to be found in some ancient, immutable quality, and it was retained only by those with the most ancient claim to nobility. All that needed to be worked out for the aristocratic genealogist were the locus of the essential quality and its mode of transmission from the past to the present. These were provided by the concept of original sin, which located the human essence in the soul, and by the genealogical chronicling of the lineage of Jesus, given in the Bible, which suggested that the transmission of royalty occurred through *blood*. Each of these premises can be contested, of course. However, in what Foucault (2003) called the classical European period, this woven fabric of concepts was part of a complex set of beliefs that allowed people to understand privilege as a quality that persons have, that these qualities can be transmitted from one person to another through the generations, and that the further back one's privilege can be traced, the more real it is.

Let us pause for a moment to examine a couple of clarifying notes. First, the preceding account emulates the Nietzschean genealogical approach because the development of aristocratic genealogy is intentionally not presented as a manifestation of the necessary or universal flow of history. Human language, practices, and beliefs suffice to explain the historical changes. The differences between Nietzsche's understanding of the nature of human history and that of the French genealogists were consequential and should also be noted. The aristocrats sought to find that which did not change

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or decay, that which was pure and holy. Conversely, Nietzsche understood the world through change, progress, and evolution. In the expanse between the aristocratic and the Nietzschean worldviews, however, what we might with caution call a transitional belief set operated.

### **Progressive, Utilitarian Genealogy**

Utilitarian ethical theory, often identified with Bentham's slogan/axiom *the greatest good for the greatest number*, sought to employ a scientific approach to the study of moral behavior. The view maintained that actions are good if the consequences of such actions are, on the whole, good. This consequentialist approach was in accord with prevalent explanatory models in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when the biological world was increasingly understood in terms of evolution and progress rather than eternal and immutable laws. This shifting worldview was reflected in the writing of moral histories. The utilitarian moral historians criticized by Nietzsche took something of an empirical approach to understanding morality, and to the extent that these historians were progressive, they sought to understand the evolution of history by finding the present in the past. That is, by locating in the past a primitive and unevolved form of the present, and then examining the events, guided by the Geist, the progressive historians imagined the moral principle to evolve from its humble origins to a current, more evolved state. These moral histories shared with Nietzsche a biological, growth-oriented view of the world, and both Nietzsche and the progressives rejected the view that the living world was static and law-driven. The difference, from Nietzsche's perspective, was that the progressives failed to fully understand the metaphysical implications of the changing perspective, and as a result, they haphazardly infused evolutionary ideas into a worldview that otherwise retained the rational and universal ordering of Scholasticism. As a result, the progressives viewed the world as evolving, but not in the Darwinian sense most think of today. Instead, the history of the world, including moral history, was thought to be unfolding toward a predesigned end. Nietzsche thought the progressives misguided for attempting to trace the dialectical evolution of morals from primitive forms to their currently advanced forms, rejecting in particular the presupposition that current moral beliefs are the rationally-evolved forms of prior

moral beliefs. As the passage below indicates, he maintained instead that the reasons for the origin of something often have little or no connection to the way it is used and understood in the distant future:

How have the moral genealogists reacted so far in this matter? Naively, as is their wont: they highlight some purpose in punishment, for example, revenge or deterrence, then innocently place the purpose at the start, as the *causa fiendi* of punishment, and – have finished. ... [In fact, however] the origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness, its practical application and incorporation into a system of ends, are *toto coelo* separate. (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 50)

The error of believing that the essential qualities and functions of present beliefs could be traced back, genealogically, to their distant origins, took a familiar form: that used by the aristocratic genealogists. In addition to sharing a narrative structure with the aristocratic genealogists, the moral histories of the progressives both used history to justify and rationalize present beliefs and circumstances.

If the progressives understood themselves largely in opposition to the aristocrats who sought to use history to preserve the status quo, then why did they use history in the same way? The answer, in one way, seems to be simple. Genealogy was available. It was a familiar way to present a historical narrative. The genealogists naturally employed for this *ready-to-hand* tool (see Heidegger, *Being and Time*) when preparing their moral history. There could be other possible readings, of course, such as the interpretation that the progressive historians intentionally chose the genealogical approach because of its effectiveness in construing contemporary European values as the most evolved form of morality, thereby positioning Europeans as the primary agent of world history. Whatever the motivation, the effect was that by presuming the existence of a stable identity that was transmitted through time, the analysis was bound to also uncritically presuppose the goodness and legitimacy of the existing moral code.

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## The Transfiguration of Genealogy

Nietzsche himself might have continued this trajectory of genealogy, but he did not. Instead, he radically altered the way that genealogy was understood and used as an historical analytic. Nietzsche used genealogy as a hammer to break down and break through sedimented perceptions (see Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*). He rejected the claim that there were essential identities that were preserved through historical time and that could be illuminated by history. History and philosophy hammered essence-informed, metaphysical presuppositions and their related metanarratives by emphasizing the multiple origins of concepts and beings through the ongoing polysemous construction of identity. His altered use of the term, “genealogy,” was an enactment of the idea that concepts are adopted, assimilated, constantly put to different uses as the need or desire arises. Genealogy, as reconceived by Nietzsche, traced these multiple origins and showed the plural nature of the identities that others before presumed singular. This new approach showed in practice how history could be done without the metaphysical presuppositions that had dominated academic thinking for so long.

Even from the initial lecture discussed above, Nietzsche viewed himself as a contrarian devoted to challenging key tenets of his discipline. His description of the Dionysian element in the *Birth of Tragedy*, for example, sought to overturn the perception, popular in German academic circles, that the Greeks were immanently rational. The book had some broad success, but was criticized within the discipline. *We Philologists*, written in 1874 but published posthumously, suggests a feeling of disenchantment toward the field of academic philology, a feeling that likely influenced his decisions to retire early and to ultimately identify his scholarship as philosophy rather than philology. As his work moved away from philology and toward philosophy, Nietzsche remained a gadfly, though he did not immediately settle on genealogy as a method. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), he used fiction as counter-narrative to challenge the dominant moral worldview. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he wrote in aphorisms to combat the system-building tradition of rationalist philosophy. It was not until *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887) that he articulated and deliberately employed his modified version of genealogy.

Although the methods employed in the works preceding the *Genealogy* took a different general form, the practice of taking a word or idea, reinterpreting it, and putting it to a new use was a familiar one by the *Genealogy*. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, Nietzsche used the figure of Zoroaster/Zarathustra to proclaim the death of God – but, more precisely, the demise of a teleological, Manichean worldview. He explained that he chose Zoroaster to destroy the old worldview and bring forth the new one precisely because Zarathustra was among those primarily responsible for its original development. Nietzsche intentionally repurposed Zarathustra to promulgate a transvaluation of morality. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche continued the transvaluative project by retooling genealogy so that it could effectively historicize without the need for metaphysical, binary thinking. Genealogy, reconfigured to be what we can now call a postmodern historiography, adopted instead a biological perspective that emphasized regeneration, survival, decline, and death, and that understood all of this to occur within a complex, dynamic environment, rather than one dominated by immutable forms and essences.

### **Hegel, Darwin, and Evolution**

It is important to recognize that not everyone prior to Darwin thought the world should be characterized by stasis and immutable forms. There seem to have always been those, such as Heraclitus, for example, who saw the world as either in flux or as evolving in some way. One of the most influential proponents of evolution and a historical view of life wrote a couple of generations before Nietzsche: that was Georg Hegel (1807). His views were influential to many progressive thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, as such, here his ideas have primarily been discussed in opposition to Nietzsche's. The intellectual relation Nietzsche had with Hegel was complex, however, and this needs to be clarified just a bit before closing.

In overview fashion then, a brief and summary account will be given of the successive worldviews to which Hegel and then Nietzsche responded: the scholastic, the clockwork, the organic clockwork, and the Darwinian. In the scholastic and clockwork

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models, the world was seen as mostly static, with perhaps a winding-down or entropic effect. The world was believed to be governed by a natural order wherein everything had its place. In the clockwork (or what Nietzsche called the mechanistic) model, the world was often understood to have been fashioned by a creator who set it in motion and then stepped away, leaving the world to be governed by the laws of nature. Critics of this Newtonian, clockwork model, such as Hegel, offered a more dynamic vision: a world developing. Hegel (1807) believed the world had a plan and an end. This included all the world, physical and nonphysical, unfolding and developing toward its dialectically-guided end. Hegel's understanding of evolution, as Geist-guided and teleological, was different than Darwin's notion of evolution via natural selection. Hegel's view of evolution can be understood as an intellectual bridge linking the Scholastic, rational universe and the Darwinian, biological worldview that began to take root by the 1880s.

Because the engine of Darwinian evolution is competition, random mutation, and successful reproduction, rather than the teleological development of the cosmos, moral evolution is in this model understood to be epiphenomenal. That is, the development of moral codes is contingent upon an environment that is itself an open system that developed contingently. Moral codes, thus understood, are not preordained by the World Spirit (per Hegel), but are the effects of successful (and unsuccessful) practices developed in response to local and changing environments. A plurality of local moral codes that overlapped here and there are responsible for the history of morality, not the Geist. One can clearly see the connections between the Darwinian view and Nietzsche's.

Hegel and Nietzsche understood moral history rather differently, but Nietzsche's entanglement with both Hegel and Darwin is more complicated than a simple binary allows. Perhaps most straightforwardly, Nietzsche, especially early in his career, embraced Hegel's historicism and vitalism. In addition, however, the views of both Hegel and Darwin evolved, as did the ideas ascribed to Hegel and Darwin. Nietzsche's views must be studied not only in relation to the current understanding of these views, but also in relation to the changing interpretations of Darwin and Hegel. The relation is further muddied because Nietzsche's own views changed over time, and he seemed to have had limited exposure to Darwin's ideas, which were



still being developed as Nietzsche was writing. Nietzsche's encounter with Darwin's ideas not only failed to lead Nietzsche to identify as a Darwinian, but he actually criticized "Darwinism" on Hegelian grounds. That is, he claimed that Darwinism sought to explain the world in terms of responses and reactions to external stimuli, but it failed to capture the far more important inner drive or Will to Power that characterizes all life (see Ansell-Pearson, 1997). A developed understanding would therefore be obliged to consider many complex factors. From the current perspective, it appears that despite his objections to ideas attributed to Darwin, Nietzsche's views were much closer to Darwinism (and further from Hegelianism) than Nietzsche realized. In fact, as will now be discussed, Nietzsche's biophilosophy was a forerunner of modern systems theory.

### **Genealogy, Interpretation, and Systems Theory**

Nietzsche held that interpretation is deeply rooted in biology and is best understood not as a distinctly human act, but as having origins in the simplest of living organisms. Consider the following from the *Genealogy of Morals*:

That anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it; that everything that occurs in the organic world consists of overpowering, dominating, and in their turn, overpowering and dominating consist of re-interpretation adjustment, in the process of which their former meaning and purpose must necessarily be obscured or obliterated. ... Every purpose and use is just a sign that the will to power has achieved mastery over something less powerful, and has impressed upon it its own idea of a use function; and the whole history of a thing, an organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations, the causes of which need not be connected even amongst themselves. (51)

Nietzsche's biophilosophy connected interpretation to survival, viewed identity as always-already plural, and anticipated contemporary systems theory's views on identity; that is, an

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individual is considered actual, but is also understood to exist within and to be constituted by larger structures that, in turn, have their own identity, and are constituted from systems above and below (see Capra and Luisi, *The Systems View of Life* and Luhman, *Introduction to Systems Theory*). For both Nietzsche and contemporary systems theorists, the world is in flux, and although there are possibly laws of physics and the like, living systems possess an openness that keeps them from becoming deterministic. Within the various interconnected living systems that constitute the biosphere, life forms continuously consume and assimilate one another, are absorbed by larger systems, resist absorption by forming alliances, organizing, dissipating, and being reincorporated into new systems – all the while functioning within multiple, interrelated sets of complex systems. Dynamic homeostasis replaces immutable forms in this view, and unless one includes the growth of complexity or biodiversity, there is no pre-established, unfolding goal for life.

In this Nietzschean/systems worldview, interpretation is not merely a practice performed by detached academics. It is fundamentally a biological process that predates the academy, human language, and even human consciousness by hundreds of millennia. It is intimately connected to a survival function that is perhaps as old as life itself and originates with the organization of the meaningful through the use of selectively porous boundaries. These boundaries, which serve as material interpreters, allow for the regulation and flow of energy/organization/information that is required by the simplest and most complex organisms. What began at the chemical stage as a lipid membrane and operated according to chemical principles developed, according to this view, into ever more complex, self-regulating systems. Driven by what Nietzsche called the Will to Power and what is today known as a principle of self-organization, living things have always interpreted things in the world as good and bad by allowing some chemicals/organization through the selectively porous membrane while denying access to others.

If the selectively porous membrane is an origin of interpretation, genealogy is its descendant that interprets the ways humans have interpreted the world. Ideas are tools that facilitate or impede the survival and reproduction of some systems at the cost of other real and potential systems. Interpretation, like survival, is not solely a matter of tooth and nail. Cooperation, assimilation,

transformation, adaptation, and the like all involve acts of interpretation. Human groups and societies, like primordial organisms, interpret other entities as contributors or competitors, protectors or exploiters, and as nourishment or poison. Biological and conceptual systems that *understand* their environment well enough are those that survive and reproduce. Interpretive failures sometimes lead to systemic dissipation and to incorporation into other, perhaps more effective, interpreting systems.

This was the point of Nietzsche's emphasis on the *value of moral systems*. He claimed that so far as he could tell, no one had ever considered the value of particular morals or moral systems, and had only focused on what was *actually* good and bad, and to a lesser degree, on their origin. He was of the opinion that the morals of his society were symptomatic of systemic sickness or of an unhealthy entity that was dying because the ideas that were supposed to sustain the organization were in reality poisonous. To make matters worse, the traditional analytic did not allow us to critique the unhealthy value system because it could only rationalize and justify it. Required then was a new historical method that would allow us to re-evaluate our values. Nietzsche did not believe that this could be achieved by finding the view from nowhere. Because all sight and interpretation comes from some perspective, the best that this sort of analysis can capture is an understanding of which prior beliefs promoted the health of the system, which did not work, and why. This was to be the new task of moral history, and in order to investigate these biologically-inspired questions, Nietzsche needed a markedly different method than that used by the aristocratic genealogists and the progressive moral historians. He adopted the familiar name of genealogy, but conducted historical analysis as a philologist who used textual and documentary evidence to trace the evolution of words and ideas. The philological method of Nietzsche asks us to read the signs that represent the interplay of forces, structures, energy, and entropy and to offer an account of such battles as they occur at the most local and personal levels: in diaries, in plays and songs, in inaugural lectures, and wherever else the encoded, embodied, residual instinct of past struggles and mergers are to be found.

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## **Conclusion**

To briefly review and conclude, then, Nietzsche began his career as a philologist with an interest in how the evolution of words and concepts could inform changes in culture. After a decade as a professor of philology, Nietzsche resigned and became an independent scholar of philosophy. During that time, he encountered genealogical histories of morality which both interested and provoked him. Having already written several books furthering the goal of articulating a more complex sense of morality, he decided to write his own history of morals. The project assimilated competing views and transfigured their message in an enactment of the contention that the history of ideas can be studied as one would study the evolution of species. Though infused with a biophilosophy that was added during the course of his career, the genealogical approach had one of its origins in the philological approach outlined in his first lecture. Nietzsche's revised philological approach decentered the essence-derived conception of individuality and emphasized perspective, context, and the plurality of conceptual origins. This philologically-inspired perspective remains vital because it was one of the strongest influences on the development of a postmodern philosophy that continues to strive to disburden thinking of the naïve, stultifying narratives commonly associated with perspectives that sponsor an abhorrence of the existing world on account of oppression, injustice, or sin, and delight in imaginary worlds without agential humans.

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## A World “Funny as Shit”: Black Humor and the New Naturalism in Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes*

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In his eighth novel, *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), the late Harry Crews (d. 2012) portrays the plight of Joe Lon Mackey, a hapless, ex-high-school football-hero-turned-redneck-bootlegger who now runs the annual “Rattlesnake Roundup” in his rural South Georgia town of Mystic, in what can only be described as a darkly comic way. *Feast* may be Crews’s “maddest book,” as one critic argues, since “his humor [in it] is at its most vicious and cuts most deeply” (Moore 64)—and in more ways than one, as becomes evident as the novel winds down to its bizarre, even surreal conclusion. Such a mode of black humor accentuates well a setting populated by a cast of freakish characters, including Sheriff Buddy Matlow, Willard Miller, and Berenice and Hard Candy Sweet, many of whom adopt an absurdist perspective toward the both biological and societal restrictions affecting their lives. At one point early on, for instance, Joe Lon visits his sister Beeder (who has been driven, we discover later, to a kind of paranoid schizophrenia by her mother’s suicide some two years earlier) in her stench-filled bedroom at their father Big Joe’s house. There, just before Beeder “reache[s] down and lift[s] a piece of shit and put[s] it in her hair” (*Feast* 51), Joe Lon sits on the edge of her soiled bed with her. Together, they watch *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* on the TV set Beeder has turned up to a deafening volume: “There was a Mexican comic on now, explaining how much fun it had been to grow up in a ghetto in Los Angeles. He made starving, and rats, and broken plaster, and getting beat on the head by cops just funny as shit” (*Feast* 47).

Joe Lon’s world, too, is equally “funny as shit,” and the grotesque and increasingly manic-depressive manner in which he deals with it suggests, as William M. Moss claims, that this character is decidedly a “creature” of his “environment” who yet cannot be

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“measured by [...] a sociological or theological standard,” the product of a place with no “door [...] open to possibility” (38). But, it is also his very consciousness of his delimited condition, despite his violent behavior, that makes Joe Lon all-too-*human* as well, finally, and Crews’s novel *A Feast of Snakes* a poignant tragicomedy of pain and passion. Douglas Day, in an early review of the novel, summarizes this dichotomy nicely: “With all that Crews has done heretofore, one laughs and recoils; but with *A Feast of Snakes* one grieves, too” (17).

First, some generic definitions, liberal though they may be, are in order. According to the *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, “black humor”, with its origins in the 1960s’ antinovel and other absurdist works, such as Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), is “a dark, disturbing, and often morbid or grotesque mode of comedy” that trades in “death, suffering, or other anxiety-inducing subjects” (Murfin and Ray 34). For American humor critic Hamlin Hill, “the blackest of black humor is quite accurately described as the humor of the unspeakable” (61), and it “might best be defined as the realistic comic exploitation of the incongruities between overt social values (chiefly sexual) and its audience’s covert impulses” (Hill 62). Such humor, furthermore, “usually goes hand in hand with a pessimistic world view or tone; it manages to express a sense of hopelessness in a wry, sardonic way that is grimly humorous” (Murfin and Ray 34).<sup>1</sup> Near the beginning of Crews’s novel, for instance, the narrator tells us that Joe Lon “was laughing but there was no humor in it” (*Feast* 28). In essence, Crews employs a dark humor in *Feast* that is “alternately a snarl and laughter” (*Feast* 106), as Joe Lon and his buddy Willard Miller are described later during one of their more crazed episodes. Moreover, this kind of comic mode, as Bruce Jay Friedman states in the foreword to his 1965 anthology introducing the sub-genre, reveals that a “new [...] chord of absurdity has been struck [...], that there is a new mutative style afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction” (ix). For Crews, however, that “asylum,” as evidenced by the mid-1970s in *A Feast of Snakes*, is the “funny as shit” world *itself* for Joe Lon Mackey and the novelist’s mainly poor white people, or many of the other denizens populating fictional Mystic, Georgia, which is symbolic of the madhouse that is contemporary American society in general and its constrictions of class, place, and race in particular. For *A Feast of Snakes*, this type of



black humor is combined with what has subsequently been termed a “new” naturalism<sup>2</sup> or regionalism in fiction, which like the “dirty realism” of the late 1970s-early 1980s is “a form of naturalistic writing that would expose the underside of American domesticity, regionalism, class, and the media” (O’Donnell 47). In his 2001 book *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, Robert Rebein contends that such fictions render an “effect in both subject matter and technique that is somewhere between the hard-boiled and darkly comic” and follow the “impulse [...] to explore dark truths” (43), which are often exposed in “narratives of family, class, addition, and escape” (O’Donnell 47).

In Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes*, then, one of those dark truths depicted is the “shit-filled” life and limitations of Joe Lon Mackey, the book’s violent and self-destructive protagonist. Not even two years out of high school, Joe Lon is both poor and illiterate, so he knows, as does everyone else in Mystic, that he is not going on to college, like “to the University of Alabama to break bones for Bear Bryant” (*Feast* 29), or anywhere else, for that matter. This consciousness of his deterministic fate is made clear in the first part of the novel, and in a language by which Crews pulls no punches in mimicking, through a third-person-limited narrative perspective, Joe Lon’s bigoted and narrow point of view: “He kept thinking that he’d never tote the pigskin again, that he was destined to deal nigger whiskey [...]. He saw his life too clearly, knew too well where it was going” (*Feast* 27). That is, Joe Lon knew “he wasn’t going anywhere but to the little store where his daddy kept the back room full of bootleg whiskey” (*Feast* 29), and toward a life of desperation, if hardly quiet. In his own novels such as *Continental Drift* (1985) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), Russell Banks, another contemporary American chronicler of the white working-class male’s predicament, has called Crews “a comic moralist, Swiftian at times in his ferocity and wit,” a Juvenalian satirist who often expresses a “moral outrage” at the “helplessness and frustration” afflicting characters like Joe Lon (10-11). And, after Swift, there is certainly in Crews’s *Feast* an “excremental vision,” as one commentator terms it (see Jeffrey 47), that is no less outrageous or gross. In short, there is an awful lot of “shit” in *Feast*, with that expletive serving as the novel’s key or

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talismanic word, since Joe Lon's life is just full of it, and more or less literally, at that.

Both early and late, that shit, and repeated references to it, just keeps piling up throughout the book. From the "chemical shitters" Joe Lon has to bring in to cope with the shit produced during the week-long Roundup, "[h]uman shit in quantities that nobody could believe" (*Feast* 16, 17); to sister Beeder's penultimate comment to Joe Lon before he goes off unhinged about their Daddy's famous saying, "wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first" (173)<sup>3</sup>, there is, finally, "more shit than you can stir with a stick," as Joe Lon says at one point (*Feast* 64), and *then* some. Still, there is also in Crews's contemporary fiction a difference from Swift's scatological satire, as Moss goes on to explain: if Joe Lon's world is "full of shit," then "no political, economic, or sociological adjustments are likely to clean it up, or even to cover its smell" (39). This is because his fictional figures, or "Grits,"<sup>4</sup> as Crews refers affectionately to them, are essentially "Yahoos in a world without Houhynhynms, or a world in which every man finds himself both Yahoo and Houhynhym" (Moss 44) at once. Thus, you are as likely to shit on yourself (as occurs with Poncy, one of those "tourists" or "retirees stunned with boredom" [*Feast* 52] who has come up from Florida to the Roundup and who is tormented mercilessly by Joe Lon and his running-mate Willard [see *Feast* 108-09]) as to be shit on by others (as happens, for instance, to Gulliver in Part 4 of Swift's novel). As for those "outsiders," not just from the Southeast, such as Poncy, Duffy Deeter, and the fittingly-named Susan Gender (the latter two driving up in a custom Winnebago from the college town of Gainesville, Florida), but also from "as far away as [...] Canada and [...] Texas" (17), all coming to Mystic to partake in the yearly festivities, Crews "makes [it] clear that weirdness and the acceptable are in the eye of the beholder" (Shelton, "Harry Crews" 6). For instance, at one point near the beginning of *Feast*, Joe Lon's "old coach, Tump Walker, who was one of the great high-school football coaches in the country, and who was Honorary Chairman of the rattlesnake roundup" (he's depicted throughout as always shuffling his balls, "scowling[,] and dripping tobacco juice"), best conveys the town's attitude toward such visitors: "I tell you, son, they crazier ever year, they are. It's one tourist here that's tainted. If he ain't tainted, I never shit behind two heels.[...] Sumbitch's got five hundred snakes

over there in cages *in* his trailer” (*Feast* 59). Unlike the more stereotypical Southern grotesque, therefore, in which the local yokels are mocked from a comfortable distance, “Crews manages to have it both ways, to maintain humor and tragic intensity” (Moss 44). In other words, if we laugh at Joe Lon and his pals’ antics, we may also come to “nervously suspect that [these characters] occup[y] a world at no great distance from our own” (Moss 44). Thus, the laughter evoked by Crews’s fiction is of “that uncontrollable sort with which we nervously confront death and decay, the unknown and the all too well known” (Moss 45), or a most contemporary brand of black or even “sick” humor,<sup>5</sup> as it’s sometimes called. Ultimately, as critic David K. Jeffrey asserts, “Joe Lon’s ideals, his hopes and dreams for the future, even his life, are severely limited by the reality which excrement images,” with *Feast* operating as both “social commentary and social satire, a vulgar and realistic reminder of man’s animality and his final end” (Jeffrey 47).

One incident in the novel which effectively “combines [such] humor and pain” (Shelton, “George” 129) so characteristic of Crews’s voice, and also reveals the close proximity between love, which “has pitched its mansion in the place of excrement” (Jeffrey 52), and death, is the sexual coupling of Joe Lon and former girlfriend Berenice, represented here as disturbingly violent and grotesquely comic at once. At the same time that he is practically driving Berenice through the wall of his trailer as he is mounting her from behind, Joe Lon is thinking about his mother’s suicide some two years before. Simultaneously, Berenice,<sup>6</sup> a most willing if somewhat distracted participant in the whole sexual encounter, babbles on to Joe Lon about her past cheerleading exploits and baton-twirling competitions (including one, in a wicked bit of literary satire on Crews’s part, at “Ole Miss,” she says, “the home of the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute [...] in Oxford, Mississippi, the home of William Faulkner” [*Feast* 120]); Joe Lon’s “shitty younguns” (11) wail incessantly from the next room; and his physically-ruined wife Elfie stands outside in the dirt yard and likely witnesses the whole pathetic spectacle occurring in her home. Crews’s adept use of a third-person-limited narrative technique has Joe Lon, for his part, recall at this moment what “first dr[ove] his mother to infidelity and then suicide”

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(Buehrer 37). Having run off to Atlanta with a shoe salesman but brought back home by the abusive Big Joe,<sup>7</sup> she kills herself by putting a plastic bag over her head, cinching it to her throat with her husband's only tie, and pinning a note to herself, which sister Beeder first finds and which reads, "*bring me back now you son of a bitch*" (120). This particular mental flashback goes a long way toward explaining, even if it can never justify, Joe Lon's present dark mindset, here depicted by Crews's narrator while Joe Lon is laboring sexually over Berenice and also peering out the trailer window at Elf and the others in his dirt yard: "He did not know what love was [...] But he knew he carried it around with him, a scabrous spot of rot, of contagion, for which there was no cure" (*Feast* 117). It is such "love," then, Joe Lon concludes, that had "messed up everything" (118), including his mother's life and accounting for her death, and has essentially turned his *own* life to "shit." So, Joe Lon does not want to hear now from Berenice how she can "love," as she says, her new college boyfriend, Shep, and yet old Joe Lon as well. Instead, Joe Lon, "plunging deeply into her [Berenice's] ass" after she had already *just* performed fellatio on him, replies, "'Love [...] is taking it out of you mouth and sticking it in you ass' [...] 'But *true* love,' he said, 'goddam *true* love is taking it out of you ass and sticking it in you mouth'" (121), after which he flips her over and she "went down in a great spasm of joy, sucking like a baby before she ever got there" (*Feast* 121). If this scene is both disgusting and sickly funny, Joe Lon's metaphoric message seems clear, if pathos-ridden: even *love* is shit, the ultimate defilement of his life ever since his mother's death, and a condition he can never hope to clean up in any way that could possibly matter, the knowledge of which drives him to the brink of depression and madness.

Therefore, if there is a black, ribald humor in the novel, it is not pointed solely or even primarily at a lower-class character like Joe Lon, who at least expresses, for all his faults, an "unaffected honesty" (Pearson 54) about his life's circumstances and where he seems to be going, which is nowhere fast. Instead, as Michael Pearson proposes, Crews's comedy "shears both the pretensions of the sophisticate and the philistinism of the rube," with a laughter "balanced pointedly between sympathy and satire" (54). As such, Crews would flat-out reject the "superiority theory" by which "condescension and arrogance are central to [satiric] humor" in particular, as Joseph L.

Coulombe explains the concept in reference to Dorothy Parker's fiction; this theory is evidenced when "people who laugh consider themselves better than their comic targets, thus separating themselves from the foolish and error-prone" (46). Crews more often than not, in contrast, directs the brunt of his humor at those few upper-class characters depicted in his works, *A Feast of Snakes* included. That is, as another critic suggests, "in [his] novels, Crews clearly sympathizes with his grotesques [...], and their behavior is often more admirable than that of so-called normal society" (Lynskey).<sup>8</sup> Such sympathy, I would argue, is perhaps what distinguishes Crews from an earlier generation of Southern, specifically Georgian, writers of fictional satire like Erskine Caldwell<sup>9</sup> and Flannery O'Connor.

Take, for example, in *Feast*, the case of the preppy Shep Martin, Berenice's new boyfriend whom she has brought back from the University of Georgia in Athens to meet Joe Lon at that year's Roundup in Mystic. If Joe Lon has been stuck and wallowing away in Mystic, the same cannot be said for Berenice, who returns now "fuller, stronger, surer of herself. [...] [S]omething [in her was] richer and deeper and more complicated," and "[w]hatever it was did not make him feel good" (*Feast* 60). Joe Lon is left thus disappointed in himself and appalled by the change in his old high-school squeeze, which in part is a mocking stab, at least on Crews's part, at her fake erudition:

But these by God weren't the good old days and he hadn't seen her [i.e., Berenice] in over a year, because her father, Dr. Sweet, had given her a trip to Paris the previous summer to study French. French! The very notion of somebody studying French threw Joe Lon into a rage. (*Feast* 60).

And as for her college-boy, clearly upper-class companion, we are told that "Joe Lon disliked him immediately, disliked the soft look of his face, the way his lower lip seemed to pout, and disliked the eyes that would have been beautiful had they belonged to a girl" (60).<sup>10</sup> "Shep was a fucking dog's name, wasn't it?" (61), or so Joe Lon asks himself, perhaps half-seriously. Besides that, "Joe Lon could have spat on him for the way he was dressed," with "double-knit tangerine trousers, fuzzy bright-yellow sweater, white shoes, and a goddam matching belt. His hair was neatly cut and he looked as

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though he had slept with his head in a can of Crisco” (60-61), which leads Joe Lon to nickname him, a bit later, “The Crisco Kid” (*Feast* 64). And if Shep’s fastidious self-presentation is not bad enough, Berenice informs Joe Lon that Shep is on the debate team at college, at which piece of information Joe Lon muses, as only one of Crews’s inimitable characters can: “He had never been introduced to anyone on a debating team before and he wasn’t sure what to say because he wasn’t real sure what it was. Probably some fag foreign game like soccer. Anybody that’d play soccer would suck a dick, that’s what Joe Lon thought” (61). Then, when Joe Lon asks his buddy Willard, who is the new “Boss Snake” of the Mystic Rattlers football team and who has already concluded that Shep is probably a “dirt track specialist” (73) (a fine Southernism and slur for homosexual), “How the hell you play debate anyhow?”, his friend enlightens him, in a wildly funny “flight of fancy,” on what “he imagines the sport to be like” (Shelton, “George” 126):

“It’d make you sick just to see it, Joe Lon. They play it with a little rubber ring.”

“Rubber ring?” said Joe Lon, feeling an immediate bilious outrage start to pump from his heart.

“That’s what it’s played with,” said Willard. “These two guys wear little white slippers and ...”

His voice loud with disbelief and shock, Joe Lon said, “White slippers.”

“Little pointy fuckers,” said Willard. “And they throw the rubber rings to each other and try to catch [them] in their mouths.”

Joe Lon stood abruptly from the table. “Mouth?” he yelled.

“Mouth!”

“Right’n the teeth,” Willard said.

Joe Lon lifted his palm, thick square fingers spread, and stared at it. “Berenice brought that sumbitch all the way to Mystic to shake my hand.”

“Looks like it,” said Willard. (*Feast* 73-74)

In his essay “George Washington Harris and Harry Crews,” critic Frank W. Shelton, who has written extensively on Crews’s fiction, offers the following analysis:

While this whole scene might be regarded as simply another instance of the ignorance of Joe Lon and Willard, in the

context of the novel as a whole it functions in exactly the opposite way. Shep is effete, pretentious, and supercilious. A junior in college, he is unable to decide whether to become a lawyer or a brain surgeon. [...] There are not a great many upper-class characters in the novel, but those who do appear are almost invariably the butt of the humor. (26).

In short, whether or not Willard *really* knows what a debate team member does is less important than his bitterly sarcastic tone here. To Joe Lon and his kind, the pretensions of such sophisticates or “wannabes” like Shep are corrupt and hypocritical manifestations of a “so-called normal society” (Shelton, “Poor Whites” 48) that, all told, “ain’t worth shit,” as Joe Lon bluntly puts it, in small-town South Georgia. In Mystic, the main topic of “conversation” is “about” that most unholy trinity of “snake hunting and pussy and violence” (*Feast* 82), with not much to speak of beyond that, thus marking the very physical limitations of Joe Lon’s world view, which is figured in “the dark fortress-like wall of trees that surrounded his little campground” (*Feast* 61).

Another instance proving that Crews is an “equal-opportunity satirist,” as it were, concerns the fate of one of his grotesque rubes, Buddy Matlow, and his run-in with another supposed sophisticate, Dr. Sweet, Berenice’s father and one of those few “professional”-class characters in the novel. Buddy, the county’s peg-legged sheriff, had lost his leg after having, as he says, “stepped on a pungy stick that had been dipped in Viet Nam Ease shit” (yes, more “shit,” and Crews does an exacting job of recreating the rough “Grit” voices of such characters), so “Goddammit he’d paid his dues, and now it was his turn” (*Feast* 15). Buddy “gets his,” or gets his sadistic kicks out of locking up young, poor, mostly black women and then raping them in their cells at the jail (with the help of an ubiquitous rattlesnake, on at least one gruesome occasion). But in an incredible passage that presages and even “out-Bobbitts” Bobbitt (if you recall the infamous case of John Wayne and wife Lorena during the early 1990s and the media frenzy it generated<sup>11</sup>), Lottie Mae, one of Buddy’s former victims whom he picks up in his cruiser during the carnivalesque Roundup happenings, pulls out a straight-razor from her shoe and slices off his penis—on which, by the way, he is wearing a “snake-

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headed rubber[ ] with a diamondback pattern” he had bought from some “longhairs” (*Feast* 53), or hippie campers, the day before. Buddy then shows up at the home of Dr. Sweet, who is discussing career prospects with the effeminate Shep and who views himself as both well-above yet hopelessly out of touch with the “ordinary folk,”<sup>12</sup> as he condescendingly calls his neighbors, living out “in the provinces” (*Feast* 135, 134) of Lebeau County. As Dr. Sweet remarks snootily in reply to Shep’s sycophantic praise of his ability to “turn a phrase,” “When I retire I plan to devote my life to *belles lettres*. [...] But for now, I have to keep this county as healthy and wholesome as modern medicine will allow” (*Feast* 134). Hemorrhaging all over Sweet’s living-room floor, Buddy, “slick with blood,” wordlessly hands his severed penis, *still* sheathed in its rattlesnake condom, to Shep, who whimpers, “Somebody’s cut his dick off.” At the sight of this horrific display, the good doctor, who proves to be completely ineffectual and squeamish (or, so much for the benefits of “modern medicine”!), falls “to the floor in a faint” (*Feast* 136). Word of this event gets back to Joe Lon and the others at the pre-Roundup beauty pageant, where they are about to crown the new “Miss Rattlesnake of [...] 1975” (136), and the men begin to conjecture on Buddy’s condition. But Coach Tump, Joe Lon and Willard’s legendary former leader (and Buddy was a “teammate,” he reminds them, some years past), “said it didn’t make much of a shit where they taken him if somebody’d gone and cut off his dick. ‘Wouldn’t surprise me if this don’t put a damper on the whole thing’” (*Feast* 152), or the following day’s actual snake hunt. In fact, our narrator puts it in the most straightforward, and thus downright if terribly funny, fashion:

The story Coach Tump had heard said they’d packed it in ice. They had packed Buddy Matlow’s dick in ice and salt and they meant to sew it back on and that was why they had gone all the way to Atlanta because they had better facilities for sewing dicks back on at the big hospital there. (*Feast* 152)

The gallows humor here is particularly cutting (pun very much intended), however, and in any case Buddy proves to be “shit out of luck,” as Willard says, since the guys soon find out that Buddy died in the back seat of Dr. Sweet’s car before they (i.e., the doctor, Shep, and Buddy’s deputy, Luther Peacock<sup>13</sup>) had even gotten out of the county (*Feast* 155). Thus, while in any other context this scene and



subsequent discussion of its after-effects would seem completely and sickeningly awful, it is presented here with a sharp-edged (much like Lottie Mae's razor that does the trick, or "kill[s] it," i.e., the snake, as she was directed cryptically to do by Beeder earlier in the narrative [see *Feast* 51]), even savage sense of humor that mitigates the horror, turning it to dark comedy instead. So when Willard tells Joe Lon, "'The poor bastard [i.e., Buddy] did catch some shit in his life, didn't he'" (*Feast* 155),<sup>14</sup> that is a bald statement of fact, not a question, rhetorical or otherwise, and just as applicable to most of the others in *A Feast of Snakes*, including Joe Lon Mackey. That is, Joe Lon's "shit" finally catches up with him as well, and he resigns himself to his dark fate and embarks on a shooting spree which culminates in his own death at the hands of a ravaging mob of hunters at the novel's climactic conclusion.

When Harry Crews died in March of 2012, Margalit Fox, in a tribute essay for *The New York Times*, labeled the novelist's works as consistently "betray[ing] a fundamental empathy, chronicling his characters' search for meaning in a dissolute, end-stage world." In truth, there is a decidedly apocalyptic tenor to the description of that desolate setting near the close of Crews's *A Feast of Snakes*: "Joe Lon [...] sat regarding the far wall of dark pine where it started to rise to the scrub oak ridge above which the sun was a thin white disk in the cold fog rising out of the ground. That long oak ridge above the pines was where they would hunt the snakes" (*Feast* 169-70). And, as it happens, this is also where *he* would "hunt" and kill some of the Roundup's participants<sup>15</sup> in a phantasmagoric spectacle whereby he is finally tossed into a pit and metaphorically drowns in a vat of "boiling snakes": "He [...] went under and came up, like a swimmer breaking water. For the briefest instant, he gained his feet. Snakes hung from his face." Then, he goes "down again" for the last time, with "his sister Beeder in her dirty white nightgown squatting off on the side of the hill with Lottie Mae, watching" (*Feast* 177). Still, to those critics who lambasted him for such "sensationalism" in his fiction, Crews would often reply, as Fox explains, that "in effect, [...] it took decadence to lampoon decadence," and thus he often in his novels employs "the blackest of black comedy" (Fox) to achieve this end. Crews's friend and something of a former protégé, Mississippi writer

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Larry Brown, in his introduction to a collection of critical essays edited by Erik Bledsoe on the Georgia-born novelist and his work published in 2001, perhaps puts it best, in reference specifically to *A Feast of Snakes* but also to Crews's fictional world in general, when he calls it "an unearthly combination of hilarity and stark reality and beauty and sadness, and [after reading the novel for the first time] I could only shake my head over the power of the imagination that created it" (3). For all of the novel's excessive, grotesque nature, the "shit" and dark humor pervading *A Feast of Snakes* reveal the stark limitations of Joe Lon Mackey's life and his outlook on it, and with no exit from that walled-in, tree-lined rural ghetto, it would seem, except through madness, as with Beeder and Lottie Mae, or through death that it is often self-inflicted, as in the case of Joe Lon's mother and her lost son himself. Hence, it is a way of laughing in the face of the abyss or, more appropriate to Crews's hardscrabble South Georgia environs, the "shithole" his people, always confronting bare survival, are ever on the edge of falling into, much like Joe Lon in that snake pit that swallows him whole at the novel's close. Better still, it's "down the shitter to nowhere land," as another classic Crews's character, Shereel Dupont, in the 1990 novel *Body*, so suitably jibes (222), so you might as well quit "wishing" in that one hand while that other hand "fills up," as of course it is bound to do anyway.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, Crews mixes his disgust at the social conditions that make Joe Lon Mackey's plight possible with an underlying "identification,"<sup>16</sup> if not outright sympathy, for the poor white protagonist himself. Still, we as an audience can, like Crews, claim no "comfortable superiority to the characters of the fiction" itself (Hill, "Black Humor and the Mass Audience" 9). Ultimately, Crews asks us to *share*, as *uncomfortable* or *disconcerting* as that may be, his characters' "emblematic [...] condition of [...] hopelessness and despair" (Hill, "Mass Audience" 9). In this sense, Crews's form of black humor fiction goes against the grain, too, of the genre's usual manifestations, as described by critic Harlan Hill in his essay "Black Humor and the Mass Audience." That is, his is *not* the "surreal fantasy" of "high-culture humorists" from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, such as Nathanael West and those of the *New Yorker* school; nor does Crews employ the "non-satiric tones" of later writers from the 1960s and 70s, such as Philip Roth and Gore Vidal (Hill, "Mass Audience" 5). Instead, a novel such as *A Feast of Snakes* represents a

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blending of the fantastic and the grotesque that is closer to Swift than to Rabelais or Bakhtin, but with an added dose of naturalistic determinism that makes Crews's dark comic vision very much his own.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further definitions and examples of this mode or genre in relation to contemporary American fiction and popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, see Max F. Schultz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1973), Elaine B. Safer's *The Contemporary American Comic Epic: The Novels of Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988), and Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen's *Encyclopedia of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Humor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000), pp. 46-49.

<sup>2</sup> For another linking of the naturalistic tradition to Crews's fiction, see Tim Edwards's article "'Everything is Eating Everything Else': The Naturalistic Impulse in Harry Crews's *A Feast of Snakes*" (1998; in Works Cited). Edwards attempts to place Crews's novel in the context of this so-called "new" or "postmodern naturalism" evident in American writing of the 1970s-80s, with, as he puts it, "that sense of indeterminacy [...] in Joe Lon's character frustrat[ing] our efforts to determine empirically whether he can control himself" (52). However, one of those "forces" that *does* seem to "explain[ ]" (Edwards 52), at least in part, the nature of Joe Lon's actions is a rather old-fashioned brand of economic determinism, I would argue, related to this character's poor white class position.

<sup>3</sup> This truism, which Crews has explained elsewhere (for instance, in his memoir *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, pp. 128-29, reprinted in *Classic Crews* [1993; see Works Cited]) he first heard as a young boy and learned from his mother, is voiced repeatedly by characters throughout his fictions. For example, Too Much, the aptly-named buxom, backwoods bombshell of one of Crews's last novels, 1998's *Celebration* (in Works Cited), responds to a delivery boy's "thinkin'" about what he "ought to git" out of her (obviously, something below-the-belt!) with this tidbit: "'Think in one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first'" (97).

<sup>4</sup> See Tammy Lytal and Richard R. Russell's "'Some of Us Do It Anyway': An Interview With Harry Crews" (1994; in Works Cited), in which Crews expresses his "admir[ation]" for such "Grits," or his "people," as he calls them, the rural poor from south Georgia in particular, since he feels very much "one of them" (540). A recent anthology, *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader* (Ed. Brian Carpenter and Tom Franklin, Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2012), also acknowledges Crews as one of the founding fathers of what has come to be called the "Grit Lit" movement in contemporary Southern fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Bukowski (1920-1994), in short story collections such as *South of No North* (1973) and novels like *Factotum* (1975), is perhaps the granddaddy of this comic form, as well as a forerunner of the aforementioned "dirty realism" in recent American fiction.

<sup>6</sup> For all the male violence that pervades the novel, it must be said that most of the female characters in *Feast*, like Berenice and Hard Candy Sweet, Lottie Mae, Beeder, Elfie, and Joe Lon's mother, are no wilting violets. In fact, they are survivors through and through, and can hold their own in the face of a naturalistic environment that ultimately defeats the likes of Joe Lon—or, they die trying (as with Joe Lon's mother) or choose madness as an escape from an intolerable reality (as with Beeder and Lottie Mae). Thus, I tend to favor Elise S. Lake (see her article in Works Cited) and her assessment of Crews's sympathy for the predicament of these characters, since the author acts as "a social reporter and critic, who embeds his fictional women in uniquely Southern sociocultural contexts" (Lake 79-80). Hence, they are less stereotypes or victims of patriarchy or misogyny, as critics like John Seelye (625) and Patricia V. Beatty (112; see her article in Works Cited) have contended, and much more the products of a deterministic "modern society" that more often than not "defeats both sexes" (Lake 93).

<sup>7</sup> Big Joe Mackey, despite his brutality toward his family and the pit-bulls he trains "with a savage and unrelenting cruelty" (40), is also the focus of some black humor in Crews's novel. In one horribly ironic instance, Big Joe, great role model that he is for his children, is presented as "a deacon in the Church of Jesus Christ with Signs Following and

was forever trying to get Joe Lon to start going” (45-6). Appropriately, though, Big Joe’s is one of the “snake-handling” churches (whose members also often practice speaking-in-tongues and the drinking of strychnine) that is part of Pentecostal Holiness denomination (Victor, the preacher from Virginia who comes to the Roundup annually to buy snakes for his congregation, is likely part of the same church). In another example of black comedy not lost on Crews’s readers, even if this father-figure seems clueless to it, Big Joe “call[s] to” Joe Lon, who has begun to break down and started howling in the dog-pit before Tuffy’s big fight, “not to go crazy like his sister did. ‘Don’t go crazy, Joe Lon! Don’t go crazy!’” (*Feast* 157). Old Big Joe seems to feel as if through some act of self-restraint alone Joe Lon can avoid Beeder’s fate, and, even more darkly ironic, as if he himself and his behavior represent what is considered “normal,” finally, in this environment.

<sup>8</sup> Other examples of such “normals” who come across as actually more freakish than their poor white country counterparts are depicted in Crews’s 1990 novel *Body: A Tragicomedy* (in Works Cited). These include Russell “Muscle” Morgan and the whole “body sculpting tribe” (53) as well as those who cater to them at the Ms. Cosmos pageant being held at the Blue Flamingo Hotel in Miami Beach. Hotel manager Dexter Friedkin is just one of these urban weirdoes whose appearance is completely artificial, from the constantly-shifting toupee on his head to the fake tan he has gotten out of a bottle. As Harry “Nail Head” Barnes, one of Crews’s “Grits” from Waycross, Georgia, who has travelled down to see his “feeadsaying” (*Body* 66) Shereel Dupont né Dorothy Turnipseed compete, would have it, these urbanites are “people who ain’t normal in any way that counts” (*Body* 125).

<sup>9</sup> John Seelye, however, in his article “Georgia Boys: The Redclay Satyrs of Erskine Caldwell and Harry Crews” (1980; see Works Cited), offers a somewhat contradictory view of Crews’s position among these past or earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-century Southern fiction writers. While he rightly notes that “Crews comes from the other end of the long red-dirt road, belonging to that class of folk about which Caldwell and Faulkner condescendingly write” (619), Seelye still sees *A Feast of Snakes* in particular as “deeper than ever in Caldwell Country” (623), with Crews’s characters like Joe Lon Mackey retaining “the same obsessive manias that so often motivate Caldwell’s country folk” (617).

<sup>10</sup> This language sounds remarkably similar to the way Ernest Hemingway denigrates his supposed “friend,” F. Scott Fitzgerald, in another “feast” of a book, if one less grotesque in setting and humorous in tone. In a mean-spirited vignette titled “Scott Fitzgerald” (147-76) from his posthumous *A Moveable Feast* (1964; see Works Cited), Hemingway describes Scott as “a man who looked like a boy with a face between handsome and pretty. He had very fair wavy hair, a high forehead, excited and friendly eyes and a delicate long-lipped Irish mouth that, on a girl, would have been the mouth of a beauty. [...] The mouth worried you until you knew him and then it worried you more” (149).

<sup>11</sup>For a devastatingly funny, retrospective take on the whole wacky episode and its aftermath, see Mario Vargas Llosa’s essay “The Penis or Life: The Bobbitt Affair” in the collection *Making Waves: Essays* (Ed. & trans. John King, New York: Farrar, 1997), pp. 315-19.

<sup>12</sup> These would seem to include his own daughters Berenice and Hard Candy and their respective boyfriends, Joe Lon and Willard, who see him merely as a supplier of pills, as they have a key to his “drug cabinet,” which they raid on a regular basis: “They would get in there / and [...] would eat whatever [they] felt like—a little something to take [them] up, or maybe bring [them] down a bit” (*Feast* 26-27).

<sup>13</sup> I cannot help but think, given his affinities to the late writer from nearby (or, just up the road from Crews’s “home place” of Bacon Co., what he has called “the rickets-and-

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hookworm belt of South Georgia”; see *A Childhood*, p. 31, and “Introduction” to *Classic Crews*, p. 10, respectively, in Works Cited) Milledgeville, Georgia, that this surname reference is Crews’s sly wink-and-nod to Flannery O’Connor, whose trademark peacocks populate her fictions in the same manner butterflies do Nabokov’s self-referential works (more-than-amateur lepidopterist that the Russian-American novelist certainly was).

<sup>14</sup>Later, Willard also says, when Joe Lon (having blacked-out in the pre-fight dog-pit on his Daddy’s property) asks him if they know who killed Buddy: “No, and I don’t look for them ever to find out either. Weren’t but several hundred had reason to cut his dick off” (*Feast* 160). Here, then, is your rough justice or comeuppance, at least South Georgia-style, since Buddy did, ironically, finally “get his” (15), or what was coming to him, and in the most brutally fitting manner, at that.

<sup>15</sup> These include Victor, the snake-handling preacher from Virginia, Luther Peacock, Berenice, and then “the nearest hunter” (*Feast* 176). Commenting upon this ending, David K. Jeffrey (see his article in Works Cited) suggests there may even be a strange “logic and at least literary appropriateness” to Joe Lon’s choice of victims, since he “murders characters who represent religion, law, and love,” as well as one who “images the faceless mob”—i.e., all “forces [...] aligned against Joe Lon from the outset of the novel” (50). Jeffrey has to admit, however, that there may be “something at least slightly absurd in an attempt to erect an elaborate rational schema on the basis of something so essentially non-rational as violence” (51).

<sup>16</sup> In his interview with the *Georgia Review*, when asked how he felt about his doomed male protagonist in *Feast*, Crews replied: “I identify with Joe Lon [...] I really, really identify with him” (qtd. in Lytal and Russell 542). But, this is not to say Crews condones his character’s behavior, particular his at-times maniacal violence. As Russell Banks best puts it in his review of Crews’s 1987 novel *All We Need of Hell*: “Like many Southern male writers, [Crews] portrays violence as an expression of helplessness and frustration, but unlike many of them he refuses to sentimentalize it as a more or less harmless form of bawdy, late adolescent behavior” (10).

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## “A Girl Gets Sick of a Rose”: A Woman’s Desire to Break Free

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Born in 1917 into a stable home environment with parents who loved her and supported her earliest writing attempts, Gwendolyn Brooks was molded from the start into a poet who followed the rules. Her exposure to poetry began when she was still a young girl, and her poetic voice was shaped by the classics: poems written by white men for a white audience. Brooks learned as a young poet how to create poems that would appeal to a white demographic. In her early career, she followed the “rules” established by a primarily white literary culture; she “played the game” and found success. However, lying beneath the surface of these neatly formal poems exist speakers who often struggle with the desire to break free from the restrictions that women face both creatively and personally. In many of Brooks’s poems, her female speakers or protagonists are also following “the rules” outlined by a white society, yet they feel constrained and unhappy. Her early poems, which explore the darker sides of urban life, also tend to glamorize the lives of women who are breaking the rules. Some of Brooks’s later poems directly celebrate women who have freed themselves from the constraints of white America. When Brooks finally joined the Black Arts Movement in 1967, she experienced a freedom from the confines of an imposed white culture, and this freedom is reflected in her poetry.

To understand the underlying theme of women wanting to break free from societal expectations in Brooks’s poems, one may first look at the journey that Brooks took to find freedom in her poetry. In her memoir, *Report from Part One*, Brooks describes her childhood home as a place that “always warmly awaited [her]. Welcoming, enveloping. Home meant a quick-walking, careful, Duty-Loving mother, who played the piano, made fudge, made cocoa and prune whip and apricot pie” (39). Brooks asserts that her mother set a strict domestic example for young Gwendolyn; her mother followed the expectations laid out by society, and she expected Gwendolyn to

do the same. Brooks's mother took care of the family and the household, clearly demonstrating the socially-acceptable role of an African-American mother and wife. Her mother's life consisted of burdensome domestic duties that Brooks would later examine in poems such as "kitchenette building" and "when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story," and though Brooks adhered to a domestic routine in her own life for decades, she ultimately rejected marriage and the constraints of marriage once she aligned with the Black Arts Movement and separated from her husband.

Though Brooks's mother had a large impact on her writing career, Brooks was also very influenced by her father when it came to a formal education and the pursuit of knowledge. Brooks describes her early memories of her father as being "a figure of power" to her when she was a child, "with kind eyes, songs, and tense recitations for [her] brother and [her]self" (*Report* 39). Her father's love of poetry and literature encouraged Brooks to pursue these venues of self-expression. Her parents' support continued on into her early teen years when her father provided her with "an old desk given to him 'at McKinley's,' a desk with many little compartments [...] and a removable glass-protected shelf at the top, for books" (*Report* 56). Brooks's father wanted her to pursue a formal education, and her mother was enthusiastic to discover that her teenage daughter could write. In her memoir, Brooks recalls sitting at that desk her father gave her and remembers that not only were her mother's and father's expectations sitting on her shoulders, but in addition, "certainly there, also, to look down at [her] whenever [she] sat at the desk, was Paul Laurence Dunbar. 'You,' [her] mother had early announced, 'are going to be the *lady* Paul Laurence Dunbar'" (*Report* 56).

Because she was raised in a home that adhered to societal norms and expectations (norms outlined by a white America), Brooks admits that in the first half of her life she was very much trying to fit into a white literary tradition. Her poems were often constructed in established "white" forms, such as sonnets and ballads. In an interview with Ida Lewis in 1971, Brooks claims that her view of the contrasting cultures of black America and white America was "that integration was the solution" because she "relied heavily on Christianity. People were really good, [she] thought; there was some

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good even in people who seemed to be evil” (qtd. in *Report* 175). She acknowledges that those beliefs were “naïve,” but she was raised in an environment that did not offer any sort of radical deviation from white society; she grew up reading white authors and studying white poets, so her poetry naturally conformed to these white standards.

Before joining the Black Arts Movement, Brooks was criticized by the African-American writing community for adhering to the “world of white arts and letters,” though this world had offered her many successes, including a Pulitzer Prize (Baker 21). Thus, in her early writing career, Brooks faced a dilemma that many black writers have encountered: should she align with the expectations of a white community of writers and enjoy success, or should she reject the white standards of literature, and instead align with other black artists? Ultimately, she chose to align with the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s, a move that marked a great change in her poetry. After decades of writing for a “white audience,” Brooks altered her poetry to appeal to black readers, and she claimed that she no longer cared about writing for a white audience. Her once subtle politics became more vocal and direct in her later poems, and many white critics accused her poetry of suffering when her subject matter and form changed. The same critics who had championed Brooks’s first book of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, accused Brooks of being “too black” when she joined the Black Arts Movement.

Writing as a black poet in a predominantly white field, Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) contains an entire section of sonnets and other tightly-controlled formal poems. Her use of form in this manuscript reflects the constraints Brooks faced politically, socially, and creatively. In his essay “The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks,” Houston A. Baker, Jr. claims that Brooks, like other black writers of the early twentieth century, “seems caught between two worlds” (21). Baker describes Brooks’s poetry as “tense, complex, rhythmic verse that contains the metaphysical complexities of John Donne and the word magic of Apollinaire, Eliot, and Pound” (21). Clearly in this collection, Brooks is following in the tradition of the white men who came before her, yet she uses a formal style to give voice to the urban black people that she saw growing up in a poor neighborhood in Southside Chicago. Baker views this style as a way to “explicate the condition of black Americans trapped behind a veil that separates them from the white world” (21). Baker’s

purposeful use of the word “explicate” here reminds the reader of the discerning nature of Brooks’s poetry. Just as a reader might attempt to interpret the meaning of a poet’s verse, Brooks attempts to explicate the condition of black Americans in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, the day-to-day African-American experience is Brooks’s text, and her poems are the interpretation of that text. Perhaps that is why when one reads her poetry, one becomes aware of the “metaphysical complexity” and “word magic” of which Baker is so fond.

Baker goes on to explore the contrasting paradigms at play in Brooks’s poems. He writes, “what one seems to have is white style and black content –two warring ideals in one dark body” (21). This “white style and black content” that Baker describes is evident in Brooks’s poem “Sadie and Maud.” This poem, written in quatrains with a heavy end-rhyme on the second and fourth line of each stanza, presents the story of two sisters, Sadie and Maud. The restrictive rhyme scheme and sing-song tone of the poem mocks the stereotypical African-American characters that Brooks saw in the urban neighborhoods of Chicago. Sadie is a wild child while Maud follows the rules. According to the poem, “Sadie was one of the livingest chits / In all the land” (7-8) and she “bore two babies / Under her maiden name. / Maud and Ma and Papa / Nearly died of shame” (9-12). Obviously, Sadie has enjoyed her life and taken risks, and although she has brought “shame” onto her family for having babies out of wedlock, she has experienced life in a way that Maud has not. Unlike her sister, “Maud, who went to college, / Is a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone / In this old house” (17-20). Maud, who has followed the rules and lived a noble life, is ultimately alone because she has lived a life without taking any risks, whereas Sadie has made mistakes but probably experienced love or something close to it. After all, she has had two babies, so she has experienced a sexual relationship with at least one man, and, quite possibly, several men.

The poem suggests that a life of playing by the rules is not only boring, but ultimately unfulfilling. The reader who is familiar with Brooks’s autobiography may project the character of Maud onto the poet, assuming that this character is representative of Brooks in

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her own early life. Like Maud, Brooks pursued a formal education rather than running around with boys from her neighborhood. But that does not mean that Brooks did not feel the same urges Sadie feels in “Sadie and Maud”; Brooks just did not act on them. In her memoir, the poet describes her teenage years as being rather solitary. She writes, “I spent most of my free time in my room, writing, reading, reflecting. I was always mooning over some little boy or other. I’d go to bed and dream of embracing and marrying Him [...] of being desperately loved by Him. The adored Gwendolyn” (*Report* 57). As a young woman, Brooks felt overwhelmed by her own sexual and romantic desires, but she never pursued them because she was “timid to the point of terror, silent, primly dressed” (57). Because her parents had such high expectations for her (after all, she was expected to be the “*lady* Paul Laurence Dunbar”), Brooks could not pursue a frivolous life of chasing boys. Instead, she was expected to live a serious, studious life, and once she found an appropriate man, then she would settle down for marriage and motherhood. To the onlooker, Brooks was the conservative Maud, but her poetry reveals that on the inside, she was the unconventional Sadie.

In her essay “For Sadie and Maud,” Eleanor Holmes Norton views Sadie and Maud in a more serious light; she sees the sisters as “each in her own way living the unrequited life of the black woman” (61). Norton asserts, “Maud ‘went to college’ – or wherever black women have gone over the years to escape the perils of living the nearly predestined half-life of the black woman in this country” (61). Norton suggests that black women in America face two options: live a life dominated by men and domestic demands, or escape that life by pursuing an education, and thus never have a family. She points out that Maud “lives alone rather than incur Sadie’s risks or risk Sadie’s pleasures” (61). Though Norton does not necessarily see Sadie’s choices as being preferable to Maud’s choices, Brooks seems to argue with this poem that Sadie leads a more fulfilling life than her sister does. Sadie breaks society’s rules and enjoys a more exciting life, despite the fact that in the process, she disappoints her family. Ironically, Sadie is liberated by her choices while Maud is oppressed by hers. At the time that Brooks wrote this poem, she was struggling with her own domestic responsibilities that accompany being a wife and mother. She had to deal with the limitations associated with conforming to societal expectations, and while it is hasty to assume

Brooks wrote “Sadie and Maud” to channel her own frustrations with repressed sexual desire, the reader notices the poem clearly suggests the wild Sadie revels in a better life than the lonely Maud.

Just as the speaker celebrates Sadie’s unconventional behavior in “Sadie and Maud,” the speaker in “a song in the front yard” is also attracted to the unorthodox, dangerous aspects of life. The speaker introduces herself as a girl who has “stayed in the front yard all [her] life” (1), so she wants “a peek at the back / where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows” (2). Clearly, the front yard in this poem is representative of the safe and honorable life that a “good girl” would lead, whereas the backyard represents the danger and wildness of a life without restraint. Though the speaker in the poem is an adolescent, it is evident that this child’s voice channels a grown woman’s desires. Many women who live safe, paint-by-number lives crave a taste of the wild side of life. The speaker in the poem asserts, “a girl gets sick of a rose” (4), implying that a rose, which is symbolic of purity and romance, is less desirable than the weeds of the backyard, which represent the untamed, free-spirited “charity children” having fun (7).

The speaker not only wants to go into the backyard, but she actually wants to go “maybe down the alley,” which suggests that she is interested in pursuing a longer journey into recklessness (6). This speaker is not innocent; she claims in a line laden with sexual desire, “I want to have a good time today” (8). The speaker’s mother, of course, represents society’s expectations of properly-raised daughters; the mother “sneers” at the charity children down the alley just as society sneers at women who sleep around or reject traditional domestic roles (11). The speaker’s mother does not want her child to associate with those children down the street. After all, the mother believes that “Johnnie Mae / will grow up to be a bad woman” (13-14) and that “George’ll be taken to Jail soon or late / (On account of last winter he sold [their] back gate)” (15-16). Johnnie Mae and George are despicable in the mother’s eyes, but the speaker is captivated by them; she thinks “it’s fine / How they don’t have to go in at quarter to nine” (11-12).

According to Ron Giles, Brooks “invites a psychobiographical interpretation” to this poem because she resented the fact that she had

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to come in early when she was a child (169). Giles suggests this childhood resentment has carried over into her adulthood, and perhaps Brooks desires to break the rules and “be a bad woman, too, / and wear the brave stockings of night-black lace / and strut down the streets with paint on [her] face” (18-20). The speaker’s awareness of what it means to be a “bad woman” indicates that the adult Brooks is voicing her cravings here; as Giles asserts, “the ironic quality of the girl’s expression betrays a rather well-developed sense of self, and she is now anticipating the time when she can act on her desires” (169). Ronald Janssen also recognizes the maturity of subject matter in this poem; he claims the “back gate” that George has stolen “collects libidinal energy from the surrounding references to ‘bad’ women” (43). Janssen goes on to assess the psychological connection between the poet and the speaker of the poem: “The poem shows us the dynamics of the human psyche at work—several forces working against each other trying to find some way to resolve the tension of individual desire and parental and social expectation” (43).

While “a song in the front yard” is not necessarily a blatant depiction of the poet’s desire to live the life of a “bad woman” who wears lacy black stockings (a woman who is clearly a prostitute), the poem does indeed glamorize the darker choices a woman could make. The poem deals with cultural norms in a subtle way. The speaker in “a song in the front yard” suggests that there are two types of women in this neighborhood; there are the women who live decent lives dictated by motherhood and responsibility, and there are the women who go out and have a good time, exploring their own sexual desires. This second type of woman may be living a dangerous life, but in many ways, by rejecting society’s standards and expectations, Brooks suggests this woman is living a freer life. The poet celebrates this type of woman by embodying a speaker who thinks this type of life is “fine.” However, one could point out that the speaker is forced to choose between being “good” and staying in the front yard or being “bad” and occupying the back yard. Neither choice is actually liberating, because both types of women face hardship. The girl who stays in the front yard “gets sick” of propriety and must deal with frustration and boredom, while the girl who plays in the alley faces “sneers” or discrimination from respected authority figures.

Similar to the speaker in “a song in the front yard,” Brooks, when she wrote *A Street in Bronzeville*, was caught between two



seemingly opposite but equally confining spheres. The first was the “world of white arts and letters” that expected her to write for a white audience and follow in the literary tradition of old dead white men (see Baker 21), and the second was the restrictive “half-life” domestic existence that black women were relegated to for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Norton 61). Both worlds impose unrealistic expectations on black women by suggesting that professional and personal success is based on one’s willingness to follow rules outlined by white culture. After all, as Norton points out, black family life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century modeled itself after a highly problematic white family structure, in which a woman’s “world is one’s house, one’s peers [are] one’s children, and one’s employer [is] one’s husband” (62). Perhaps as someone who felt confined by both white literary expectations and black family culture, Brooks is able to live vicariously through the characters in her poems who misbehave. If nothing else, readers who face those types of societal constraints may be able to identify with the liberation that Sadie and Johnnie Mae experience when they break the rules. Even if these characters are not representative of Brooks’s latent desires, it is clear that writers experience danger through the characters they create, which is why many people are drawn to creative writing. Often, poets turn to the creative process because it provides a safe outlet for exploring their precarious proclivities.

Brooks’s poems about a woman’s darker desires engage readers who understand the dual nature of a writer. While the poet and the poem’s speaker are not the same, readers understand that it is nearly impossible to completely separate the poet from the voice in a poem. If the poet’s job is to present an accurate reflection of human nature and the day-to-day existence of ordinary people (which Brooks seems to believe is her authorial duty), then perhaps her poems present some truth about the poet’s deepest longings. However, a poet can hide behind a poem, especially if that poem is restricted by formal elements such as rhyme or meter. In their poems, poets seek to reveal some truth about the human experience, which is often rooted in the poet’s personal life, but when a poem takes the form of a ballad or sonnet, the form often dictates what the poem says. Brooks’s early poems are prime examples of the connection between strict form and the poet’s inclination to hide behind a poem. An imposed form limits

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not what a poet can say, but how she can say it, and Brooks's poems before she aligned with the Black Arts Movement are mostly in form. Thus, she was constantly limiting herself when she imposed the forms of the white literary culture on her poems, which may reflect the restrictions she felt in her personal life at the time.

Brooks's application of rhyme and meter in her early poems is representative of the pressure she may have faced to play by the rules of white literature in her early work. However, Brooks employs form ironically in "Sadie and Maud" and "a song in the front yard" because even though she imposes rules and restrictions on the lines, the poems are clearly depicting women who want to reject or already have dismissed society's restrictions and expectations of women. The underlying question of why both white and black societal standards seem to be stricter on women than on men is most likely answered by the fact that women exhibit the physical proof of sexual disgrace (pregnancy). Brooks acknowledges that while young women face the burden of shaming their families if they pursue sex outside of marriage, that choice is often the more attractive alternative to living a life of repression. According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall in her analysis of Brooks's poems, the poet "has taken the conventional 'scarlet woman' figure usually associated with the corrupt, sinful city and transformed her into a positive, vital force" (154-55). Rather than shaming Sadie for her sexual indiscretion and bearing two children "under her maiden name" (10), the speaker asserts that "Sadie scraped life / With a fine-toothed comb" (3-4). With her metaphorical comb, Sadie "didn't leave a tangle in" (5); she experiences every knot or challenge that life throws at her, and she passes down her perseverance to her daughters.

Sadie is a positive role model for readers because she never apologizes for her vitality and her subversive morality. In "The Women of Bronzeville," Guy-Sheftall explains that Sadie has lived a better life than her sister, Maud. Maud "has followed society's rules, but her life has lacked the vitality and fullness that makes one's existence meaningful" (Guy-Sheftall 156). Even though Maud and Sadie both end up without a husband, Maud is the only one who ends up alone at the end of her life. Sadie is not alone when she says "her last so-long"; she has her daughters, who have inherited her vivacious lust for life.

Both “a song in the front yard” and “Sadie and Maud” imply that there is something to be gained when one rejects society’s expectations. The good girl should want to be the “bad” girl because a decent, honorable, play-by-the-rules life is boring. A life full of danger and bad decisions and lust, on the other hand, is a more fulfilling life because it may lead to more authentic relationships with other people. Rather than repressing her natural sexual desire, Sadie explores it, which results in two daughters, and thus two new potentially meaningful relationships. Brooks understands that a person only gets one life, and it is more fun to break boundaries than to always do the right thing. With the character of Maud and the speaker in “a song in the front yard,” Brooks seems to be asking: at the end of your life, will you regret the fact that you never took risks? Examining these women that Brooks created in her early poems, one can see that a subversive life is preferable to a life spent following the rules of a problematic domestic structure, and these poems reveal that Brooks was on the brink of rejecting the rules of the “world of white arts and letters” to which she had previously adhered.

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## The Masculinized Female Hero: Punishing Misalignment in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Game of Thrones*

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Much has been written, both pro and con, regarding the empowered characters of two popular series, Kara “Starbuck” Thrace, the fearless Viper pilot in the recent *Battlestar Galactica* remake, and Brienne of Tarth, the knighthood desiring warrior of George R.R. Martin’s *Songs of Fire and Ice* and its television counterpart, *Game of Thrones*. For some, these women are the embodiment of female power and agency in a male-dominated world.<sup>1</sup> For others, Starbuck and Brienne of Tarth indicate the way women are forced into certain roles to fit into said male-dominated world.<sup>2</sup> At the height of the latter argument lies Judith Butler’s ideas regarding gender performance, and claims abound that women of fiction and film such as Starbuck and Brienne are exemplifying gender mimicry, enacting masculinity their only recourse for fitting into the world around them.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the masculine attributes they exhibit are performative, perhaps they actually are a natural fit, or perhaps it is a combination of both. What is more interesting, I believe, is how both shows explore the way that such boundary-crossing women are forced into the traditional, male-aligned standards of the hero, and then rejected for upholding those same, masculine ideals. Both Starbuck and Brienne exemplify traditional, heroic ideals, yet when neither can conform to a binary gender system, these characters reject each for the masculine traits she displays, highlighting the rigid, cultural roles and codes still in place for women.

What both series underscore is how “traditional” definitions of man/masculinity and woman/femininity are almost impossible to escape as well as the way that ideas about traditional masculinity are linked to the ideal of the hero. As Judith Butler concludes in *Gender Trouble*, biological sex and gender are not tied together, and gender is not binary—one is not *either* man *or* woman.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore,

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masculinity and femininity are not binary, and as Butler posits, gender is “a free-floating artifice, with the consequences that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (*GT* 6). *Battlestar Galactica* and *Game of Thrones* utilize Starbuck and Brienne to illustrate, as per Butler, that the cultural desire to force people into a binary gender system (“compulsory heterosexuality”) is still alive and well. Intertwined ideas about man and masculinity and woman and femininity are frequently rigid and regulatory, according to Butler, and “notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as a part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* 141). In other words, gender, along with the associated masculine and feminine traits, is a social construction; individuals perform or mimic the gender roles of those around them.<sup>5</sup> This construction and performance means that gender is not a biological given in the same way that a person’s sex is, but rather a learned behavior. For many, however, one is either a man/masculine or a woman/feminine, and the way that other characters react to and treat both Starbuck and Brienne indicates this common, cultural view that still insists on a binary gender system.

The antagonists’ reinforcement of binary gender divisions also means that their rejection of Starbuck and Brienne is tied to views of masculinity and femininity that are entrenched in traditional gender stereotypes and archetypes. As Eve Waniek says, the word woman is often “conventionally determined,” linked to ideas of women as “‘weak,’ ‘fair,’ or ‘second’ sex,” and she mentions some of the typical archetypes that women fall into, like angel or witch (59, 57). The traditional feminine figure is nurturing and caring; she is the weaker sex, prone to emotional outbursts and irrationality. Traditional masculinity, on the other hand, embraces such qualities as power, strength, control, and rationality. Ximena Mejía believes that normative masculinity teaches men that they should “avoid shame at all costs . . . act as though everything is going all right, as though everything is under control. . . . [Men] should be stoic, stable, and independent” (33, 32). In addition to control, Mejía notes that traditional masculinity teaches men that they should “never show[ ]

weakness. . . . [Men] reject within themselves any semblance of vulnerability, any sign or feeling of fear, and . . . certainly never manifest externally any sign of those dreaded emotions” (32, 34). Touching on power, Judith Halberstam notes that “[m]asculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege. . . . What we call ‘dominant masculinity’ appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power” (2). Consequently, references to femininity and masculinity rely on the traditional models, models that the antagonists reinforce. Through Starbuck and Brienne, both series illustrate how traditional gender ideals trap each woman, how neither is fully recognized or celebrated for her boundary-crossing, but instead punished for doing so.

For antagonists in each show, these views of masculinity carry over to those of the traditional hero, and there is a need to align the traditional—man/masculinity and the hero. Given the components of traditional masculinity, it is not surprising how many of those also fit the characteristics of the traditional hero. As Christine Mains points out, “[t]he traditional hero is a male, often of noble or elite standing (or in the process of becoming noble), who is a notable warrior or, in more modern texts, a fighter for truth and justice. The hero is isolated; although he may rescue the ‘heroine,’ his narrative rarely focuses on his marriage or family life” (179). As with traditional masculinity, the traditional hero has power, control, and strength. He has no ties; nothing that would cause any sort of vulnerability or weakness. Mains also makes a distinction between hero and heroine. The heroine is a passive female who needs the male hero’s aide. Joseph Campbell’s preeminent work exploring the traditional hero and heroic journey, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, acknowledges that the hero can be both male and female.<sup>6</sup> Yet, rarely does he touch on female heroes or reference heroes in general without using the pronoun *he*.<sup>7</sup> Most of his references to women, in fact, address either the heroic quest for love where the hero must complete a series of tasks to win the love of a beautiful woman, or the woman as the hero’s temptation, a woman who leads the hero astray, disrupting his quest. Granted, female heroes are few and far between in mythology—in literature prior to the 1900s, for that matter—but there is, perhaps subconsciously, deference to the traditional male hero. Interesting also is that the

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female protagonists with agency almost always are referred to with the masculine-oriented term “hero,” rather than the feminine “heroine,” a word that frequently connotes deeds and feats of lesser importance than those of the male counterpart. While both Starbuck and Brienne are well-rounded characters, each containing characteristics deemed masculine and feminine, each series indicates how other characters try to force these women into either a “male” or “female” role, selectively ignoring any traits that don’t conform to the male/masculine or female/feminine split or rejecting the women outright when they cross boundaries and do not align with a proper gender. And, in both worlds, to be a hero, characters *must* align each woman with the traditional male ideals of one, overemphasizing masculine characteristics.

In fact, contemporary science fiction and fantasy works frequently uphold and reinforce this link between traditional masculinity and the hero. As Mains notes, the female heroes of both genres “have adopted masculine qualities in order to convincingly assume the role . . . . Typical characteristics include agency, competitiveness, physical toughness, forcefulness, aggressiveness, violence, independence, and rugged individualism” (184). Matthew Jones comments on the need for “a particular variety of traditional, normative masculinity” in order to succeed in the world of *Battlestar Galactica*, going on to examine both the physical and mental attributes of *BSG* heroes. Included amongst the mental attributes are “moral faultlessness” and the ability to be “decisive, rational, and unflinchingly honorable,” along with being “perfect physical specimens” (159, 160). Jones says that Gaius Baltar, the underhanded anti-hero of the show, is thin, pasty, and feminized, so “[i]f Gaius becomes some form of un-man, a compromised aberration against so-called real masculinity, then Apollo and Helo come to stand for what the series believes these real men should be [physically perfect, logical, and moral]. . . . Slowly but surely an image of what a man should be develops” (160). In Jones’s words, masculinity and heroism are constructed “as a combination of bold adventurism, implacable loyalty, and ruthless militarism” (161). While he is speaking, specifically, of the *BSG* world, it is equally applicable to the medieval world of *Game of Thrones*, and as we will see, characters emphasize these same, masculine characteristics in both Starbuck and Brienne, often at the expense of those traits deemed “feminine.”



This abandonment of all feminine characteristics and complete adoption of masculine characteristics denotes a common problem in the depiction of female heroes, a problem both shows acknowledge through the portrayals of Starbuck and Brienne. As Carol Clover posits about the female hero in horror films, the “Final Girl,” as she terms the last woman standing, is always masculinized.<sup>8</sup> For Clover, this stems from the “need to bring her in line with the epic laws of Western narrative tradition—the very unanimity of which bears witness to the historical importance, in popular culture, of the literal representation of heroism in male form” (60-61). This masculine, heroic alignment is a scenario we see replayed in every genre where the hero is present—from horror to science fiction to fantasy. In fact, Halberstam echoes this sentiment, noting that “the action adventure hero should embody an extreme version of normative masculinity” (4). While it might seem like masculinized female heroes are breaking away from dualistic alignments that decree an association of female (sex) with woman (gender) and with femininity, they often are not. The problem arises in that audiences frequently reject this alignment in their desire to realign the hero with normative femininity. The reason for this rejection and attempted readjustment is because, as Butler comments, “we regularly punish those who fail to do gender right” (*GT* 140). Butler elaborates on this idea in *Undoing Gender*, saying “[t]he conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus . . . [is] restrictive . . . [insisting] on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand . . . gender . . . [it] naturalizes hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (43). Halberstam corroborates Butler’s views, noting the frequency with which tomboys are punished for their masculine traits and steered toward the feminine once they reach adolescence, asserting that, “for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity. . . . Female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo- normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment” (6, 9). While these ideas typically encompass the audience’s views of the female hero, the sympathetic portrayals of

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both Starbuck and Brienne highlight the wrongness in the characters' treatment of and actions toward each woman, showcasing deeply-rooted and flawed gender ideals that decree a woman "broken" if she doesn't fall into the binary gender system. When characters cannot steer Starbuck and Brienne back into "proper femininity," punishment ensues—ridicule, skepticism, and demeaning comments are heaped upon each woman. The exception for both women, though, is based on whether or not her skillset is needed. Thus, through each woman, both shows highlight the "trap" women often face when boundary-crossing: to become a hero—a traditionally male role—both Starbuck and Brienne must adopt or present certain "masculine" attributes, yet each is rejected when they do not align with the gender ideals of the characters that surround them. For Starbuck, rejection occurs when she displays feminine weaknesses, weaknesses not allowed in the masculine heroic ideal. Brienne of Tarth, on the other hand, is a woman "acting" like a man; thus, her failure to properly conform to her gender precipitates rejection.

Image-wise, these women embody the hero's normative, masculine traits, crossing and even eliminating gender boundaries. They are strong, fit, tough. They enter and control the male world of which they are a part: Starbuck smoking cigars, drinking, and playing poker, and Brienne wielding a sword as if it were an extension of her arm, perfectly capable of dropping into a full-on brawl if needed. Starbuck is seen in a dress in only a single episode, and she tells Lee "[m]e in a dress is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" ("Colonial Day"). Her typical attire is asexual, whether military dress, combat fatigues, or athletic. More often than not, she has a gun strapped to her, and she readily takes and gives beatings in the recreational boxing matches held so the crew can let off steam. As for Brienne, she is described in *A Feast for Crows* as "strong as most knights, and her old master-at-arms used to say that she was quicker than any woman her size had any right to be. The gods had given her stamina too. . . . Fighting with sword and shield was a wearisome business, and victory oft went to the man with most endurance" (Martin, *AFFC* 143). When Jaimie Lannister, a member of the ruling family, advises Loras, who believes that Brienne killed heir-to-the-throne Renly Baratheon, not to go after her, he tells Loras that "[t]he wench is as strong as Gregor Clegane [the man known as the mountain], though not so pretty'" (Martin, *SoS* 848). Jaimie's "joke" here is that Gregor

is an ugly brute. Neither woman is dainty, neither wears dresses or fusses with her hair; they are masculine and imposing. Even their physical appearance belies strength and action, and they deftly navigate, embrace, and wield all that belongs to the male hero's world.

Beyond physical appearance, both women also cross boundaries and embody several of the mental characteristics of the male hero. Loyalty, which was touched on briefly before, is a key component of both Starbuck's and Brienne's heroic comportment. Starbuck is loyal to Commander William Adama, the man in charge of the *Battlestar Galactica*. When he instructs Starbuck to kill Admiral Helen Cain, a leader who has lost her moral compass, if he gives the go-ahead, Starbuck tells him, "[t]his is a fracked up thing that I've been asked to do," but when he questions whether or not she will, she replies, "[y]eah, I'm gonna do it" ("Resurrection Ship, Part 2"). She also is bold and daring, and even when in a life-threatening situation, her Viper crashed and oxygen running low, she still keeps fighting, managing to get a Cylon raider working so she can fly home. For Brienne, her whole philosophy revolves around honor and oaths. When she first comes to be a part of Renly's Knightguard, Brienne tells him, "I . . . pledge my life to yours, and keep you safe from all harm" ("What is Dead May Never Die"). After Renly's death, she makes a similar vow to Catelyn, telling her, "I will shield your back and will give my life for yours if it comes to that. I swear it by the Old Gods and the New" ("The Ghost of Harrenhal"). Later, when Jaimie Lannister gives her a rare, Valyrian steel sword and asks her what she will call it, without hesitating, Brienne replies, "Oathkeeper" ("Oathkeeper"). Even with both Renly and Catelyn dead, she keeps her vows to both, trekking across the kingdom to find and protect Catelyn's daughters and to kill Stannis, her loyalty and word her sacrament. Yet, their deaths also tear her apart, and she blames herself, saying, "[n]othing's more hateful than failing to protect the one you love" ("High Sparrow").<sup>9</sup> Thus, Brienne and Starbuck exemplify the characteristics critics attribute to male heroes. They are loyal to a fault, guided by a firm sense of morality and honor, as well as adventurous and daring. Because of the high standards each holds herself to, failure also hits both Starbuck and Brienne hard, not only

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because they are failing themselves, but more so because they are failing those whom they believe they have a duty to protect.

Finally, there are the intertwined aspects of challenge and agency. Once a path has been set for each woman, taking action is the only viable option. No matter what the challenge and how much violence is necessary, like their male counterparts, each character keeps pushing forward until the task is completed. What both shows indicate with these boundary-crossing women is that there is no one definition of woman or femininity, of man or masculinity. Embracing who they are as individuals, neither Starbuck nor Brienne conform to any outside standards, following their own, internal code instead.

Yet, there also is a tendency for characters to emphasize certain “masculine” traits, especially to justify a woman’s heroic capability. In particular is the emphasis on anger and violence. In her examination of gender in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Christina Rowley comments that “[v]iolence is a gendered concept, associated with masculine characteristics and with male actors; that women are portrayed as equally capable and prone to violence may be an egalitarian statement, but it is a problematic representation because the concept itself remains unchanged” (323-24). There is a cultural belief that women are not capable of violence; that violence belongs to men. Establishing credibility, therefore, tends to resort to the trope of the angry woman. Clover acknowledges this trend, claiming that the predominant depiction of the female hero is “the image of the angry woman—a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator . . . of the kind of violence on which, in the low-mythic universe, the status of full protagonist rests” (17). For both Starbuck and Brienne of Tarth, anger and violence are tied together. We are introduced to Starbuck’s violent side right away in the miniseries that starts off the show. While playing poker, her Executive Office (XO), Colonel Tigh, references the fact Starbuck “got thrown in the brig as a cadet for drunk and disorderly” (“Miniseries, Part 1”). Tigh continues to antagonize her, and it is only a matter of minutes before Starbuck punches him in the face, ending up “grounded” from flight for, as she puts it, “striking a superior asshole” (“Miniseries, Part 1”). Later, when she and Lee “Apollo” Adama, a fellow pilot and the brother of her dead fiancé, Zak, get in an argument, Starbuck tells him, “[y]ou should go. I’m getting the urge to hit another superior asshole” (“Miniseries, Part 1”). Starbuck

epitomizes the angry woman, her temper on a short leash and violence barely contained. Even at the beginning of the series, an angered Starbuck is going to strike out. Given her reaction to minor upsets, it is no small leap to see the escalation of her violence. The Cylons, a human/machine blend, are enemy number one; they annihilated the human homeworlds (a series of 12 planets named after the zodiac constellations) along with all but about 50,000 humans. When the humans capture the Cylon named Leoben, who claims to have placed a nuclear warhead on *Galactica*, Starbuck has no reservations about torturing him for information.<sup>10</sup> In fact, she spends eight hours submitting him to water torture, nearly drowning him. Later, when Leoben speaks to the President, Laura Roslin, he tells Laura that ““she was just doing her job; [in] the military . . . they teach you to dehumanize people”” (“Flesh and Bone”). In these “angry” Starbuck scenes, the show illustrates a key aspect about gender, particularly as connected to the traditional hero. Characters, not the show, emphasize her “masculine” anger and violence at the expense of “feminine” emotions, as if Starbuck were only about anger. In fact, characters ignore or entirely miss the subtleties regarding what incites that anger. Tigh provokes her, expecting a violent retaliation, but attaching no larger import to it than it being an expected, perhaps even compulsory, response to an attack. Leoben attributes her anger to military training. Few characters look past the anger for the emotion that prompts it—emotion, after all, is a weakness, and not something a hero expresses. For each angry outburst Starbuck has, as will be explored later, there is emotion that prompts it, a vulnerability underlying her actions. Yet, characters need to align Starbuck with the masculine; therefore, that anger is overemphasized, and the audience’s only insight is often through Starbuck’s internal thoughts. If anything, her anger and violence are attributed to loyalty for and protectiveness of her people, as with her torture of Leoben, which again, in characters’ minds, aligns her with the traditional, male hero.

We see this same loyalty and protective-inspired anger in Brienne, and as with Starbuck, Brienne’s anger and violence also are tied to extreme emotion. After Brienne fights Loras Tyrell, the Knight of Flowers, and wins, Catelyn Stark tells Brienne that she fought bravely, to which Brienne proclaims, ““I fought for my king [Renly

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Baratheon]. Soon, I'll fight for him on the battlefield. Die for him if I must" ("What is Dead May Never Die"). After Renly's brother, Stannis, kills him, Brienne's anger is fueled further; for not only has she failed to protect the one to whom she swore an oath, but also she has failed to kill his murderer. This anger emerges in her conversation with Catelyn, who worries that Stannis' large army will easily kill Brienne if she goes after him. Brienne replies, "I swore a vow.... Promise me that you will not hold me back from Stannis" ("The Ghost of Harrenhal"). What characters see and what is frequently emphasized, as with Starbuck, is Brienne's "righteous" anger and stoicism in the face of injustice. This de-emphasis of the emotions behind Brienne's anger, therefore, allows characters to align her with the traditional male heroic model. However, as with Starbuck, Brienne's anger is connected to extreme emotion, and characters often either overlook or ignore that facet of Brienne, since emotion is so strongly tied to the view of feminine weakness. The audience, on the hand, is privy to Brienne's emotional motivation, seeing Brienne's face contorted in grief as she screams and cradles Renly's dead body ("The Ghost of Harrenhal"). Her later oath to Catelyn sees the same results upon Catelyn's death. Brienne's oaths have turned to vengeance, and now include killing Stannis and locating and protecting the missing Stark girls, Sansa and Arya. When she finally finds Arya, nothing will stop Brienne, not even seasoned fighter Sandor Clegane, who refuses to turn Arya over. In perhaps one of the best depictions of Brienne's angry violence, her fight with Clegane degrades from swords to fists to teeth, and then finally, both dripping blood from numerous wounds, she bludgeons him with a rock and topples him off a cliff. For both women, intense emotion is the catalyst for intertwined anger and violence. We are given the inciting incidents for both Starbuck and Brienne, which revolve around horrendous, unavenged deaths. The fact that both women incorporate aspects considered both feminine and masculine into their heroic personas, however, is often lost on the characters that surround each woman, as those characters, rather than celebrating the women's crossing of boundaries, instead try to force them into a preexisting male mold of the hero. After all, the traditional male hero might have anger, but his outward appearance should always portray stoic calm, repressing emotion; it is a feminine weakness to go into battle fueled by emotionally-charged irrationality.

Despite personifying normative masculine heroic traits, neither Starbuck nor Brienne holds up under the scrutiny of other characters, failing to conform to the masculine ideals to which the antagonists often hold them. As mentioned previously, both women always incorporate both masculine and feminine elements throughout both series, yet characters dismiss what they deem feminine—or until there is a break, and they cannot fit Starbuck and Brienne into their male-informed ideals. While many see Starbuck unraveling in Season Four when she returns from the dead, in reality, she always was “unraveled,” or always had these feminine-associated traits. As Roz Kaveney surmises in her comparison of Lee and Starbuck, “Lee is generally cautious and sensible, whereas Starbuck is dashing and charismatic; his besetting weakness is caution and hers recklessness. In general the show is more indulgent of him than of her. Lee is good at managing his crews, Starbuck rather less so” (119). Kaveney also describes Starbuck as “riddled with guilt,” “suicidally reckless,” which “contaminates her judgment,” as well as being “arrogant” and obsessive (125). These are not the traits, as seen earlier, associated with the traditional male hero who engages with calm rationality, yet these are traits that cling to Starbuck throughout the entire series. She breaks down while trying to tell Adama about Zak and her guilt over his death in Season One—she passed him as a pilot, despite the fact he had weak skills, and he died in a flight accident. Crying, she tells Adama Zak’s death was her fault because “I made a mistake . . . because I was just . . . I was so in love him . . . he just wanted it so much, and I . . . I didn’t want to be the one who crushed him” (“Act of Contrition”). In Season Three’s “Maelstrom,” it is her illogical tendencies and emotion that make Adama question whether Starbuck is capable of flying. The crew witnesses her, in flight, shooting at nothing; she sees flashes of herself as an abused child and of her abusive mother, Leoben, her guide through her hellish past (“Maelstrom”).<sup>11</sup> When the visions reappear on her next flight, she plunges into a storm, convinced it will lead her to answers, thus instigating her own death/disappearance (“Maelstrom”). As for the idea of being lost, Starbuck has always felt this way. Returning to Season Two, while back in her old apartment on Caprica, she tells fellow pilot Helo that “[a]fter they [the Cylons] attacked, I never

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pined over any of my old crap. Never missed it. Stupid view of the parking lot. Broken toilet in the bathroom . . . You know, everyone I know is fighting to get back what they had. I'm fighting because I don't know how to do anything else'" ("Valley of Darkness"). What these early examples illustrate is the fact that Starbuck is a well-rounded female hero, one who contains aspects associated with both masculinity and femininity. Since the hero is so tied to masculine ideals, what we see is the characters downplaying those "feminine" traits in the first few seasons. Characters often fail to notice Starbuck's emotional characteristics, her feelings of being lost, and even her vulnerability, since the emphasis is on her masculine heroic features, since the entire crew celebrates those very aspects, along with her skills. Adding to the skewed character perspective is the fact that the instances of Starbuck's more masculine action and aggression far outweigh, both in frequency and effect, those instances where more feminine-associated characteristics occur. As Van Leavenworth asserts, this shift in perception arises in the last season because of a change in how other characters view her, a change, as mentioned earlier, where she is forced into a feminine mold, yet devalued for those feminine characteristics.<sup>12</sup> While Leavenworth is definitely right about the shift in perception, what is more interesting is the reason behind that shift, which I will explore shortly. In this way, *Battlestar Galactica* gives its audience a glimpse of what characters cannot see, showing the way binary gender ideals trap women, pushing them into an either/or model while ignoring attributes that don't "fit." By doing so, these antagonists dismiss and devalue important aspects that make up each woman's identity.

Unlike Starbuck, however, it is a rare instance where Brienne is not ridiculed and demeaned for stepping out of the bounds of normative femininity. As Atara Stein says, masculinized female heroes are often depicted as "freakish, unflatteringly unfeminine, and unnatural, while making a point of reminding the viewers of their persistent feminine vulnerability" (190). First, there are the attempts to force Brienne into traditional femininity. In the last attempt (out of three) at marrying her off, her prospective husband, Humfrey Wagstaff, tells her "that he would expect her to be a proper woman once they'd wed," announcing that "I will not have my lady wife cavorting about in a man's mail. On this you shall obey me, lest I be



forced to chastise you’” (Martin, *AFFC* 142). Brienne challenges him to a fight and, as she recalls in *A Feast for Crows*:

[s]he was sixteen and no stranger to a sword, but still shy despite her prowess in the yard. Yet somehow she had found the courage to tell Ser Humfrey that she would accept chastisement only from a man who could outfight her. The old knight purpled, but agreed to don his own armor to teach her a woman’s proper place. . . . She broke Ser Humfrey’s collarbone, two ribs, and their betrothal. He was her third prospective husband, and her last. Her father did not insist again. (Martin 142)

Years later, when she is searching for Sansa Stark, Brienne encounters Lord Tarley, who tells her, “[y]ou never should have donned mail, nor buckled on a sword. You never should have left your father’s hall. This is war, not a harvest ball” (Martin, *AFFC* 207-08). In the *Game of Thrones* world, characters uphold rigidly defined gender roles. No matter what her age, how her actions and body defy that predefined feminine role, or how many men she defeats in battle, Brienne is still ridiculed for stepping out of line. In fact, there is a constant push to bring her back in line. Yet, even as she is pushed toward proper femininity, there is the acknowledgement that she does not fit that role, an acknowledgement that comes with a new set of oppressive and demeaning comments. Tarley himself says, “[s]tronger than most men. Aye. She’s a freak of nature, far be it for me to deny it” (Martin, *AFFC* 364), telling Brienne, “[i]t is said your father is a good man. If so, I pity him. Some men are blessed with sons, some with daughters. No man deserves to be cursed with such as you” (Martin, *AFFC* 365). This status as outsider plagues Brienne’s entire life; she’s an aberration who will never fit and who is forever denied access to both the feminine and masculine worlds. In rare instances, there are begrudging comments about her skill, though even Tarley wants to give credit to the power of her Valyrian steel sword—i.e., to an object rather than the person who wields said object.

By far, most of the comments about Brienne disparage her physical appearance. When Renly comments that Loras is jealous of Brienne after she defeats Loras, the knight snaps back, “[j]ealous? Of

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Brienne the Beauty? Don't make me laugh” (“What is Dead May Never Die”). Rather than address or admit to her superior skill as a warrior, Loras instead attacks her looks, using the mocking nickname bestowed on her in her youth, as if demeaning Brienne somehow raises Loras and lessens his “weakness.” Similarly, when an imprisoned Jaimie first encounters Brienne, he asks his captor, Catelyn, “is that a woman?” and “where did you find this beast?” (“A Man without Honor”). When Jaimie asks Brienne, “[h]as anyone ever told you you're as boring as you are ugly?”, she replies, “[a]ll my life, men like you have sneered at me. And all my life, I've been knocking men like you into dust” (“The Prince of Winterfell”). That Brienne is strong and powerful, there is no denying. Yet time and again, characters, particularly male characters, are unable to acknowledge her skill and her heroic traits. Ridiculing her appearance is the only way for them to reassure themselves and to put her in her “proper place.” Brienne has disrupted the gender binary; therefore, she must be punished once the men realize that she cannot be forced into a feminine role. And, what better way to punish the woman who longs for knighthood than by stripping away her heroic qualities and combat skill? Portrayed in a sympathetic light, it is obvious that it is not Brienne, but rather her detractors, who are in the wrong. Hateful and demeaning comments indicate the narrow-mindedness that plagues characters in the series as well as the way these comments try to shame Brienne and strip her of important aspects of her identity.

What we see with both Starbuck and Brienne, consequently, is that their masculine heroic traits are often only accepted when someone has a need of the skills each woman possesses. For Starbuck, who disappeared for two months, the fleet has learned to live and, in fact, survive without her skills. Adding to Starbuck's fall is the fact that, shortly after her return, an uneasy truce begins between Cylons and humans.<sup>13</sup> With no war, the fleet no longer has the same need for Starbuck's heroic skillset, for the talented Viper pilot. It is upon her return from the dead that characters begin to emphasize and negatively exploit Starbuck's ever-present “feminine” characteristics. The crew views her with suspicion: how is she still alive after two months? Where has she been? Why does her Viper look brand new? Is she a Cylon? From this point on, as many critics argue, she is feminized—turned into an emotional, illogical woman. As Leavenworth asserts, “Starbuck's transformation begins with a

gendered undercutting of her heroic traits. . . . The *tough* character is re-envisioned as an emotionally sensitive *girl* to be constrained by the scientific norms of the patriarchal military mindset. . . . [She becomes] the stereotype of the irrational female” (695, 696). In “He That Believeth in Me,” her blood is tested to prove she’s not a Cylon; however, this changes nothing because the testing is known to be defective. President Roslin believes that if Starbuck is not a Cylon, then she must have been sent back to pull them off track in their search for Earth (“He That Believeth in Me”). Thus, Starbuck becomes the typical temptress whose only purpose must be to lure the crew away from their mission and to their doom. Furthermore, Adama demands an explanation as to why her ship is “pristine,” which Starbuck cannot provide (“He That Believeth in Me”). Adama’s reply is not support for his prized hero, but rather distrust, and Starbuck gets an armed escort away from the two leaders. Things only escalate as Starbuck relies more heavily on those pesky feminine attributes—emotion and intuition. Claiming Adama and Roslin need to listen to her, that in her mysterious absence she learned the way to Earth, Starbuck is only met with more suspicion and disbelief. When both refuse to listen, Starbuck bursts into Roslin’s room and draws a gun on her (“He That Believeth in Me”). In this instance, extreme emotion and instability eradicate all of Starbuck’s previous heroic traits, and she becomes the dangerous Other, the threat to humankind.

As the episodes progress, Starbuck is further and further removed from the masculine heroic ideal and increasingly associated with the feminine irrationality and emotion. Adama finally concedes and gives her a small crew and a garbage scow (ship) so that she can find Earth. No longer does she garner the best equipment or the best crew, but rather haphazardly held and pieced together ones. Further aligning her with the feminine is the fact that she wants nothing to do with mapping out a route; but, much to her crew’s dismay, she refuses to listen to reason and relies on gut instincts instead (“The Ties that Bind” and “The Road Less Traveled”). The meager crew she is given has no faith in her abilities and comes close to mutiny. As pilot Sharon “Athena” Agathon says, riling the crew up more, ““she’s out of control. . . . We gotta do something before she takes us all down with her. . . . Starbuck is leading us into a trap.”” (“The Road Less

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Traveled”). Here, the loss of faith in Starbuck is complete. The skills for which she was once revered now indicate her complete loss of control, or her “feminization.” To make matters worse, when the fleet finally does find Earth, it is a devastated planet, no longer inhabitable—Starbuck has failed in her ultimate duty as a hero. It is at this point that she finds her corpse, and even her most faithful advocate, Leoben—the Cylon positive that Starbuck was the destined angel who would lead them all to salvation—abandons her. We finally get utter emotional meltdown and dejection when, while looking at her dead body, Starbuck asks, “[i]f that’s me sitting there, then what am I!?” (“Sometimes a Great Notion”). What is obvious is that Starbuck has not changed: she still embraces the same, heroic traits as in the earlier seasons, is still determined to follow through on her objectives, determined to protect the human race. As the need for her skills declines, so does the view of her as heroic, the view of her as irrational female replacing that of masculinized hero as her crewmembers and copilots force her into a rigidly defined vision of woman and of femininity. As she burns her own corpse, she is lost, but perhaps what is more jarring is that her own people’s distrust, suspicion, and loss of faith have chipped away at her faith in herself. Perhaps it is not so much the discovery of her own death that leads to her anguish, but rather the sense of loss as she is devalued and stripped of the heroic traits that compose her identity. Thus, the show illustrates the devastation experienced when Starbuck is rejected for such an intrinsic part of herself and how inflexible gender ideals tear her down.

For Brienne, even her beloved Renly only sees her as an asset when he needs her. Granted, Renly showed her far more courtesy than any other man, dancing with her at a public event and garnering her devotion at a young age. For possibly the first time in her life, a man makes her feel special, and “her feet floated across the [dance] floor” (Martin, *AFC* 60-61). However, as Loras tells Jaimie, “‘Renly thought she was absurd. A woman dressed in man’s mail, pretending to be a knight. . . I asked him why he kept her so close, if he thought her so grotesque. He said all his other knights wanted things of him, castles or honors or riches, but all that Brienne wanted was to die for him’” (Martin, *SoS* 925). Absurd and grotesque, Brienne is only valued by Renly because of her complete devotion, a devotion Renly does not have to return. Furthermore, unlike his other knights, her

value lies in the fact that he does not have to give her anything for her service or even acknowledge her in any way. Here is someone who will die for him, yet Renly only uses her for that devotion and for her obvious skills. In his eyes, she is not a hero, but simply an expendable resource. While he doesn't ridicule Brienne to her face, he is just like every other man, saving that ridicule for when her back is turned. In highlighting these characters' hatefulness, both in words and actions, *Game of Thrones* not only sheds light on the restrictiveness of adhering to a binary gender system, but also the pain and suffering it causes those forced into said system. Furthermore, the series focuses on Brienne's strength; she rises above every awful word and action directed at her, and continues forward, always following the path that she set for herself.

Regarding Catelyn, the next person to whom Brienne vows an oath, her motivations are unclear. While Catelyn has proved honorable, she is also judgmental. Her views of the former king, Robert Baratheon, and her husband Ned's illegitimate son, Jon Snow, are just two instances where her judgment is front and center. With Robert, she sees no reason why Ned should feel either duty or honor-bound to the decadent king, encouraging him to abandon both loyalty and friendship and reject the position Robert offers Ned. Despite the fact that it is not an innocent child's fault that he was conceived out of wedlock, Catelyn also both hates and rejects Jon. What we frequently see with Catelyn is that once she has judged and decided, there is no changing her mind. In fact, it is based on a set of choices, including vengeance for her husband, that Catelyn comes to need someone like Brienne on her side. Granted, it might be possible that such an instantaneous bond formed between the two women, but more than likely, it is because Catelyn first saw a use for Brienne. One of the early comments Catelyn makes to Brienne after Brienne defeats Loras is "[y]ou fought bravely today" ("What is Dead May Never Die"), and later, she tells Brienne, "[y]ou served him [Renly] bravely" ("The Ghosts of Harrenhal"). Catelyn's emphasis on Brienne's "bravery" and her limited interactions with Brienne indicate a certain "criteria" Catelyn desires and a use that she has for someone with the skills that come with that criteria. Hence, Brienne's initial value to Catelyn is because Brienne's skills prove useful. For both

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Brienne and Starbuck, acceptance frequently comes with strings. Neither Brienne nor Starbuck is truly accepted for who she is, for those boundary-crossing characteristics that make her heroic, but rather for what she can do for others. In this way, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Game of Thrones* reveal the self-centeredness at the heart of many characters, while at the same time embracing and celebrating the unique blend of characteristics that make each woman a force.

What does differ for Brienne, however, is that while she is initially “used,” most characters using her change their views after spending significant amounts of time with her. Catelyn comes to champion Brienne, telling Jaimie that Brienne ““is a truer knight than you will ever be, Kingslayer”” (“The Ghost of Harrenhal”). Forced to trek across the country, Brienne is Jaimie’s only means of safety if he wants to get back to King’s Landing and his family. Over the course of their trip, he develops a respect and friendship for Brienne. After they arrive in King’s Landing, Jaimie protects her when it is discovered that she is suspected of murdering Renly, giving her his Valyrian steel sword. However, the sad fact is that few and far between are the people willing to give Brienne a chance, and their need always necessitates that chance. The far more likely outcome of Brienne’s encounters with others is ridicule and the devaluing of her abilities. Like Starbuck, Brienne is the irrational and emotional woman trying to “play” hero in a man’s world. There is little respect or admiration for an aberration such as Brienne, and what little is given to her is hard won, Brienne’s circumstances rather than herself allowing for the shift in characters’ perception of her. For both Starbuck and Brienne, there is a limited acceptance from the characters that surround them, and those characters tend to emphasize and prefer each woman’s masculine characteristics for as long as they need her skillset. The dominant desire expressed through many characters who interact with each woman, however, is to push both women into either a purely masculine or a purely feminine role. Hence, characters constantly emphasize anything deemed female weakness. Attacks on physical appearance and/or mental attributes become characters’ weapon of choice.

There is no denying that both Starbuck and Brienne of Tarth are heroes or that both series celebrate each woman as such. In fact, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Game of Thrones* explore the different facets, masculine and feminine, that compose each woman’s identity.

While both women do escape the gender binary, what is fascinating is the characters' constant push to realign and/or associate them with characteristics long linked to the "feminine," characteristics that are also used to indicate their "lack." In Starbuck, characters view the more feminine-associated traits—her irrationality and emotional outbursts—that she exhibits late in the series as weakness. These characteristics undermine her strength and her status as a hero, eventually leading characters to question her abilities, her mental state, and her leadership. Brienne, on the other hand, never has anyone look to her for her strength, power, or leadership. Instead, characters in her world continually tear her down, trying to align her with her "proper" gender. Neither woman is fully accepted, but instead forced into a mold based on traditional ideas of how a man or a woman should be. Furthermore, the traditional heroic ideal that characters embrace is strongly tied to ideas about traditional masculinity. Consequently, Starbuck becomes too feminine and weak to maintain her heroic status, and Brienne cannot escape the rigid views of and roles for women in the *Game of Thrones* world. This rejection chips away at important aspects of each woman's identity, and as each battles against villains, those villains also come to encompass the demons that enforcing a binary gender system creates. By the end of *Battlestar Galactica*, Starbuck is lost and defeated, questioning everything about herself. Brienne, however, keeps plowing forward, pushing aside the constant stream of negative feedback. What both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Game of Thrones* illustrate is the way that adhering to a binary gender system punishes and traps those caught outside the rigid definitions of man and woman. Characters who question, undermine, and even ridicule Starbuck and Brienne are not perceived in a positive light, but rather the shows highlight how these characters are frequently petty, self-centered, and hateful. In the end, Starbuck and Brienne are heroes; who they are is based on their words and actions, based on the unique combination of masculine and feminine characteristics they possess. Both exhibit immense strength and bravery in the face of adversity and both strive to rectify injustice at any cost.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christine Mains et al. delve into the portrayal of Starbuck as a realistic, female hero in “Heroes or Sheroes.”

<sup>2</sup> Van Leavenworth, Jennifer Stoy, and Lorna Jowett all explore different aspects of the portrayal of gender and the treatment of female and/or gay characters on *Battlestar Galactica* in their respective articles.

<sup>3</sup> Butler’s seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, explores the ideas of gender as a social construction and a performance.

<sup>4</sup> Butler delves into ideas about the binary gender system in *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>5</sup> Citing drag queens as an example of gender imitation/performance, Butler writes more about the social construction of gender and about gender as performance in *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>6</sup> Early on, Campbell says that “[t]he hero . . . is the man or woman” (18), and later “[t]he hero, whether god or goddess, man or woman” (99).

<sup>7</sup> The emphasis here is my own.

<sup>8</sup> Clover believes that “[t]he fact that female monster and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior (and often in name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male” (12-13).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, she also blurts out that, “I don’t want anyone following me. I’m not a leader. All I ever wanted was to fight for a lord I believed in. The good lords are dead and the rest of them are monsters” (“The Wars to Come”).

<sup>10</sup> Her anger is justified when, while shouting at Leoben, she tells him that “[y]ou slaughtered my entire civilization! That is sin! That is evil, and you’re evil” (“Flesh and Bone”).

<sup>11</sup> She even tells Lee, when she is cleared to fly again, that “I’m not going back out there. I don’t trust myself” (“Maelstrom”).

<sup>12</sup> Leavenworth believes that Starbuck’s transformation “occurs not through her loss of them [i.e., her heroic traits] but via a shift in how they are perceived and how the narrative portrays her” (695).

<sup>13</sup> With the Cylon resurrection ship destroyed, Cylons can no longer reincarnate after death, and are, like the humans, similarly adrift without a home. There is a large faction of Cylons that also see the fight against humans as pointless; both groups are searching for a home, and both want to ensure the survival of their species.



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## #Education is Trending: Social Media in the Classroom

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The extreme popularity of social media in informal settings has given rise to the idea that platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and the like may be put to good use in formal educational settings as well. While a plethora of research in this area enumerates both benefits and drawbacks of such application, knowledge is expanded on this topic by sharing individual classroom experiences with various methods of incorporation and their relative effectiveness. To that end, this paper will give a brief overview of the literature on this subject; will detail the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* in a general education history course at a small, private college; and will provide student and faculty feedback regarding its implementation.

### **Literature**

As Rania Mostafa suggests, debate continues between those who feel social media can be used to enhance higher education teaching learning and those who see it as a distraction (147). Other reports estimate that up to 80 percent of faculty are using social media in college courses (Moran et al. qtd in Wilson 54). Literature on the topic tends to focus on this tension, as well as on establishing a clear definition for “social media” and related terms; discussion of the most used sites among educators and students; different methods used to incorporate these technologies in the classroom with the benefits and drawbacks of doing so; and student and faculty perspectives on the adaptation of these technologies for educational purposes.

### **Defining “Social Media”**

While an established definition of “social media” is elusive, W. G Mangold and D.J. Faulds define social media as “a variety of new sources of online information that are created, circulated, and

used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues" (qtd. in Neier and Zayer 134). Mostafa defines social media as "the usage of Web-based tools that link people and enable them to share information, videos, pictures, and so on" (144). Stefania Manca and Maria Ranieri define social media as "a wide range of applications, enabling users to create, share, comment, and discuss digital contents" (217).

Some authors posit definitions for particular formats. For example, *Twitter* is referred to as a "microblogging" platform on which users can post 140-character comments, images, or links, follow other users, repost ("retweet") comments from other users, and create and follow subject-specific posts using the now famous hashtag symbol (#) (West, Moore, and Barry 161). In general, however, "social media" refers to any online site that allows for social networking and interaction.

### **Most Appropriated Platforms**

In their specific research, Manca and Ranieri reported 64 percent of faculty respondents declared using at least one social media platform in their teaching, with *YouTube*, *Blog-Wiki*, and *Facebook* being the most used platforms (221). While there are many different social media platforms, those that seem most used in the classroom are *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Bettina West, H el ene Moore, and Ben Barry suggest that because *Facebook's* effectiveness in educational settings is questionable due to conflicting research regarding its efficacy on engagement and fostering learning, attention might be turned to *Twitter* (160). However, another study indicated that while 60 percent of faculty surveyed were not interested in using *Facebook* or *Twitter* for education, faculty commonly use weblogs, wikis and podcasts (Legaree 1). In an amalgamation of eleven studies regarding this trend, Chris Piotrowski found the main social media tools used were *Facebook*, blogs, *Twitter* and *YouTube* ("Pedagogical Applications" 257). Similarly, in a 2015 student survey, Stacy Neier and Linda Zayer found respondents were most familiar with social networking sites, video content and sharing sites, with the least understanding regarding microblogging (i.e. *Twitter*) (136). In total,

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across studies, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* lead the social media sites as the most widely used in the classroom – for now, at least.

### **Methods of Incorporation**

Researchers suggest it is not only using these platforms that is important, but how they are used (Legaree 3). Cynthia Wilson warns it is important to have a reason for using social media in the classroom, and not only because it is a novelty; the innovation, when used properly and with reason, can encourage participative and experiential learning (56). Manca and Ranieri found the general trend is to use social media to visualize resources and to access and consume content instead of creating or producing it (228), somewhat negating the interactive potential of the technology. However, strategies for incorporation can influence how well the social media platform is integrated into the course with positive student outcomes. Researchers posit that faculty themselves must participate in the platform used, develop a theoretically-driven pedagogical approach to incorporation, and require mandatory student use of the platform (Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger 284). Ben Lowe and Des Laffey, for example, provide ten strategies for using *Twitter* in an educational setting, including giving a brief introduction to the platform, having a course hashtag in every tweet, and using the platform both in and out of class (189). Likewise, West, Moore, and Barry identify four key success factors for integrating *Twitter*, including strong initial faculty presence on the platform, justifying technology and *Twitter* in the classroom, mandatory *Twitter* participation, and rewarding active professional tweeting versus social tweeting or reactive retweets (168-169). In addition, to enhance students willingness to engage with these technologies, Mostafa suggests that: 1) faculty provide rich information to students regarding the media and expectations, 2) faculty should make suitable changes where necessary to curriculum to design more engaging and interactive environments, 3) institutions should reform education by improving pedagogy to enhance student engagement, 4) faculty should actively encourage students to participate and engage, 5) institutions should modify any restrictive policies that inhibit the use of social media in classroom, and 6) institutions should acknowledge the benefits of using social media in the classroom (155).

Besides general strategies, research also gives specifics on how to use and grade the use of social media in the classroom. For example, *Twitter* has been used especially in large lecture formats to allow students to ask questions during the lecture (West, Moore, and Barry 165). Others have incorporated the use of social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, in place of traditional Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard and Moodle, which are seen more as static repositories of information and less interactive than social media (Meishar-al, Kurtz, and Pieterse 34; Veletsianos and Navarrete 145).

In general, no matter which platform is incorporated or how, faculty education is key. Lillian Buus argues it is critical that teachers are aware of the possible ways to use these platforms and how to “scaffold” them into the design of the courses using such technology (13-14). Therefore, while all authors do not agree on one particular method of incorporation, they seem to all suggest that the mere incorporation of these platforms is not enough to make for a successful learning tool; the method of incorporation should be carefully considered and tailored toward the educational aim of the course.

### **Benefits of Incorporation**

Of course, the most touted benefit of incorporating social media in the higher education classroom is that it is already a fixture in students’ daily lives (West, Moore, and Barry 160). Due to their constant connection to these technologies, studies show these “digital natives” actually experience different brain development that craves constant communication and is accustomed to multitasking (West, Moore, and Barry 160). Also, the use of social media can spark greater participation, create a sense of presence, and help students form more social connections as opposed to traditional technological formats (Veletsianos and Navareete 146). Social media use can also be more egalitarian, participatory, and interactive (Piotrowski, “Pedagogical Applications” 258). Social media tends to foster communication, engagement, collaboration and creativity (Piotrowski, “Pedagogical Applications” 258). Mostafa reports the main benefits of social media in higher educational teaching are the

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added collaborative dimension, enhanced interaction and connection between all involved, and enhanced students' experience through participation (144).

Another benefit of incorporation in the classroom is that by moving these platforms from solely informal settings to formal educational settings, students have increased opportunities to apply them beyond social contexts; thus, students are more likely to adapt them when moving beyond higher education into the professional world ((Piotrowski, "Pedagogical Applications" 258; West, Moore, and Barry 160), which often requires not just knowledge and use of, but also proficiency in working with these media sources. Another advantage is that these platforms require students to self-initiate their learning, and thus can promote students' self-regulated learning (West, Moore, and Barry 167). Also, students' largely positive perception of using the media in coursework, as well as increased faculty and peer interaction, could contribute to increased student academic success (West, Moore, and Barry 167). Neier and Zayer also found peer feedback via social media was associated with students' greater desire to develop writing skills (138).

Different platforms, of course, can have different advantages. *Twitter*, for example, allows for rapid course updates and can help support knowledge creation and retention, enhance social presence, and motivate students through the use of familiar technology (West, Moore, and Barry 161). One study reports that students felt using *Twitter* in the course improved interaction with the learning community both in and out of the classroom, including interaction between professors, other students, and professionals in the field of study (West, Moore, and Barry 164).

Overall, Blaine Legaree summarizes the primary benefits of incorporating these media as increased student and faculty communication, increased student peer networking, increased engagement with course materials outside of class, as an alternative to more traditional static platforms, and practice using the technologies and skills that may assist students later in their professional fields (2). Piotrowski adds other advantages, including low financial expenditure for such technology; their flexibility, immediacy, compatibility with "contextual educational dynamics"; and "didactic innovation" ("Pedagogical Approaches", 262).



### **Drawbacks of Incorporation**

While there are advantages to incorporating social media in the classroom, results are often mixed as to its efficacy (West, Moore, and Barry 160). In fact, an analysis of data-based studies regarding this topic show a sizeable minority report contrary findings, negative views, genuine concerns, and limitations (Piotrowski, “Scholarly Research” 450).

One drawback of incorporating social media is the differences in adoption rates among students (West, Moore, and Barry 162). For example, demographically, male students report feeling less skilled using *Twitter* than females (West, Moore, and Barry 162). Manca and Ranieri also note gender, discipline (field), age, and prior use and knowledge of particular media mitigate faculty perceptions and success in courses using social media (219). Consequently, in general, those who are not as familiar or comfortable with *Twitter* initially perform differently when using the media in educational settings, but this evens out over time (West, Moore, and Barry 166).

Another issue with incorporation is that while students are largely enthusiastic about the use of social media in the classroom, they tend to limit their participation to graded activities (Veletsianos and Navarrete 144) because students often desire to compartmentalize professional and personal identities (Neier and Zayer 135). Other disadvantages include a possible increase in workload for faculty and students, lack of trust in peer feedback, ownership issues, difficulty in adaptation of these media, and issues protecting the anonymity of students (Ferris-Costa and Hill; Veletsianos and Navarrete 146; Trinder et al. qtd in Neier and Zayer 134). Legaree sums up the literature regarding adaption of social media in educational settings to be, in addition to privacy issues, the concerns about copyright infringement, time commitment required, lack of training on the technology, questionable impact on student learning outcomes, difficulty in establishing standard methods for grading and assessment, concerns regarding student integrity and professionalism, and possible cyberbullying or harassment (2).

Another issue with which to grapple is the institution’s policy regarding social media. First, many institutions do not have an accessible social media policy (Pomerantz, Hank, and Sugimoto 11).

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For those schools with such a policy, *Facebook* and *Twitter* are two commonly referenced media forms, and the policy typically addresses posting appropriate content, representing the institution appropriately, and faculty's limitations in reporting student posts with coworkers or external agencies (Pomerantz, Hank, and Sugimoto 12). Concerns center on guaranteeing assignments and other uses do not go awry of the institution's policy, while also balancing the requirements of the policy with the philosophy of academic freedom and First Amendment Rights ((Pomerantz, Hank, and Sugimoto 14).

### **Student and Faculty Perspectives**

Student and faculty perspectives are of great import for this topic. Their relative perspectives and perceptions regarding the use of social media, or as Mostafa called it their "customer readiness for co-creation" (145), can in fact influence its success or failure. For example, students report increased satisfaction in a course as a result of the use of *Twitter* (West, Moore, and Barry 161). Researchers have found that in large-lecture settings especially, *Twitter* positively influenced student engagement, participation, and enthusiasm in a course (Elavsky, Mislán, and Elavsky 215). It has also been shown to positively impact engagement and final grades (Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger 283; Junco, Heiberger and Loken 128). In one study, students report having enjoyed using *Twitter* in particular as a learning tool (West, Moore, and Barry 164). However, Neier and Zayer report that students do not perceive this media, such as *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, or *Pinterest*, as providing much benefit in an educational setting (139). While it is important to note that though perceptions can influence outcomes, many students possibly have just not had exposure to effective usage of these platforms in a formal educational setting, and thus cannot see how such media does work. Also, in most of these surveys, students are asked about hypothetical usage and not actual usage. In studies in which students have experienced actual social media in the classroom, their feedback is largely positive.

However, while students tend to favor social media use, some studies suggest faculty are less enthusiastic (Manca and Ranieri 236; Piotrowski, "Pedagogical Applications" 257; Piotrowski, "Scholarly Research" 448). Student concerns tend to center on a fear students will lapse into socializing during academic activities, privacy issues, and data overload, while faculty concerns focus on the extensive,

varying social media forms and lack of technological training on these platforms (Piotrowski, “Pedagogical Applications”, 257). Manca and Ranieri report that faculty are also concerned about the erosion of traditional teacher roles, managing relationships with students, and the perception that face-to-face teaching is more effective than online (228). Likewise, Baiyun Chen and Thomas Bryer also highlight faculty’s difficulty in assessing social media use in the classroom, concerns about professional identity, and time constraints (96-97).

However, Neier and Zayer report students see instructors who use social media in the classroom as innovative and more sensitive to students’ needs (140). The same study also found students see the best use of these media as facilitating discourse and enhancing pedagogy (141).

### **Case Study**

Neier and Zayer suggested further research on using social media in educational settings to discover direct measures of effectiveness and fit for different course types (142). Sharing experiences from courses in which these media are incorporated can begin to add to this scholarship. If we acknowledge social media/technology is an important aspect of current college students’ lives, it is imperative educators attempt its use in the classroom. The following section will provide two case studies featuring social media as class projects to underscore what the above-mentioned studies highlighted. The two projects discussed are *Twitter* and *Facebook*. The case studies discussed below concern history courses at a small, private Christian college. The Assistant Professor who developed these assignments was doing so in her first year beyond graduate school.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions for this project center on how to use social media in the classroom and student and faculty perceptions regarding its effectiveness. Namely, for the given assignment, how did students perceive the use of social media in the particular course? Also, what perceptions do faculty have after engaging social media in the classroom? Based on the prior research, the student response is expected to be largely positive, but individual responses should be

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informative in further improving the incorporation of media in teaching and learning. Also, though prior research indicates that faculty are usually less enthusiastic about incorporation, feedback from a faculty member who has the desire to use such media in the course should also skew toward positive.

### **Case Study Method I: *Twitter***

The professor used *Twitter* in a lower-level survey, HIST 151: World Civilizations I, and an upper-level major specific course, HIST/CHR 312: The Reformation. The basic assignment was the same for both classes, requiring students to “translate” sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* into the “Ninety-Five Tweets”. In the sixteenth century, the way to catch attention was to nail a list of grievances to a church door in a town center; today, one is more likely to complain in 140 characters on *Twitter*. Thus, students had to make Luther “contemporary.” Students were required to follow the 140 or less character requirement and use *Twitter* language, handles, and hashtags. Yet, in the process of modernizing Luther, the original importance of each individual thesis had to remain.

In the upper-level course, the class made an actual *Twitter* account @MartinLutherBPC. The class of eleven was split into pairs for the week-long assignment; each pair had a set of theses and had to post a few each day. The day the account went live, announcements were sent via the school’s e-mail, *Facebook*, and *Twitter* accounts. Social media was already being used to announce this social media project, underscoring how colleges are already adjusting to the new methods of reaching people. Within a few minutes of the announcement, the class account had followers including students, faculty, alumni, and even the official school account. As students tweeted throughout the week, the class had posts re-tweeted amongst the followers, while also connecting with other *Twitter* accounts in posts.



[Martin Luther@MartinLutherBPC](#)

The scrambled teaching of indulgences makes even a genius unable to answer questions [@\\_Johann\\_Tetzel](#) [#eightyone](#) [#donttrustwikipedia](#)  
**2 retweets 1like**

Reply

Retweet

Like

More

Fig. 1: Student *Twitter* post for HIST/CHR 312 course project on Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*

In this post shown in Figure 1, another *Twitter* account is referenced: [@\\_Johann\\_Tetzel](#). Tetzel was the indulgence-selling priest who sparked Luther's writing *The Ninety-Five Theses*. Many historical figures have *Twitter* accounts available with which to connect for such a project as this. Not only was Johann Tetzel called out, but the person overseeing his page "retweeted" the post and responded. Thus, this project can be very interactive, even beyond the classroom, because there are pages for so many figures.

In addition to connecting to other figures, students were required to use the important hashtag (#) *Twitter* feature. Students had to hashtag the thesis number and create their own creative hashtags relevant to the thesis. Some creative hashtags from the upper-level class included: [#allaboutdatrufe](#), [#Luthersaywhat](#), [#theother99percent](#), and [#aintlysol](#).

In the lower-level survey, the classes did not create a live class page; rather, this was a one-day in-class discussion. Students paired off, chose their favorite two theses, and wrote the end products on the classroom's white board. They too were encouraged to modernize the language, use hashtags, and use other figures' handles, all while retaining Luther's original meaning. As the professor walked around

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and observed the students, she noticed they were far more engaged in this discussion activity than any other from the semester; they also voiced it was their favorite activity. Students continually called the professor over to discuss their theses and make sure they fully understood the meaning before “translating” it. Also, the final exam featured a Reformation question which was one of the most-answered essays; the Luther analysis was often the strongest part of the essay, complete with direct reference to the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Thus, the activity helped students understand, retain, and critically analyze Luther's historical importance. This activity allowed them to grow as critically thinking students, which is the main goal of this required lower-level survey course.

### **Case Study Method II: *Facebook***

The same professor also incorporated social media in a HIST 152: World Civilizations II course. She used *Facebook* as a group project rather than assigning an individual research paper. The class was split into groups of three or four and assigned an historical figure from within the class's time frame (1600 to the present). The assignment featured individual and group work. Each individual student had to research their historical figure for basic information as required on *Facebook* pages (birthday, location, education, and job). They also, however, had to do deeper research to understand their figure's life events and actions which makes him or her historically important. Thus, they had to dig deeper than basic research and figure out the “Why” question: “Why should anyone study this person?” This “Why” question required critical thinking and analysis because students had to understand their person in order to become their person on the *Facebook* page. This is exactly what a similar entry-level history paper would require of students. Thus, the students were expected to undergo the same thinking and analytical levels as a traditional paper in a new format.

After researching their figure, each individual student had to create two “likes” for the following categories: television shows, movies, music, and books. Students were encouraged to choose modern, fun “likes” but had to properly answer why they thought their person would choose it. Thus, they used their research and critical thinking to truly understand their person's importance in history. This was a very creative avenue for students' critical

thinking. One student chose “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” as one of Gandhi’s favorite television shows. Her explanation was that Gandhi highly valued family and this show highlights how one family, despite struggles, relies on each other. Another student, covering Winston Churchill, cited *Harry Potter* as a favorite book because it illustrated the British boarding school experience. Churchill spent his education in elite British boarding schools and often cited this as very formative.

After creating “likes,” the students had to come together as a group to work on status updates. Students had to individually create two updates, but had to work together to guarantee no overlaps in information, yet that all important historical events were covered. The updates had to mention significant historical events in each figure’s life. Yet, the update had to be in modern, *Facebook* language; thus, abbreviations, hashtags, and emojis were encouraged. In order to take an important historical event and translate it to modern, youthful language again required students to think critically. They had to retain historical importance while being fun and creative. An example from a group covering Mikhail Gorbachev included a picture of Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan with the update (see Fig. 2).

**Mikhail Gorbachev**

1985

TBT to when I met with US President Ronald Reagan. Boy is he persistent about tearing down the Berlin wall.

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Edit](#) · [Delete](#)

Fig. 2: Student *Facebook* post on Mikhail Gorbachev for HIST 152 course project on historical figures from 1600 to the present, using the common *Facebook* theme of “throwback Thursday.”

The group then had to explain to the class the significance of the update: why was Gorbachev meeting with Reagan and why was the Berlin Wall a significant historical detail? Yet, they used the common *Facebook* Throwback Thursday (TBT) to make this important detail modern and fun. Another example from the same group featured a

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status update comment from a “Concerned Citizen” in the Soviet Union (see Fig. 3).

### **A Concerned Citizen**

1985

Some people never learn from history..... #glasnost(openness plan)

@mikailgorbachev

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Edit](#) · [Delete](#)

Fig. 3: Student *Facebook* post from a “concerned citizen” about Mikhail Gorbachev for HIST 152 course project on historical figures from 1600 to the present.

Once again, the group had to explain the historical significance of Gorbachev’s “glasnost” plan to the class when explaining this update. What was very impressive about this update, in particular, was the connection the group made with Louis XVI’s similar openness plan which indirectly led to the French Revolution, just as Gorbachev’s plan would indirectly lead to anti-Communist revolutions. Although using a modern social media resource, this group clearly used critical analysis and made important historical connections from earlier in the semester.

### **Case Study Outcomes and Conclusions**

Both projects were well-received by the students. Students not only performed well on the assignments, but were interested and engaged during the projects. To evaluate student response to the projects, the professor asked students from her HIST/CHR 312 and Spring HIST 152 courses to submit written opinions. Each survey had one question: "How did you like the Social Media project?" Regarding the HIST/CHR 312 *Twitter* account, eleven out of eleven surveys were positive; regarding the HIST 152 *Facebook* assignment, thirty two out of thirty two were positive.

### **Student Feedback**

The most substantial findings were two trends that appeared in both classes. First, there were numerous responses indicating the projects were relatable to the new generation. Four of eleven



HIST/CHR 312 students and nine of thirty HIST 152 students used some form of “relatable” or “new generation” in their response. The second trending topic in both surveys was that the project was “fun” and “creative.” The HIST/CHR 312 class featured three of eleven students using those exact words; nine of thirty two HIST 152 students used those exact words. Students also indicated the assignment was fun and easy, yet still helped them learn a lot. There were also responses that the *Facebook* project, in comparison with a paper, was less stressful because it was familiar to them; also they remarked that without the stress, they learned more. More detailed student response information can be found in the Appendix.

In the upper-level HIST/CHR 312 there were two students who, although providing a positive comment, also expressed desired limitations on how much social media should be used in the classroom: “It would be good to incorporate social media in the classroom but only to a certain extent” and “using social media is a positive, but only if you use it wisely to where it does not get out of hand.” The professor found this very interesting because no limitation was expressed in the HIST 152 responses. The upper-level course was comprised of History and Christian Studies juniors and seniors; whereas, HIST 152 is mainly comprised of freshmen and sophomores from all majors and is a required core curriculum class. Thus, this shows more advanced college students within their subject matter were a bit more skeptical to rely on social media as an educational tool. The week the upper-levels completed their project, several did voice they would have preferred a more direct, in-depth discussion on the Ninety-Five Theses.

### **Faculty Feedback**

Based on this feedback, the professor found that upper-level students, who have already been required in several classes to think critically in discussions or through written papers are more hesitant of using social media as an educational learning tool. Yet, this use of papers may not be such a positive tool for incoming students. By using social media instead of traditional essay assignments, students were drawn into the material and the process of thinking critically. It provided a good entry to academic research and proper thinking skills.

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Once they are drawn in and have more college class experiences, then they move to the upper-level desire for greater critical thinking in more traditional methods. This indicates that social media is an effective teaching tool for the “new generation” entry-level students.

The professor in this study did not experience the concerns noted in the above-mentioned studies highlighting faculty concerns on time consumption and uncertain/difficult assessment methods. The time involved was not beyond usual class and assignment preparation. The HIST/CHR 312 live *Twitter* page did not take more than fifteen minutes to create, format, and set security perimeters. The in-class HIST 151 *Twitter* activity took less than five minutes to explain to students. The HIST 152 *Facebook* page assignment took about fifteen minutes to prepare. All that was required in advance was to randomly split students into groups before class and create an assignment information page.

Assessment of students’ work was not difficult, either. For the HIST/CHR 312 *Twitter* page, the professor simply checked the page each night and marked off which groups had or had not posted their tweets. This assignment was factored into a weekly discussion grade. The HIST 151 *Twitter* activity was also factored into an overall end-of-semester discussion grade. For both of these classes, the discussion grades were based largely on participation and general effort to understand the historical significance. The HIST 152 *Facebook* project featured each group presenting their page to the class. The professor had a rubric for the presentation measuring the overall group page, as well as individual preparedness of members. Each group member was also able to submit peer evaluations for each of his or her other group members; these were taken into account with the student presentations to deliver individual grades. Assessment was easy and less time-consuming than a research paper assessment.

### **Discussion**

This case study serves to illustrate some of the ideas discussed in the research related to this topic. From the debate centered on how to best incorporate social media into pedagogy, to the benefits and drawbacks of incorporation, to the importance of the perspectives of students and faculty, this example is hopefully one of more to come of how this knowledge can play out and improve the classroom experience of today’s digital learners. Placing the current study in the

context of the earlier discussed literature elucidates how this study compares and pertains to previous scholarship on the topic.

### **Methods of Incorporation**

As suggested by Manca and Ranieri, the success of this classroom application of social media may relate to the professor going beyond using it to have the students access and consume media, to creating and producing content instead (228). The design of the assignments was such that the students created their own *Twitter* posts and *Facebook* pages, making the learning more active than passive. Participation was mandatory, as suggested by Junco, Elavsky and Heiberger (284), and the platform was used both in and out of class as suggested by Lowe and Laffey (189) and West, Moore, and Barry (168-69).

### **Benefits of Incorporation**

The student comments that the projects with *Facebook* and *Twitter* were “relatable”, “fun”, and “creative” underscore the literature that one of the benefits of incorporating these into the classroom is students’ prior familiarity with the platforms (West, Moore, and Barry, 160). That there was no difference in response among males and females or any other groups reiterates the egalitarian nature of proper incorporation (Piotrowski, “Pedagogical Applications” 258).

### **Drawbacks of Incorporation**

Although the demographic difference noted by West, Moore and Barry (162) in adoption rates among males and females was not noted in this case study, there was some difference in regard to college level (i.e. a difference in the general education HIS 152, a freshman course, and the upper level HIS/CHR 312 course, an upper level course). The professor did not note a significant increase in workload or grading issues as other studies have noted (Legaree 2).

### **Student and Faculty Perspectives**

Student responses to the project satisfaction survey concur with Mostafa’s idea regarding “customer readiness for co-creation”

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(145): students reported being “excited” about doing such a project and that they “enjoyed” it. Perhaps, just as the literature suggests (Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger, 283; Junco, Heiberger and Loken 128), it was this excitement and enjoyment that lead to the enjoyment of the assignment that students reported and the increased knowledge of the subject observed by the faculty member. In fact, one statement even directly contradicts the perception reported by Neier and Zayer that social media is not beneficial in a classroom by calling it not only “fun,” but noting specifically that it was “educational.” The largely positive student feedback in this case study is typical since student feedback, in general, is largely positive in other studies. While faculty perceptions can be sometimes more tepid, that was not the case here. The faculty member involved did not seem to experience any of the negative associations of using social media in the classroom reported by other faculty who have done so, as stated earlier.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate via an overview of the literature and practical applications that social media can be an effective teaching tool. It bridges students' daily lives with the traditional educational model and provides a different, and sometimes better, means through which professors can connect with students. When used sparingly, alongside traditional teaching modes such as lectures and research papers, it can help stimulate student thinking, growth, and excitement. As more social media types evolve or emerge, it will be necessary for more professors to develop and critique possible classroom incorporation. Hopefully, these findings might encourage more faculty to consider using social media and provide the pedagogical community with further insight.

Appendix

Question: “How did you like the Social Media project?”		
Response Theme	Course	Full Response
“Relatable” or “New Generation”	HIS/CHR 312	<p>“The <b>generation</b> of this class loves social media so to add it in with the stuff we are learning is a great way to get students involved.”</p> <p>“I think it was useful as a way to <b>relate</b> to this <b>millennial generation.</b>”</p>
	HIS 152	<p>“I thought it was interesting to try and relate real world issues with <b>today’s</b> [sic] modern technology.”</p> <p>“Using <i>Facebook</i> as a School assignment was a good idea b/c [sic] it allows students to better present information they’ve learned in a way that is most <b>relatable.</b>”</p> <p>“I think its [sic] great idea because it gives <b>college level students (18-23 years old)</b> a chance to incorporate some things they like into actual educational work.”</p>
“Fun” and “Creative”	HIS/CHR 312	<p>“I thought it was a pretty cool and creative way to learn about the 95 Theses. It made us have to actually study and think about the meanings of the thesis statements so it was a good and <b>fun</b> learning tool.”</p> <p>“It was <b>fun and creative!</b>”</p>
	HIS 152	<p>“Using <i>Facebook</i> as an assignment was probably my favorite assignment since I’ve [sic] been in college. Mainly b/c [sic] social media is something all of us get excited about but also b/c [sic] you allowed us to put <b>creative</b> thought into it and let us have <b>fun</b> with the project.”</p> <p>“I enjoyed this project immensely. It allowed us to ‘go outside the box’ and use individual <b>creativity.</b>”</p> <p>“I thought the FB assignment was <b>fun</b>...it got us to actually think and look up things about our person...it also let us be <b>creative</b> and it wasn’t just a normal boring project.”</p> <p>“I thought using social media for class project was <b>fun</b> and educational.”</p>

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