



CEA MID-ATLANTIC REVIEW

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The Mid-Atlantic Review – Volume 33, 2025 Call For Submissions – Deadline: 1 June 2025

The Mid-Atlantic Review seeks scholarly articles, position papers, short fiction, poems, and pedagogical reflections for its Special 2025 Issue focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI). In the span of a year or two, generative AI has posed unprecedented challenges to and opportunities for higher education, the humanities, and the arts. Intellectual, pedagogical, and artistic engagement with this emerging technology is vital in our current world and this issue of *The Mid-Atlantic Review* encourages such engagement. We are also looking for original photographs or artwork related to the Mid-Atlantic region. Ethically produced AI art related to the Mid-Atlantic region would be of particular interest for this issue.

We also welcome submissions not related to AI for this issue. Those who would like inspiration for their writing can use the theme for 2025's conference: Freedom.

Research articles and essay submissions should be limited to between 3,000 and 5,000 words; reviews of scholarly books should be limited to 1,000 words; poetry submissions should be limited to 500 words per poem with a maximum of three poem submissions; and short fiction should be limited to 1,500 words with a maximum of one short fiction submission. Poetry and short fiction must be related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing.

The Mid-Atlantic Review is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually by the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group (CEAMAG). The journal specializes in literary and cultural criticism, discussions of pedagogy, public humanities work, reviews of scholarly books, personal essays concerned with the teaching of English, and creative writing related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing. *The Mid-Atlantic Review* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography and available to scholars through the EBSCO and ProQuest Literature databases.

The Mid-Atlantic Review believes that scholars and creative writers should be paid for their labor. Authors of published pieces will receive a \$20 honorarium and a copy of the journal.

Scholarly work must be prepared in accordance with the most recent MLA style manual and emailed as a Word or Google document to CEAMidAtlanticReview@gmail.com. Please remove your name, institutional affiliation, and any other identifying information from your document. The deadline for submissions is June 1, 2025.

Additional information about the CEAMAG and digital copies of Volumes 16-32 of *The Mid-Atlantic Review* can be found here: <https://bowiestate.edu/academics/colleges/college-of-arts-and-sciences/departments/language-literature-and-cultural-studies/ceamag/ceamar-journal.php>. Bowie State University (BSU), Maryland's oldest HBCU, is the digital home of the College English Association, Mid-Atlantic Group. Issues of *The Mid-Atlantic Review* are printed thanks to funding from BSU's Department of Language, Literature, & Cultural Studies.



Anthony Salvatore Abate, "Tarentum, Pennsylvania."

Mother's Day: A Social Commentary on W.E.B. Du Bois's Writings on Women

Jacquetta Ayewoh

Civilization must know two things: The glory and beauty of creating life, the need and duty of power and intelligence. This and this only will make the perfect marriage of love and work.

–W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women”

There is much to be admired about the strength and courage of a Black mother. The many sacrifices she makes to ensure the safety and success of her children should be, at all times, highly exalted. My mother raised her first daughter at the tender age of fifteen, and despite her age and inexperience, she loved and sacrificed selflessly. She then went on to raise two more daughters alone, in poverty, yet she did so selflessly. When my eldest sister had her first daughter at the age of fifteen (I at the time being three years old), my mother scolded, embraced, and continued to love her and the new child, selflessly. My middle sister rebelled throughout high school, graduating by the skin of her teeth. Yet, through all the heartache, missed days of work, and sleepless nights she caused my mother during those formative years, she was also loved selflessly. As an adolescent, I watched my mother work overtime just to send me to Québec and Montréal for a school trip, my senior prom, and even sending me off to college. I paid it forward by gifting her my high school diploma in an envelope with a “thank you” card attached. When I received my bachelor's degree, I gifted my mother my tassel, and when I earned my master's degree, I gifted her a t-shirt that read, “Millersville University Mom.” When my husband asked

for my mother's blessing to marry me, she wept for joy and blessed him because she loved me selflessly enough to give me away.

Black mothers are generational byproducts of love and sacrifice, and they raise their Black daughters to continue in that legacy. I am forever grateful for the love and lessons my mother has given me to bestow onto my future daughters. However, a new dawn arrives where millennials, such as I, are preparing their daughters to lead outside the confines of motherhood and into the realms of social justice. In this analysis, I am calling for a revision of the traditional codification of racial progress for Black women and to recodify this hegemonic trope with a contemporary classification that centers on the intellectualism and *free womanhood* of Black women. This analysis explores the homogenization of women as mothers and sacrificial lambs through a literary lens that employs W.E.B. Du Bois's "Of the Meaning of Progress," (1903) "The Damnation of Women," (1920) and *Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911).

W.E.B Du Bois, amongst others, is a monumental early twentieth-century Race Man and leading figure in the Black intellectual community. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has remained a monolithic text within the community for more than one hundred years. *Souls* provides our community with a sociological framework that helps us better contemplate race relations and racial consciousness through concepts such as the "veil" and "double consciousness." These two tropes essentialize the way in which African Americans maneuver through society alongside whiteness. Du Bois neither encourages nor advocates for assimilation; rather, he encourages Black men to find their own place in society without "bleaching their souls." He contends that it is, after all, the hope of the Black, Negro male to be a "coworker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius" (Du Bois 365). Black masculinity is an operative term, one which happens

to be an overarching rhetorical motif employed throughout *Souls* and many other texts written by Du Bois. The Negro man, according to Du Bois, is defined as "...a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world..." (364). If Du Bois can describe Black men as the "seventh sons" in White society, then is it safe to assume that Black women can be categorized alongside them as "seventh daughters?" This hypothetical title insinuates that though Du Bois mentions women in his essays, he does not actually consider them "coworkers" in racial progress. Du Bois's inclusion of women in his texts is limited, and he portrays them through two distinguishable maternal schemas: strong Black women (SBW) and mammies.

Barbara McCaskill investigates Du Bois's limited portrayal of women in his writings and argues that Du Bois's *Souls* presents a presumptuous Victorian perspective of womanhood, alleging that Du Bois homogenizes women through a hegemonic, masculine lens. Du Bois, according to McCaskill, portrays the unlikeliness of women sharing the same level of intellect or intelligence as men. Furthermore, he does not depict women as being socially or economically independent. McCaskill contends that Du Bois coddles his women by protecting them from the "big bad wolf" of white supremacy. She also sees Du Bois's desire to protect Black women in "The Damnation of Women" as an attempt to restore the Black homes that were violently ravaged during slavery and post-Reconstruction. McCaskill notes:

This near-fetishization of the monogamous African American mother and wife can be traced, as Du Bois insists, to the collision of enslavement and post-Reconstruction racism with the American Dream. In slavery, the African American home was a site of constant, spontaneous intrusion and control by the white master and mistress of by posses of white vigilantes self-elected to spread terror and violence. (McCaskill 76)

Here McCaskill illustrates Du Bois's romanticized fear of Black women succumbing to the wiles of white patriarchal masculinity. Du Bois's texts reflect his desire to restore the Black home by using the social condition of Black women (from slavery to post-Reconstruction) as rhetorical ploys to incite action among other Black men to aid in this restoration. He perpetuates the image of Black mothers being torn from their homes to nurse their master's children, and young Black daughters being raped in the Big House to compel Black men to take up arms against the white patriarchal establishment. She contends that Du Bois is seemingly obsessed with the notion of Black men protecting Black women and their homes by any means necessary. Though his intent to protect Black women is flattering, on the contrary, McCaskill notes how Du Bois manages to identify and confine Black women as solely "daughters of sorrow" (74). McCaskill continues, "He honors African American women, even as he homogenizes African American womanhood. He extols African American womanhood, even as he fronts programs and expurgates or outright excludes African American women" (74). McCaskill's argument highlights *Souls's* neglect of Black womanhood during the height of their intellectual growth. In doing so, Du Bois challenges the intellectual potential Black women have in comparison to Black men.

"Of the Meaning of Progress" chronicles Du Bois's experience teaching poor, Black children in a remote mountain town in Tennessee. Du Bois describes the town as destitute and in need of an educational revival. Many of its residents dwell within a state of learned helplessness and cannot ascertain the meaning of progress through the achievement of an education. In his narrative, Du Bois meets an anxious, big-eyed girl named Josie. Josie's enthusiasm for education exacerbates Du Bois's desire to reopen the war-torn, colored school. He writes, "Josie, hearing my errand, told me anxiously that they wanted a school over the hill; that but once since the war had a teacher been there; that she herself longed to learn, - and thus she ran on, talking

fast and loud, with much earnestness and energy” (Du Bois 406). Josie and her brothers are the first to attend the school once reopened. Du Bois reflects upon his connection with his students and their families; however, he is drawn to Josie’s family and her desire to step outside the confines of her mountain town.

After a decade’s absence, Du Bois returns only to find his modest school once again abandoned and most of his former female students married with children. Du Bois remarks upon his impression of one of his female students, “She looked somewhat worried with her new duties, but soon bristled into pride over her neat cabin and the tale of her thrifty husband, the horse and cow, and the farm they were planning to buy” (412). Out of all these discouraging reports of his former students, Du Bois is most dismayed by Josie’s untimely demise. He learns that Josie never received the opportunity to travel beyond the mountainous perimeters of her town. In the end, readers discover that Josie sacrificed her dream of finishing school to financially provide for her family after her brother’s abrupt abandonment. Readers learn that Josie’s little sister Lizzie also leaves home “flushed with the passion of youth” (411) and returns with a nameless and fatherless child who only increases Josie’s burden. Josie’s selfless sacrifice ultimately kills her, reflecting her unfulfilled desire to ultimately achieve progress.

The meaning of progress denotes an alternative meaning for Black women. Subsequently, Josie’s sacrifice is a common example of this denotation through the hardships and selfless sacrifices exhibited by Black women in order to protect the welfare of their families. Zharia Thomas et al.’s “25 Years Research of Psychology Research on the ‘Strong Black Woman’” (2021) explores the concept of the “Strong Black Woman” schema (SBW). The authors define this term as “Black women who demonstrate strength and self-reliance in the face of adversity, while prioritizing others’ needs above their own” (Tomas et al. 3). They maintain that the origins

of this schema are rooted during the Antebellum period when enslaved women were subjected to manual labor alongside men which in turn rendered them as physically “strong.” This label, they continue, contrasted “Black and white women through uplifting white women as dependent and weak” (12). This projection of Black, feminine strength followed Black women for generations by perpetuating it onto their daughters. Black women teaching their daughters the importance of Black, feminine strength is a survival mechanism to evade weakness and timidity. Thomas et al. add, “Furthermore, to survive enslavement, Black women needed to exhibit strength and needed to take care of others. One reason Black women are believed to accept the SBW schema and use it as a tool for coping is that it reflects their experiences at the intersections of racism and sexism” (12). Additionally, Thomas et al. contend that SBW is a derivative of the mammy trope—wherein Black women are encouraged to be caretakers to white families, while managing the affairs of their own families. Leeja Carter and Amerigo Rossi similarly echo Thomas et al.’s argument and explore the relationship between SBW and the mammy trope. Carter and Rossi define the mammy as a “self-sacrificing, mothering woman who happily cares for her slave owner and his family, her family, and community seemingly unaffected or without fatigue” (290). They allege that the exploitive role of the mammy reinforces a false narrative of Black, feminine strength and perpetuates a dependence on “white oppressive standards of servitude, and contain Black women into being a workhorse among other notions” (291). Fundamentally, Black women like Josie are expected to sacrifice for the welfare of their families; it is an unfortunate epigenetic trait which continues to negatively impact the Black community.

Progress in the Black community is often measured by the ability to economically provide for one’s family. Education, Du Bois’s essay reveals, is not factored into this equation; in fact, education is considered a luxury and not a necessity. Josie is more than just a young girl

from a poor mountain town; she is an archetype. She represents all Black women who inherit the sole responsibility of catering to the needs of their families. Josie is the sacrificial lamb of her family; she died so that someone else may live off the sweat from her brow. Moreover, Du Bois uses Josie as a rhetorical ploy to gain empathy from his readers and to underscore the unjust, social outcomes of slavery and Reconstruction. To him, women like Josie are to be revered for their sacrifice. Her story motivates men to recognize the sacrifices many Black women often make for men to achieve progress/status; however, this acknowledgment is void of gratitude and rooted in expectation. Du Bois allegedly attempts to acknowledge and pay homage to Black women like Josie in his essay, “The Damnation of Women”; however, his attempt is limiting and continues to depict Black women through a presumptuous, Victorian lens.

“The Damnation of Women” suggests that the responsibility of restoring the Black nuclear family during Reconstruction rested solely on Black women and their ability to fulfill and maintain traditional gender roles. Du Bois posits:

The family group, however, which is the ideal of the culture with which these folks have been born is not based on the idea of an economically independent/working mother. Rather its ideal harks back to the sheltered harem with the mother emerging as nurse and homemaker, while the man remains as sole breadwinner. What is the inevitable result? Broken families. (Du Bois 16)

The post-Reconstruction era allegedly granted African Americans the liberty to redefine the Black home without further subjugation of the white gaze. Du Bois argues how the white gaze objectifies the bodies of Black women and deems them either too primitive or incapable of achieving motherhood, marriage, and civilization. Du Bois’s essay refutes this by encouraging

Black women to focus on mothering as a method to help advance the Black race. He analyzes the statistics of white and Black families and deduces:

Among native whites, one woman in ten is separated from her husband by death, divorce or desertion. Among Negroes, the ratio is one in seven. Is the cause racial? No, it is economic, because there is the same high ratio among the white foreign born. The breaking up of the family is the result of modern working and sex conditions ... (16-17)

“The Damnation of Women” goes on to contradict white society’s homogenization of Black women while simultaneously homogenizing Black women. Essentially, Du Bois’s essential focus on slavery deprives Black women of the ability to step outside of the confines of the ivory towers of Victorian womanhood and motherhood. Moreover, slavery remains at the root of Du Bois’s desire to restore Black families and hegemonic gender roles. His essay contradicts the very thing he attempts to advocate—*free womanhood*. He writes, “She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion. The present mining horror at free womanhood must pass if we are ever to be rid of the bestiality of free womanhood; not by guarding the weak in weakness do we gain strength but by making weakness free and strong” (2). Du Bois’s essay attempts to highlight consequential outcomes for Black women desiring to be free of their domestic duties and encourages them to pursue what JoAnn Pavletich theorizes as *true womanhood*—an all too evident trope in post-Reconstruction African-American literature. Pavletich distinguishes this trope through three hegemonic characteristics: feminine virtue, submissiveness, and piety. In response to Du Bois’s argument in “Damnation,” she contends “Within the discourse of true womanhood, a woman’s purity and piety must protect her from even the perception by others that she is available for attack. Historically, this discursive demand doomed black women who

were made able by the racist structures of slavery and its legacy” (Pavletich 650). Essentially, Pavletich argues that exhibiting these characteristics “protects” Black women from societal scrutiny; nevertheless, whether Black women concede to these roles or not, Du Bois nonetheless still considers them “daughters of sorrow” (Du Bois 4). In support of this claim, Du Bois mentions the following “daughters of sorrow” in his essay to illustrate Black women’s rise from slavery: Harriet Tubman, Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Kate Ferguson, Mary Shadd, and Louise De Mortie. These women are known for their courageous contributions to racial progress for Black women during the era; however, Du Bois’s essay solely focuses on their womanly beauty.

Additionally, Du Bois’s essay attempts to credit these women for their contributions to racial progress while also limiting them to their beauty and feminine qualities. Though he encourages readers to acknowledge the overall triumphs of Black women, he nonetheless fails to characterize some of these women as aesthetically flattering and compares their feminine qualities to their advocacy: “in gentle Phillis, Harriet the crude Moses, the sibyl Sojourner Truth and the martyr, Louise De Mortie” (Du Bois 4). Farah J. Griffin also analyzes Du Bois’s evaluation of these women leaders in “Damnation”:

Although the turn to black women’s agency is an early contribution to black feminist revisions of African American history, Du Bois’s delineation of black female types is somewhat disturbing because of its implied class and color politics. While hailing the courage and contributions of Tubman and Truth, he writes of them: ‘Such strong, primitive types of Negro womanhood in America seem to exhaust its capabilities. They know less of not more worth, but a finer

type of black woman wherein trembles all of that delicate sense of beauty ...’.

(Griffin 31)

Griffin’s analysis unveils a close relationship between the beauty of *true womanhood* and the ugliness and primitiveness of *free womanhood*. She maintains that Du Bois’s essay is a manifesto encouraging Black men to protect Black, feminine beauty. Griffin supports this with a further analysis of the text:

Du Bois opens the essay with a description of four women of his boyhood: his widowed mother; his beautiful cousin Inez; Emma, the victim of a sexual double standard; and Ide Fuller, the outcast. These four women represent the limitations American society places on women when denying them social, political, and economic freedom. (Griffin 31)

According to Griffin, Du Bois’s categorization of these four types of women reveals an underlying critique of the development of women’s intellect and leadership and evokes the desire to encourage *true womanhood* (31). Griffin adds, “The perfect examples of this type of womanhood of beauty and intelligence he gives in the following: ‘Mary Shadd . . . was tall and slim . . . of that ravishing dream born beauty, that twilight of the races which we call mulatto’” (32). Despite the literary and sociopolitical capabilities *free womanhood* allows Black women, Du Bois instead distinguishes *true womanhood* through Black women’s sacrifices.

Du Bois’s views on Black women are not only confined within sociological texts such as “Damnation” and “Of the Meaning of Progress,” they are also evident in his fictional work *Quest of the Silver Fleece*. This novel presents another distinctive connection between physical beauty and political advocacy through Du Bois’s critical depiction of *free womanhood* being both primitive and unvirtuous.

Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911) unfolds the tale of a requited love affair between Bles and Zora. Bles is an impressionable young Black man who is mentored and groomed by a white, schoolteacher named Mary Taylor. Mary is enthralled by Bles's transformation from Negro to gentleman and encourages him to advance his education in the North. On the contrary, Zora is described as a "child of the swamp" who prefers to live life in the wilderness. Bles and Zora are infatuated by each other; Bles admires Zora for her strength, bravery, and brevity. Likewise, she admires his dreams for his dedication towards civility and education. Bles assumes the role as Zora's protector and encourages her to attend school with him. As Bles teaches Zora how to read and write, Zora teaches him about life on the swamp in return. She vehemently expresses her disdain for work, structure, and civilization; nonetheless, Bles remains enamored by the enigmatic young girl even offering to pay for her tuition. For a time, Zora enrolls in school and begins to make progress; however, once Mary Taylor discovers the details about Zora's rape, she begins to ostracize and vilify her. She berates Zora out of fear that her lack of virtue will distract Bles. In fact, she detests the thought of Zora and Bles being coupled because she believes that a young man of Bles's caliber deserves to be with a *true woman*, like her. Mary weaponizes her knowledge of Zora's rape as a catalyst to separate the couple. Du Bois writes:

'Bles,' she said primly, 'have you absolutely no shame?' He braced himself and raised his head proudly. 'I am going to marry her; it is no crime.' Then he noted the expression on her face, and paused. She stepped back, scandalized. 'Can it be, Bles Alwyn,' she said, 'that you don't know the sort of girl she is?' He raised his hands and warded off her words, dumbly, as she turned to go, almost frightened at the havoc she saw. The heavens flamed scarlet in his eyes and he screamed. 'It's a lie! It's a damned lie!' He wheeled about and tore into the swamp. (Du Bois 15)

Mary Taylor despises Zora because she does not exhibit the same virtues of *true womanhood* as she thinks she does. This social comparison Mary impacts towards Zora because her rape causes her to be *othered* and further marginalized. In fact, this comparative and adversarial relationship between Mary Taylor and Zora ultimately represents the underlying discord between Black and white women today.

Patricia Hill Collins deconstructs the relationship between Black and white women and maintains that white supremacy is the culprit. She affirms, “Another basic idea concerns how binary thinking shapes understandings of human difference. In such thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its ‘other’” (Collins 70). In essence, Mary *others* Zora because without her virtue, she is unfit for womanhood, which also means that she will make an unfit wife and mother. Collins also analyzes the connections between *othering* and the misnaming, *ungendering*, and *unmothering* of Black women. She adds “As a part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood” (69). Furthermore, Du Bois’s text is a literary depiction of the mistreatment of Black women by white patriarchal society. Bles helps Zora to see her true potential, but once she reaches the peak of transformation, he falls victim to the whims of Mary Taylor and abandons her. Mary’s negative response to Zora’s womanhood and Bles’s abandonment is another familiar social trend to which many Black women fall prey. Janet Mock echoes this argument through an examination of bell hooks. She affirms “Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power not because they don’t see it, but because they see it and they don’t want it to exist” (Mock 195). hooks’s perspective

illuminates how the disgruntled Mary Taylor's misdeeds towards Zora posit a bigger, underlying issue: Black women are under attack by white women because of the possessive attitude displayed towards Black men.

Inasmuch, Mary Taylor is but a conduit of white patriarchal society. She represents its relentless mission to dismantle the Black nuclear family, and Bles represents a sect of Black men who are complicit in its destruction. Mary devalues Zora for her past and intervenes in Bles's plans to propose marriage. Mary ruthlessly exposes Zora's sexual trauma to Bles and admonishes him for still wanting to marry Zora. Bles, rather than defending Zora's honor from Mary's speculations, appeals to it by fleeing. The text alleges a historical pattern of white women conspiring with Black men to replace Black women in the home. It also suggests that Black men's desire to obtain proximity to whiteness, via white women, consequently, results in the prolonged oppression of their "darker sisters." Instead of trying to help Zora as she does Bles, Mary denigrates any/all development for her growth and maturation as a potential wife and mother. hooks's work provides subsequent context regarding this connection between white women and Black men. She maintains, "As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized" (hooks 27). As implied by hooks, white women abuse their privilege to dominate their darker sisters. Unfortunately, some Black men are sucked into the white patriarchal vortex of upholding the white woman's virtue much to the detriment of the Black woman.

Upon further analysis of "Of the Meaning of Progress," "The Damnation of Women," and *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, I am proposing a reconsideration of the Black motherhood trope within the contemporary Black intellectual community. We are in need of a contemporary trope that rests outside the confines of traditional, hegemonic gender roles. My mother's mother bore

and raised her out of love, and from that love I was born. The perpetuation of motherhood and sacrifice is a generational hindrance in the Black community, one that Black women tend to celebrate more than intellectual achievements such as matriculations and graduations. This notion is supported by research conducted by Thomas et al., as well as Carter and Rossi. These authors deconstruct the SBW and mammy tropes and show that they are not only coping mechanisms to avoid weakness, but they also show a dependence on white patriarchal servitude. These tropes must be rewritten, and I look forward to breaking that cycle by stepping outside of the traditional gender roles that are negatively perpetrated in the African American community. “The Damnation of Women” raises two hypothetical decisions for Black women: 1) Black women can choose motherhood and risk protection of their virtue, or 2) Black women can choose economic independence and free womanhood at the risk of jeopardizing their virtue. Whatever those risks may be, I choose the latter.

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Pragmatic Mexiamerican, or On Mitigative Multiplicity: A Stance Against Cultural Rigidity

Rosemary Briseño

The term *mestizaje* refers to the biological metaphor of in-between-ness, a stymied sense of being anchored in liminality; broadly, it means a person who has both Spanish and indigenous ancestry. *Mestizaje* is also a term inferring indigenous racial pride. The word, then, is intimately interrelated with the notion of Chicanismo, or the rhetoric of resistance; *mestizaje* takes on many valences, particularly in that it takes on cultural as well as biological connotations in terms of being passed from one generation to the next.

But for me, this term leans too heavily toward the racial and biological. I prefer the term “cultural hybridity,” which lends itself to the inclusion of more than one culture and also indicates the diverse ways that culture is broadly conceived, not just in terms of race, applies to many of us today (Canclini 11). Traditionalists in Chicano studies argue, however, that favoring the term “cultural hybridity” over *mestizaje* suggests a rejection of the historical significance of the colonized people of pre-Cortésian Mexico (Pérez-Torres 7). Using the more scientific term “cultural hybridity” over the sociocultural “mestizaje” suggests forgetting a conquered people’s “repressive colonial history of enslavement, genocide, and exploitation” as well as their history of miscegenation “as part of their official discourse surrounding national identity” (Pérez-Torres 7).

I argue that the political ideology of the subaltern is never displaced in my preference for the use of the term “cultural hybridity” over the term *mestizaje*; rather it is my way of recognizing that Mexican-American cultural identity is in fact what’s left after imperialism. The

term suggests that Mexican-American identity is the byproduct of cultural *difference*. Cultural hybridity acknowledges not only the basic cultural construction constituted by the subaltern and its dialectal opposite of the oppressor, but also the complex dimensions each culture simultaneously dispossesses from the other.

Using the term cultural hybridity rather than *mestizaje* in a discussion of borderland consciousness shows how far removed from Mexico even those affiliating as Chicana/os can be; Chicana/os, for example, have stronger ties to the United States than to Mexico. Using the term cultural hybridity instead of *mestizaje* further confirms that the degree of integration into mainstream American society is not always a conscious, personal, or political decision. Any typology of assimilation should not devalue those who self-affiliate as Chicano/a and not as *mestizaje*.

The hybridization process begins with the element of time. It could be argued that the more time a person of Mexican descent spends on U.S. soil, the more time they have to adjust culturally. Simply put, familiarity with the English language and “mainstream Anglo culture” are necessary to everyday functioning (Martínez 16). It takes many years to become adjusted to American life, but when it happens, it seems you’ve always lived in the United States (Martínez 16). Attention to a secondary language (i.e., Spanish) and holding on to deep-seated nationalistic ties to one’s ancestral country can become diluted as affiliation to American cultural identity grows stronger.

Attempting to achieve social and economic success, an individual’s ties to their ethnic culture can be extinguished over time; especially when this time spans over many generations. Yet something more than language and family recipes also die. An unfortunate result of these negotiations is relegating (wo)man as subject, a hierarchy inciting notions of cold, calculating,

scientific procedures, of violent splitting and cleaving, where no precedence is given to how the culturally hybridized “patient/specimen” might refuse or reject perpetual existence in a culturally-mediated, endemic state of ambiguity and invisibility.

As a light-skinned Mexican-American, I am that specimen. I exist behind a glass plate for others to observe. On the subject of passing, as a Mexican-American, I’m often misunderstood by peer and non-ethnic groups alike. Living in a hierarchal society, where class is defined in terms of race and position, is difficult because class has the unfortunate effect of leaking into where it negatively affects social and cognitive development, notably in the classroom (Moya 160). Identities, whether sexual, cultural or ethnic, are variable, and so, as Moya explains, it is not acceptable to expect all people who identify as Mexican-American to have the same “phenotypic features or cultural affiliations we typically associate with that group of people” or to assume that they engage in the same, identifiably “Chicano” cultural practices to accept that such a culture exists, just as it is incorrect to assume that “every human being who has a vagina experience[s] that biological fact in exactly the same way in order for us to assert that there is a social formation, generally referred to as ‘gender’” (Moya 160).

So, why has my light-skinned self, speaking perfect English, acculturated and educated in Euroamerican culture, cost me my Mexicanness, my *mexicanidad*, even though I am able to trace my ethnic ties to Mexico before Pancho Villa’s time? Apparently, I have made a trade. But at what price? As a first-generation college graduate from a working-class background, I managed to escape the dusty, isolated border town of Eagle Pass, Texas, where I was born and raised. The path to education was jump-started by my “English-only” classroom, and although I have succeeded academically, because I have managed to master the language of the land in the

written and spoken form, I have lost much, culturally, identity-wise, and ethnically, in my efforts to secure that success.

I've gained entry to the hallowed ivory tower of my university as an Assistant Professor, but at what cost? The halls of academe, although filled with opportunities I would not have been privy to had I remained in the Eagle Pass, were also empty of other Mexican-American/Latino/a/Chicano/a voices, except for one who was more than a voice, a saving grace, really. Dr. Victor Villanueva, who was my advisor during my doctoral studies, understood my feelings of emptiness in the ivory tower. His way of thinking, of "generalizing, theorizing, and questioning the systemic based on the personal," or what Freire calls *praxis*, "reflection and action through language," reflects the way I too ruminate and try to make sense of my own world (Villanueva vii).

During my time as a doctoral student, then ABD, then finally a PhD, I was unable to express my isolation and anxiety, because I did not know how to accept or handle my "racelessness," as Fordham calls the denial of the Other when American minority students become high achievers (qtd. in Villanueva 16). Racelessness, when adopted as a strategy, is to "go it alone," and is linguistically marked by "asserting that one is choosing to speak 'correct' English, ... Standard American English ... the language of the white middle class" (Villanueva 40). I didn't know that eschewing the *brown outta of my tongue* would lead to a spiraling array of hurtful incidents I wouldn't know how to handle: I'd "get it," a punishment, from both sides - including my own. I was and am a victim of intercultural ethnic harassment: the price of earning my way into academia as a woman of color.

I took several courses in Southwestern and Chicano/a literature when I was a student at the University of Texas at Austin. Once, when we were reading Sandra Cisneros's *The House on*

Mango Street, professors expected Chicana rhetoric reflecting Chicana's internal hatred because, as Ana Castillo writes, "we learn that our race is undesirable. Because of possible rejection, some of us may go to any length to deny our background," while other Chicanas hope for "light-skinned children and brag to no end of those infants who happen to be born *güeros*, white-looking" (Castillo 38). I was more concerned, however, with the alienation I saw in Esperanza, which I recognized stemmed from her social and class positions, and not necessarily from her ethnicity. How could I be expected to empathize with traditional, Chicano/a rhetoric when I didn't culturally fit in? Some classmates, I know, openly called me assimilationist; some just didn't understand and were confused.

My approach to Chicano/a works didn't change much when I began my doctoral studies, where I was often the only student of Mexican descent in the classroom. When I was asked to play the role of native informant, I wasn't going to make things comfortable for them. I never responded the way the professor expected me to because I didn't think of myself as an "angry Chicana." I thought of myself as the token Chicana. I wasn't interested in traditional Chicano/a politics because at the time, I didn't understand brown radicalism, my politics didn't bleed that way—yet my disinterest didn't come from disdain, but because of my involuntary acculturation.

I don't think I will ever fit the expected profile of Chicana academic; that is, a BIPOC who is also an academic who plays by the rules, is passive, and makes no ripples in the water because the way the university system expects me to fit the mold of the token person of color is hegemonic. Villanueva writes that hegemony "watches over and works with changes in language" as it constitutes "ideological domination"; he compares hegemony to rhetorician Kenneth Burke's ideology of "ultimate terms" (122). In me, hegemony found both prey and predator, because language is my power and my Achilles heel.

Since English is my source of power, my mode of self-expression, and because English is hegemonic, my method of deconstructing societal hegemony is interrelated with the very system I am trying to deconstruct. When I was born, I became an unwilling participant in the acculturation of the hegemonic system, a pragmatic assimilationist. If I am to reclaim what I have lost for the sake of an education, I must clarify and differentiate these terms: I thus call myself a pragmatic Mexican-American assimilationist and pragmatic Mexiamerican. It is my hope, in addressing pragmatic assimilating borderlanders, or those occupying liminal cultural and sociopolitical spaces who are vulnerable to the sociohistorical and cultural chaos of the south Texas borderlands, that they will find their place on the periphery of Chicano/a culture more accommodating and more encouraging of different interpretations regarding Chicana/o identity.

The term *pragmatic Mexiamerican* is how I identify my cultural heritage; it is a descriptive partly stemming from my own thinking. *Mexiamerican* complements being Mexican and American, and is a more natural blend than the hyphenated Mexican-American; the term *pragmatically assimilated* is one I borrowed from Oscar J. Martínez's *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands* (1994). Martínez's book is an ethnographic text analyzing the complexity of the people on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, in which he uses the term "pragmatic" in part to define a Mexican-American who chooses to learn to speak English as one way of achieving self-advancement.

I first read *Border People* in the name of research, but I came to regard it in a much more personal light. The book captures the humanity of the borderlander and their ability to challenge and transcend the metaphorical and physical limitations of the boundary which separates them from others. The chapter titled "Mexican Americans" is of special significance, since it deals specifically with complex cultural flux and the degree to which borderlanders are influenced by

their social and cultural history; this influence holds relevance for Mexican-Americans to this day.

Martínez states that borderlanders whose ancestors were already in the Texas/Mexico area before 1848 experienced a greater degree of acceptance than those who arrived after the Mexican Revolution, largely due to the later group's lower-class status (92). However, the increasing number of Mexicans from "disadvantaged backgrounds" pouring into the southern United States, especially in Texas, at the turn of the twentieth century has created "a more favorable ethnic climate"; as a result, "many of these immigrants and their descendants began to slowly distance themselves from their cultural roots to some degree than earlier immigrants, who experienced a very slow and limited mobility" (92). Martínez describes these immigrants as National Mexican Americans because they still represent the Mexican American community despite their weaker cultural ties (93). This group of borderlanders are precursors to the modern-day pragmatic Mexican American assimilationists.

The key shift from National Mexican American to what Martínez calls the "pragmatic assimilationist Mexican American" is due mostly to increased class mobility in recent decades, which has led to greater acceptance of Mexican Americans by the Anglo population. This, in turn, has caused "significant loss of Hispanic cultural traits," including the use of Spanish (Martínez 93). Martínez's assessment of this "loss," however, is problematic. He writes,

At the other end of the assimilationist spectrum are people who, in striving to achieve the American Dream of material comfort, status, and acceptability in U.S. society, consciously and overtly reject their Mexicanness because they see it as an impediment to personal progress. They are embarrassed by the poverty and other social problems that prevail in the Hispanic community and by the negative publicity that Mexicans constantly

receive in the U.S. media. They are often very critical of their cultural background and the lands of the forebears, and they work hard at shedding their ‘negative’ baggage. (95)

The language Martínez uses to describe a pragmatic Mexican American assimilationist in *Border People* is destructive. He describes a person that is not human at all, more like an imitation of life, a two dimensional cardboard cutout of the real thing, a *papier-mâché* marionette manipulated by unseen hands from the rafters of a dark mezzanine.

An assimilationist, as Martínez defines it, is a shameful, humiliated state of cultural and ethnic consciousness. It’s possible that persons fitting such descriptors exist. I prefer, however, to view the assimilationist in ways that align with what E. San Juan calls the “fabled trope of the ‘melting pot’” (542), a term he takes from Israel Zangwill’s 1909 play with that title. In the “melting pot,” the warmth of ethnic color, the diversity of culture, and the strength of race fade into memory or transform into sites of internal contestation and anxiety, rather than being replaced through a “neoliberal policy of multiculturalism”; that is, the transactional, cynical decision to rid oneself of non-Anglo characteristics in order to advance socioeconomically (San Juan 90, 96). The distinction I am making here is between Martínez’s self-loathing Mexican-American pragmatic assimilationist and an internally conflicted pragmatic Mexiamerican. Even though the terms are similar, they have strong and important distinctions. Language is powerful, and the term “assimilationist” is very different than “pragmatic Mexiamerican.”

Martínez’s and Villanueva’s accounts for the potential of assimilation of minorities in the U.S. differ in that Villanueva discusses race where Martínez does not. “Race is the final factor affecting assimilation,” Villanueva explains, recounting how Mexicans in the “‘30s, the ‘50s, and the present have immigration authorities checking documents of those who ‘look Mexican’”

(Villanueva 28).¹ Essentially, race is important because the more ethnic one looks, the more frequent and more harshly one is judged; thus, the greater the need to fit in with the racial status quo (i.e. white). Speaking the dominant but unofficial language (English) is one way to challenge this prejudice.

If San Juan is correct in stating that racism is based on cognitive and behavioral practices of everyday life, that is, it is ingrained in our psyche, then it will be difficult to dismantle the learned behavior one has adopted when they learn to associate success with assimilation. A pragmatic Mexican American assimilationist and a pragmatic Mexiamerican share the same desires for upward social mobility, status, material comfort and acceptability in American society. Like other hardworking, honest Americans, pragmatic Mexiamericans want to achieve the American Dream. However, unlike pragmatic Mexican-American assimilationists, Mexiamerican pragmatists do not feel ashamed or “embarrassed by the poverty and other social problems that prevail in the Hispanic community and by the negative publicity that Mexicans constantly receive in the U.S. media” (San Juan 95).

As Mexiamerican pragmatists, we are not obsessively critical of our cultural background, not because we are not invested in our own ancestral histories, but because our histories are made foreign to us through years of systemic acculturation. We don't reject our roots or forget the legacy of imperialist conquest from which we came, nor are we eager to bury our “cultural baggage” so that we might easily blend into mainstream American society. We choose not to erase our ethnic history because to do this would essentially be a form of erasing ourselves.

My parents, Mexiamerican pragmatists themselves, created an English-only household; they did what they thought was right. I am proud of my Mexican ethnicity and wouldn't want to

¹This form of law enforcement was officially sanctioned by Public Law 78, or the Bracero Program, which was instituted by the Truman administration in 1949 (Acuña 288).

lose any more of it than I already have. Nonetheless, I find myself alienated from some aspects of Chicana/o ideology, especially where indigenusness is considered a key to cultural authenticity. English is my only language, and it has whitewashed my already weakened cultural ties.

In no way do I equate myself with the likes of Miss Jimenez, the Anglicized Mexican-American character in Luis Valdez's one-act play, *Los Vendidos*, who chooses to gringo-ize her Mexican surname, insisting that it should be pronounced "JIM-enez" (41). Typical of Valdez's satire, *rasquachismo* (broad, common, comic relief of the traveling, impromptu teatro campesinos of the 1970s, popular among California braceros), the setting of this one-act play is Honest Sancho's Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop. The English translation of the play's title, *Los Vendidos*, means The Sell-Outs, which is a term often synonymous with the term assimilationist, as they are sometimes used interchangeably. The significance of Valdez's one-act play, its setting, and its title is that little to no distinctions are ever made between assimilationists and sell-outs, just as there might be no distinctions between pragmatic Mexican-American assimilationists and pragmatic Mexiamericans.

Valdez's play is just one of many examples of Chicana/o literature from the turbulent 1960s and 1970s that focus on "the oppressive forces of ignorance," about Chicana/o history "as ancient and as beautiful as life itself," and about the "gabacho" who "refuses to see him [the Mexican] as anything but cheap a labor supply" (Valdez 16). Suffering, oppression, ignorance, hatred, injustice, poverty, immigration, racism, and intolerance are reflected in Chicana/o literature, including, too, the voices of the pragmatic Mexiamerican. We don't differ from the "traditional" literary Chicana/o voices; our pragmatist experiences reflect many of the same issues, just from a different lens.

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Found in Thought

Noel Sloboda

“Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat.” – Walt Whitman

Must have taken a wrong turn, again,
heading through the real world

on my way to a college open house
where I am to staff a table

for creative arts, sandwiched
between recruiters for all the future

forensic accountants, hospitality
administrators, and petroleum engineers.

I will need to ask forgiveness
from the Admissions Office for being so

tardy. I could blame too little sleep
after a long night of reading Blake

or long-haul COVID fog
shrouding a middle-aged brain.

But honestly, I just like hanging out
in daydreams where so much real

disappears—including tax audits,
recruitment targets, and artificial clocks—

where Earth is like the porridge
chosen for a snack by Goldilocks,

neither too hot nor too cold,
and no Cassandra cries about our planet

reverberate through my brain—
just soul-stirring hymns

hummed by Nephelae

celebrating cumulus cotton balls

on which we drift eastward
toward a notional sunrise.

Writer's Block

Noel Sloboda

On Sunday evenings
with nothing much else
to do, we used to cruise

past a house one town over
where a famous man
of letters was said to have

crafted tomes translated
into two-dozen tongues.
We hoped to glimpse Calliope

on her way in or out
the side door, but all the lights
were off, every time—

except one cold April night
when bluish luster in one window
outlined the silhouette

of a slender frame slumped
forward at a desk, head in hands
as if the weight of gray

matter made it impossible
to sit up and face the glow
of a blank screen.

CharlesGPT: Dickens, Generative AI, and Literary Studies Now

Dan Dougherty

A cursory scan of the last year of articles on sites concerned with the pedagogy and future of literary studies such as *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals an emerging cottage industry thinking about and responding to the advent of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models (LLMs). The tones of these articles range from dismissive to apocalyptic and play out a cat-and-mouse game on two levels. On the first, educators and their students are pitted at odds as previous assessments fall flat in the face of generative AI. See, for instance, Beth McMurtie and Beckie Supiano's "ChatGPT Has Changed Teaching," and a student perspective in Owen Kichizo Terry's "I'm a Student. You Have No Idea How Much We're Using ChatGPT." It is probably fair to say that teachers at the secondary and post-secondary levels either have encountered or will soon encounter AI-generated text that borders on nonsensical from students, engendering a dismissive attitude towards the still-developing technology; students might advocate for the usefulness of said technology, and counter by arguing that their instructors are caught in a sort of survivor bias since they might catch only the *bad* or carelessly edited AI-generated text rather than that which goes undetected.

This is obviously a sad state of affairs and, at the risk of sounding far too idealistic, it creates adversaries out of collaborators in and out of the classroom. These are issues that will inevitably be worked on for years to come as technology continues to develop, and many more think pieces on the topic are yet to be written. The second cat-and-mouse game is more germane

to this essay: scholars in literary studies and similar disciplines might wonder what, exactly, the future of the discipline is if ChatGPT and the like continue their exponential development, and what the role of the individual scholar might be moving forward if, to be crude, a computer can read texts “better” than a person can.

I am certainly not alone in watching the crude LLMs evolve over the last two years, and I have wondered if, some years from now, this technology will make vestigial the art of studying literature, generating through the sheer mass of collected data writing and “thinking” indistinguishable from what scholars produce. Without a crystal ball that sees into the future, and at the risk of being proven very wrong in time, I would offer a few observations on where LLMs stand now in relation to literature and literary studies and perhaps a note of reassurance through considerations of the venerable Charles Dickens, E.M. Forster, and James Joyce. As the companies powering generative AI incorporate tens of thousands of times of academic and other writing into their LLMs, it seems to me more important now than ever to take stock of where we are in the discipline and where we might go soon and someday without resorting to hyperbolic language and outright fearmongering, but while still taking seriously the capacities and limitations of generative AI.

Currently, LLMs are considerably better at generating large quantities of “literature” than “criticism”: the analysis of preexisting texts that ChatGPT can perform is limited to the surface-level reading one might find by searching on an internet database for themes, tropes, or plot points in a given text or texts. Because the ability of these LLMs to generate text that might be considered literature has advanced so rapidly, I will start there with the hypothesis that, as more critical texts are added to the language models as training data, LLMs might see similar improvement (in quality and in type) in that arena in the coming years.

I take Dickens as a test case because he wrote, approximately, four million words² of fiction spread across his novels, novellas, and sketches, and because all his works are in the training data for LLMs as public domain texts (Davis). His style is immediately recognizable, which is also helpful in a test case: his flair for the melodramatic, his spectacular characters - “gargoyles,” as George Orwell called them (454) - and his gentle, earnest sympathy for the fictional people who populate his worlds are a few of his many hallmarks. If ChatGPT and other LLMs could produce a coherent work of fiction in a cohesive style, it would stand to reason that Dickens should be well within its reach, having so much text to work with and such powerful stylistic markers. I have asked these models to do so many times, and I encourage the reader to do the same: prompts might include “write a scene about a woman buying groceries in the style of Dickens,” or “write a story with an old man and a young man arguing about the merits of marriage in the style of Dickens.” A few excerpted examples that will be examined further:

In the quaint town of Canterbury, nestled amidst the rolling hills of England, there lived a young man named Edward Fairfax. He was a lad of gentle demeanor, with eyes that mirrored the vast expanse of the sky and a heart as pure as the morning dew. Edward was apprenticed to a kindly old gentleman who ran a small bookshop at the corner of High Street, where he spent his days immersed in the world of literature.

It was on a crisp autumn afternoon that Edward first laid eyes upon the object of his affection, Miss Elizabeth Hawthorne. She was the daughter of a wealthy merchant, her beauty surpassing that of any maiden in the town. With raven hair cascading down

² I compiled the plaintext files of each of Dickens’s fifteen novels (*The Pickwick Papers* through the incomplete *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*) through public domain sources and added the length of each text in words together for a total that approached four million words. With his short fiction (*Sketches by Boz*) and novellas (*A Christmas Carol* and others) included, the final total is over four million.

her shoulders and eyes as deep and mysterious as the ocean, Elizabeth possessed a grace that captivated Edward from the moment he saw her.

Their paths crossed one day as Edward was delivering a parcel of books to the Hawthorne household. As he stepped into the opulent foyer, he caught sight of Elizabeth gracefully descending the grand staircase, a book clutched to her chest. Their eyes met, and in that instant, Edward felt as though the very stars had aligned to bring them together.

(ChatGPT 3.5: “Write a story about a young man falling in love in the style of Charles Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield*”)

In the quaint village of Dullingham, there lived a young man named Edward Trotwood, whose life was as orderly as the rows of lavender that lined the cobblestone paths of his modest abode. Edward, much like his uncle from whom he inherited not only his name but also his solitary existence, had never known the tender touch of love. His days were spent in the pursuit of knowledge, his evenings in the company of books, and his nights in the realm of dreams where he dared to imagine a life less ordinary.

One fateful autumn morning, as the mist clung to the earth like a lover’s embrace, Edward’s path crossed with that of Miss Clara Peggotty. She was the niece of the local fisherman, a woman whose laughter was like the tinkling of church bells, and whose eyes held the depth of the very oceans her uncle sailed upon. It was in the marketplace that they met, amidst the chaos of bartering voices and the sweet aroma of fresh pastries. Clara, in her haste, collided with Edward, sending a cascade of apples tumbling from her basket.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, sir!” she exclaimed, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Edward, ever the gentleman, merely smiled and knelt to assist her. “Think nothing of it, Miss. It is I who should apologize for not being more aware of my surroundings.”

(Microsoft Copilot, “creative mode”: “Write a story about a young man falling in love in the style of Charles Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield*”)

It is an admittedly strange exercise to closely read mechanically-generated text: because there is no author, there is no intention behind it, nor thought in it. There are some things here that are shockingly close to Dickens. The names are evocative, and the scenario that the LLM concocts in each case (an apprentice in love with a wealthier woman, the lonely but avid reader) could appear plausibly in a Dickens novel. Microsoft Copilot pulls names directly (and, amusingly, in strange arrangements) from *David Copperfield* (1850). Some of the language, particularly the similes, might be a touch exaggerated.

Using a prompt that asks for any text longer than a page or two, or trying to achieve a formal or narrative unity between passages, is still beyond the reach of the LLMs, but this as it is, frankly, is an amazing trick: ten years ago, procedurally generated Dickens would have seemed like an absurd premise. However, each subsequent request yields more disappointing results. Even across LLMs, elements repeat; an hour or more spent generating “stories” using similar prompts will reveal that the model hasn’t actually read or understood Dickens as an author, but only taken the average or composite of his writing. None of the characters in these generated texts make the reader ache like Dora Spewlow or laugh like Aunt Betsey Trotwood. None of the prose has the bouncing energy of Dickens.

This recalls to my mind what Forster said of the novelist, in the very early days of literary criticism: “Dickens’ people are nearly all flat . . . Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality

of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own” (71). What the LLM-generated texts lack is that profound vitality, the human behind the caricature whose quirks and eccentricities he cannot help but insert into his writing. The “average” (or mean) of Dickens, seen in the passages above, is profoundly less than any passage from Dickens. Beyond his characters, his prose vibrates with the small touches of the imperfect: sentences that meander, digressions that don’t go anywhere, and schmaltzy metaphors that often make readers giggle instead of sniffle. On the other hand, when an author like Joyce, in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode in *Ulysses*, apes Dickens, he does so convincingly and with aplomb in a way that the language models are incapable of:

Reverently look at her as she reclines there with the motherlight in her eyes, that longing hunger for baby fingers (a pretty sight it is to see), in the first bloom of her new motherhood, breathing a silent prayer of thanksgiving to One above, the Universal Husband. And as her loving eyes behold the babe she wishes only one blessing more, to have her dear Doady there with her to share her joy, to lay in his arms that mite of God’s clay, the fruit of their lawful embraces. He is older now (you and I may whisper it) and a trifle stooped in the shoulders yet in the whirligig of years a grave dignity has come to the conscientious second accountant of the Ulster bank, College Green branch. O Doady, loved one of old, faithful lifemate now, it may never be again, that faroff time of the roses! (Joyce 343)

This is perhaps a silly example, but one that does offer real insight into the distance between the mechanical “reading” that LLMs perform on the training data they are supplied with and the reading that a skilled author and writer can execute. The narrator reaches out to the reader demanding reverence, taking the fatherly, lecturing tone that so many of Dickens’s narrators are

known for. The language in this passage recalls clearly a few passages in *David Copperfield*, particularly the elevated, melodramatic passage containing Dora's death and the end of the novel, as David, in his final, sweeping retrospective relates to the reader, "Here is my aunt, in stronger spectacles, an old woman of four-score years and more, but upright yet, and a steady walker of six miles at a stretch in winter weather" (878). The Dickensian impulse to adhere to realism (time has passed, and these characters are aged and might be in worse health than they were hundreds of pages prior) while still insisting that the stubborn, wonderful Betsey hasn't been hobbled despite pushing ninety years old, suffering only thicker glasses, is something that Joyce pokes fun at. The "grave dignity" of the "whirligig of years," too, is a raucously funny linguistic juxtaposition that only a human reader of Dickens could spot and know to satirize.

Writers and readers of fiction can rest easy, as this, clearly, proves that Joyce is a more able, game reader than ChatGPT. Facetiousness aside, if the models develop at a similar pace in the realm of literary criticism as they have in the realm of generating creative prose, the above offers a few possibilities for potential repercussions in literary studies once companies providing the training data branch out and include large swaths of scholarship in addition to the current textual repositories, which is inevitable whether publishers and authors would like them to or not. We might imagine a ChatGPT (perhaps model 5 compared to the current 3.5 and 4) that can produce text that looks, at first blush, indistinguishable from literary scholarship. It might possess elements that are considered absolutely essential to any piece of serious criticism: passages pulled directly from one or more texts, engagement with past thinkers and writers, and perhaps even an argument that logically follows from one point to the next over several paragraphs or pages without the inclusion of the totally banal observations that currently typify close reading by LLMs. This is currently out of reach, but, if similar Darwinian leaps in

capabilities occur in the coming months as have in the last two years, it stands to reason that it is a matter of when such things become possible rather than if they will ever be possible.

A good piece of literary criticism illuminates something about the text being read, but also illuminates as much if not more about the person reading the text. There are by consensus no absolutely correct readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *Hamlet*, but many thousands of writers have approached the play and many millions of words have been written about it. A great reading of *The Tempest* will bring something out of the text, make something in it apparent that wasn't apparent, and this will emerge directly from the person who read it and felt compelled to write about it. Literary critics are perpetually itching at mosquito bites, scratching an irritant that can only be soothed by thinking, teaching, and writing about the curiosities and eccentricities of the texts that we read. Any given writer will not have the time to read every piece of writing that has been written about a given text or that might help situate that text in one of the hundreds of intersecting theoretical frameworks: this is something that we concede when we write on Shakespeare or Dickens or Virginia Woolf, that it is impossible to have considered every possible angle and approach. It is both necessary and limiting. Because of this, LLMs will, with absolute certainty, have access to more data than any human critic. The computer will have in its training data millions or billions of times, a Library of Babel, and will be able to pull from sources that range across disciplines' boundaries, and even multiple languages.

What the LLMs will lack, and this to me is an insurmountable hurdle, is the urge to scratch the metaphorical mosquito bites. ChatGPT does not and will not find something in a text so odd that it demands investigation and countless hours of reading and thinking. If it produces something resembling literary criticism, it will be to good scholarship what the generated Dickens passages were to Joyce's mimicry, a perfect average of all of Dickens without any of the

peculiar idiosyncrasies that Joyce's and Dickens's other readers have identified for almost two centuries. An LLM might "read" all of literary criticism from Forster to the present, but it is the individual critic whose quirks and vibrancy make each approach to the same literary text that has been read countless times before it comes to life. Only the precise combination of life experiences, thought processes, and texts that have been read over a lifetime allow a critic to produce a given piece of criticism: no two readers have encountered the exact same sets of texts, or been trained in the exact same combinations of theoretical approaches. This is, most would agree, why readers can take the same novel and read it so unapologetically differently, often reading individual sentences in conflicting and contrary ways. In the often weird and wonderful world of literary scholarship, no two people have the same mosquito bites.

I will conclude by offering a few potential ways to bring LLMs into the literary studies classroom that have proven useful in my introductory literature surveys that cover wide ranges of genres and swaths of time that capitalize on their ability to quickly generate massive amounts of text. Students are familiar with musicians performing covers of other artists' songs, and the metaphor of ChatGPT "covering" an author or a genre was especially resonant. After brainstorming around questions like "What makes Dickens so Dickensian?" or "What are the essential elements of a lyric poem?" I asked students to break off into groups and generate various literary "covers" of the day's assigned texts.

Students were quick to identify, in brainstorming, many of the prose stylistics Dickens frequently uses after spending eight-hundred-odd pages working through his writing. They, like me, found the generated text lacking or at the very least insufficient: they had identified many smaller quirks that the LLM missed, and, despite repeated attempts at coherence between passages, couldn't manage to get the language model to relate a story that continued for anything

like the length of even a single of Dickens's serialized parts. I think this helped to demystify the technology and let students discover where it is currently lacking in an environment that they might have expected to be very hostile to the very mention of ChatGPT in the college classroom. They knew, after a few months of practice, that they were already more advanced than the LLM at reading and thinking, and I think it was pedagogically useful to provide the space and time to experiment with a technology they likely use frequently day-to-day but perhaps have not considered more critically.

A second lesson I plan to tinker with further in subsequent years has students use ChatGPT to convert one piece of writing into another genre or a different author's style, creating procedurally-generated tapestries that bridge the gap between distinct literary forms and styles. I had students translate Shakespeare's sonnets to other poetic forms, and then to prose form in the style of their favorite novelist, and asked them to input scenes from the plays we had read and try to convert them to different literary forms including novels, other dramatic genres than their original, and more. This lesson was intended to be a warm-up in anticipation of thinking about the apparent theatrical genre(s) and the form of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* but lasted for almost the entire class period. If asking what makes Shakespeare Shakespearean reveals the inadequacies of current generative AI rather quickly, this second lesson provided more promise for bringing language models into the classroom in substantial ways. The different capacities that genres and forms have are sometimes obvious to students (sonnets have a rhyme scheme and are very short; novels almost never rhyme and are long; movies have music, but typically lack the interiority provided by novels), etc. But tangible texts that students generate in real-time and that they can riff on through prompt engineering brought the old-school consideration of the conventions of different literary forms into the new century. This class of students was eager to

branch out and try something new, and I believe that they left their seats with a deeper understanding of LLMs as well as the assigned literary text. I have had positive results thus far with these experimental lessons, and I hope that in future courses I design with ChatGPT in mind, I can continue to use generative AI as something actually generative, not a technology to fight and evade. Time, again, will tell.

What LLMs can do at present is genuinely wonderful and also existentially frightening to those of us in the profession of teaching and writing about literature. What they might be capable of doing in the future, even more so. There are certainly some things that ChatGPT can do better than people can, and there will likely be more things added to this list in coming years. At great risk of being proven incredibly foolish, I would wager that literary criticism is one arena that will remain ever out of reach. Not, as some might believe, because the models lack the required nuance or sufficient training data because these are places that will improve with time. It is precisely because of the sheer volume of this data that LLMs will falter. The individual reader, eccentric, vibrant, with an eye for detail and the willingness to scratch textual itches wherever and however they emerge, will always have something new to say and a new perspective to bring to the stories that have captivated us in the discipline since its inception. This is why I entered the field, and, I suspect, why so many others have as well.

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Cultivating Sustainable Creative Writing Practice

Audrey Heffers

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

-bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Embodied Pedagogy, Rest, & Creative Writing

Embodied pedagogy provides the space to consider the physical realities of the body. This approach can consider experiences of the classroom with mobility aids, or variations in executive function. David J. Nguyen and Jay B. Larson write about how “Embodied pedagogy joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction” (331), further discussing how “the locus of learning resides at this constantly evolving nexus of body, mind, and experience” (333). And bell hooks argues that “students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge” (15). Embodied pedagogy grants the tools to consider the sociocultural treatment of (and experience within) particular bodies. While it may feel obvious to some, there are ways that race, gender, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation are uniquely treated both within and outside of the classroom. This treatment is a crucial point of understanding our students as “human beings with complex lives and experiences” instead of objectifying them as nothing more than empty vessels in need of the lessons specific to a particular pedagogue’s area of expertise.

Hui Niu Wilcox suggests that we need to “develop alternative models of knowledge production that challenge the interconnected dualisms and hierarchies (mind/body, male/female, white/other)” because “it is in and through our bodies that we experience the world and develop consciousness” (106). The COVID-19 pandemic is one extreme case that highlights embodiment in the classroom. How does Zoom vs. in-person instruction change the learning experience? How do experiences differ depending on the physical effects of learning environments during Covid? These are questions which instructors and pedagogy scholars may not have thought about deeply enough before 2020, but our historical moment compels us to do so now. It is not enough to address the solutions that require the least change and the least risk, such as activating captioning on videos or only offering the bare minimum accommodations in letters from disability services.

As I considered the rich potential of embodied pedagogy, I began to incorporate more humane practices into my composition courses, adapting and experimenting based on student reception. One such practice included scheduling a break in the middle of class with explicit acknowledgement of individual *bodymind*³'s needs for time to drink water, to use the restroom, or to sit quietly. I also incorporated more time for community building during class time—peer discussions, sharing lived experiences, and group activities manipulating paper materials to engage different styles of learning. At the end of one semester where these strategies toward inclusivity and rest were implemented (Spring 2023), 92% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “This instructor seems to care about me as a student,” 84% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “This instructor seems to care about me as a person,” 95% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “This instructor seems to care about

³ The false dualism of mind/body is answered with the Disability Studies term “*bodymind*,” “a materialist feminist disability studies concept referring to ‘the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’”. The term *bodymind* highlights how ‘mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other’, collectively impacting our experiences of ourselves and the world” (Schalk par. 1).

diversity, equity, inclusion, & accessibility,” and 89% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “This instructor seems to want to help me succeed.”

Wilcox writes about “embodiment’s transformative potentials, not just to illustrate concepts in lively ways, but also to cultivate communities that ‘break down barriers’ and hierarchies in the academy” (117). Further, she writes that embodied pedagogies can be “implemented in ways that are inclusive of and sensitive to all students’ multiple intelligences” (117). To that end, when teaching multimodality, I invited students to think about access: access in terms of disability and formal accommodations, certainly, but also access in terms of each individual’s human needs. We all, I emphasized, find some aspects of learning and communication more accessible than others. This is supported in texts such as *What Inclusive Instructors Do*, where Tracie Marcella Addy et al. write, for example, that multimodal instruction “increases achievement outcomes . . . confidence in learning, in-class engagement, and attitudes toward learning” (125).

Over the years, my research and pedagogical interests have included the intersections of Creative Writing Studies and inclusive pedagogy. In light of the changes that I was making in the composition classroom, I inevitably began to wonder what creative writing habits are fostered by workshops. In these composition courses, my emphasis on rest, access, and community building became some of the core foundations of my classroom. For creative writers—both within the academy and outside of it—how do we frame periods of non-production? In “Embodied Ways of Knowing, Pedagogies, and Social Justice” Wilcox writes that “By conveniently decoupling students’ minds and bodies in a Cartesian [sic] manner even in a lively discussion—it is the thoughts that count; the bodies that think and utter these thoughts are irrelevant—we reproduce the very system of power that we claim to critique” (107). And, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

Paulo Freire discusses the need for “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (126). hooks, much inspired by Freire, also discusses the “connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors” (16). So how do we account for bodies—the physical and the sociocultural experience of them—in the classroom? Accounting for bodies in the classroom must go beyond institutionally required accommodation policies on the syllabus, or a vague blanket statement to students acknowledging that they might have a lot going on. We must, for one, account for “different kinds of concrete social difficulties in people’s lives on the individual level” (Ryynänen and Nivala 2).

One way to honor truly the connection between body and mind in the learning experience is the incorporation of rest. Rest is too often unacknowledged in the design of a semester, and, even when acknowledged in theory, the practical application can fall short due to explicit or implicit constraints imposed at systemic and institutional levels. hooks was a proponent of acknowledging how, in the classroom, we can be “striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (15). We have the opportunity to innovate toward compassionate and humane praxis by recognizing embodied needs, putting values about cultivating artistic practice into action in the classroom, and modeling sustainable creative habits.

Who Do You Want to Be?

In *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing*, Janelle Adsit writes that:

To move toward an inclusive creative writing is to identify and analyze assumptions that the field carries about the figure of the writer. Creative writing instruction—which comes in many academic and extra-academic forms—teaches students not just the *skills* of craft. Creative writing’s institutions teach—and, in so doing, continuously *construct*—the writer and the *lifestyle* of writing. (14, emphasis original)

The creative writing classroom trains writers. This goes beyond teaching writers about clichés and metaphors, line breaks and forms. The classroom, as Adsit indicates, often sets up writers for what to expect of their writing life beyond that particular academic setting. Even that academic setting is not some ideal place exempt from problematic cultural inheritances. Academic settings exist within an institution (the university), and such an institution is susceptible to societal flaws regarding how race, disability, etc. are treated. The university also exists within a capitalist economic system that is intent on the highest possible profit and productivity (even at the expense of the individual). The classroom itself is an artifice, one that is built within the confines of a semester (a period of time with a specific start and end, and with imposed breaks). In this instructional artifice, there are some weeks dedicated to reading published works, while others are dedicated to producing writing. This set-up does not inherently guide students in how to formulate their own specific writing life moving forward. Students inherit the schedule; they are treated as *participants* in their writing careers, but not *collaborators* in the process. In fact, such schedules can be rigid and work against individual intuition.

Here it can be useful to think about Disability Studies, in particular, the concept of “crip time.” As Alison Kafer explains in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, crip time:

requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies. We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need “more” time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. (27)

An instructor can tell students that it's important to rest, that it's important to trust the process. However, in practice, the creative writing classroom doesn't inherently allow for that.

If a text is assigned and the student writer is getting nothing out of it, there often isn't the option to stop reading and dedicate that time/energy elsewhere (an option that exists outside of the classroom setting). When a writer feels like they cannot stop reading a book, even one that is not pleasurable or otherwise useful to them, that is a hang-up that they can carry out into their writing life in the so-called "real world." If a writer isn't particularly moved to produce a poem during, say, Week 4 of the semester, they are compelled to do so anyway because a workshop is coming up in the schedule.

Rest is often not built into the schedule at all. This pacing gives the impression that writers should always be reading and/or writing, which is not sustainable. We may be implying to our students (without even intending to do so) that to take a rest is to be a failure. Such implications can cause burnout, or can even cause writers to stop creating altogether. This refusal of rest in order to consider oneself a writer may be made more explicit, as Felicia Rose Chavez lays out in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, where she writes about how

As a feminist scholar, I used to think that this story of adaptive teaching policy was fair, in that it respected the burdensome work/life/school/family balance that I myself managed as an undergraduate. . . . If a student were truly engaged, they would find the time to write, be it on the subway, during downtime at work, during math class, whatever. The words would materialize, and so would they, again and again. But only if they cared. How do you make them care? Start by making them accountable. (53)

It's not that encouraging students to figure out how to balance their writing with life is not a noble goal, and it is hard to argue that we don't want students who care and are accountable.

However, this framework implies a false binary: if you can't write, it isn't because of any external circumstances, but rather that you don't care, or that you don't care *enough*, or that you don't want to be held responsible for your actions. Caring and accountability cannot be compelled, though. And, I would argue, caring about your writing and being accountable with your writing goals must be balanced with caring about your own health/happiness/needs, and accountability to other areas of your life as well. It is not an either/or, but rather a constant balancing act that needs to be flexible in order to succeed.

How can we better model more accessible, individual, and adaptable writing lives for our students? How can we avoid making writing and reading feel like a chore to those who are so passionate about it in the first place? How can we help students navigate the balance that often needs to be negotiated between a) life/non-writing concerns, b) our own limits as humans with bodies and minds that work particular ways, and c) writing itself?

The answer to all of this is, largely, going to come back to granting students autonomy, not only as students, but also as writers and as people.

Practical Applications

This line of inquiry brings us to the question of what we can do, practically. What can it look like to incorporate rest into the creative writing classroom? How can it shape our praxis, in ways big and small? How can creative writing instruction reify the concept of belongingness, both in the classroom and out in the world as a creative writer? As we devise strategies to address these questions, it is also necessary to note, as Addy et al. do when they say that students “bring to the classroom their identities and lived experiences, which shape how comfortable they are and ultimately how they learn” (77). Different strategies are going to be successful for different groups of students at different times. None of this is guaranteed to work in every

learning environment with every group of students. Rather, these are only a handful of strategies that instructors can experiment with, intended as an early step in developing similar strategies that work best for our own particular students' needs as they shift and evolve.

1. Breaks During Class

I began to make time in my lesson planning for a scheduled break in the middle of class. Students are not machines. This is one way to acknowledge that fact, both with words and with actions. It allows them to refresh themselves, which can help them to learn better. Of course, this type of rest is dependent on course conditions, such as how much time the class is allotted, how we can shape the class's work around a break, and so on. (I found that I was able to do this in my 75-minute composition class, but didn't usually have the same time to do it in my 50-minute composition class.) A "break" may also not be a break per se. Rather than "we're not doing anything for five minutes," options may be quiet time for writing during a class meeting (ex: freewriting, writing exercises, etc.), reading, or research.

2. Breather Points During the Semester

When we want to be sure that we're covering *enough*, it can feel impossible to go at anything but a breakneck speed. But if we recalibrate how we envision the shape and pace of the semester, we can create moments of reprieve and rest—primarily as a student-focused technique, though there can certainly be benefits for instructors as well. There are many different ways to implement "breather points." The first class after a major project is due, I often don't immediately give students new assignment guidelines, as it helps to have a transitional period where they can rest before switching gears. Even when I give students access to all assignment guidelines at the start of the semester, we often wait at least one class meeting before reviewing the next set of guidelines together.

In my recent composition courses, I've given my students a hands-on, creative project to do in-class between major projects. One example of a creative project is small group work inventing and physically crafting a new emoji. I assign this project after a lesson on multimodality, which includes a section on the symbolic mode of communication. Such an assignment engages students differently than digital composition, even multimodal digital composition.

But this strategy could look like many things: it might be periodic times in the semester where there are no synchronous class meetings; it might include less formal assignment expectations, such as freewriting or experimenting in different genres; it might look like student-led discussions where there are no readings due. In a creative writing classroom, this encourages student writers not to approach the (often mythic) writer's life as constant production. The framework of constant production inevitably sets writers up for failure when life happens, or when their bodyminds simply need the rest to which we are all entitled.

3. Adaptable Schedules

Addy et al. write about how “flexibility is required for achieving the goals of an equitable and inclusive classroom” (113). Certainly, every instructor has had circumstances where a schedule has had to be adapted. The spring semester of 2020 would be an example of this in the extreme. But how can we focus our adaptability on student needs? Often, students can tell you their needs when outright asked, especially if the environment doesn't feel punitive. Are students beginning not to participate as robustly in the workshop? Do they need to take a break from this style of class meeting for a week or so? Perhaps they're not connecting to the assigned readings in meaningful ways and the readings need to be shorter, or simply different.

One method for this adaptable approach could be having a checklist of what the instructor thinks is necessary to get through during the semester. We can then schedule time for readings, writing, workshop, or revisions in the shorter-term, adjusting as the semester moves along not based on what we thought would work in theory before the semester even started, but based on a conversation between 1) students' needs to rest from particular kinds of work, and 2) the instructor's checklist of vital goals of the course.

Alexandria Peary writes about how “prewriting is about engaging the preverbal, appreciating (and even summoning) the right silence that surrounds potential language” (1). One way of framing the writer's life is as though there are seasons—so, for example, that there is a “spring” of generating ideas, a “summer” of drafting, an “autumn” of revisions and edits, a “winter” of rest that is perhaps bolstered by joyful engagement with literature or other kinds of arts. The checklist method acknowledges and honors each aspect of being a writer, using our implicit authority as instructors of creative writing so that our students, as writers outside of the academy, feel an inherent permission to switch gears or otherwise rest and not feel as though they are failing.

4. Flexible Readings

A radical question that we might ask ourselves as creative writing instructors is whether or not every student needs to do every reading. Whether acknowledged or not, every student does not do every reading. How can we work *with* that reality rather than *against* it? (A common emphasis in pedagogical training is how to police, punish, or otherwise control students in order to force them to complete all readings, which often feeds resentments from both the students and instructors involved.)

I have had professors who allow for a “flex week” where we can opt out of a particular week’s readings. An alternative structure for this might also include letting students pick between two or more readings that get at a similar element we want them to learn, such as a lyrical voice, an experimental form, the handling of tension, etc.

Student preferences may be affected by both individual taste and larger cultural factors. Basil B. Bernstein writes about “a *public* language,” which “contains its own aesthetic, a simplicity and directness of expression, emotionally virile, pithy and powerful and a metaphoric range of considerable force and appropriateness” (qtd. in Schoone 3). This kind of public language may be implemented in creative texts, and it may prove more accessible to students than some of our own (potentially more academic and/or inaccessible) selections.

This flexibility of readings can be pushed even further, especially in classes focusing on short essays, short fiction, and poetry. Instead of the instructor deciding on a handful of texts they personally find compelling, the instructor may provide a list of poetry collections (or essay collections, or story collections), with each student selecting one writer/collection as their focus. This student can then share selections from that writer/collection with other students for group discussions. In addition to allowing students more agency, having them select their own reading could open the class to more intertextual discussions. As writers, they will always be in discussion with works they haven’t necessarily read themselves but have heard about. It could also spark their curiosity to read particular texts at a later time, depending on how their peers discuss the texts.

5. Modeling Habits

As touched upon already, we have the opportunity to treat the workshop not just as peer review, but also as a way to model habits of the writer’s life available to student writers. This,

too, can touch on the “seasons” approach to writing. We can model the various fluctuating states of writing: time for writing and revision, but also time for freewriting, brainstorming, resting, and so forth. Illustratively, Brandi Reissenweber writes that:

Focusing on the end product, then, to the exclusion of the larger experience, is a significant missed opportunity. Attending to the complex steps that come before writing is essential, and I argue that more time spent on these activities helps students navigate a broader base of the creative process. This shift in emphasis gives students the opportunity to practice the skills of idea generation and development more deliberately, to witness curiosity as an engine for inspiration, and to create consequential work that finds its impulse in innovative and meaningful sources. (1)

Rest is a necessary part of inspiration. Inspiration can be sparked after the physical and mental rest of stepping away from producing and writing. Additionally, engaging with stories, poetry, and essays for pleasure can be modeled as a part of the process. Inspiration, here, is focused on the creative act, but could certainly also apply to the inspiration to learn and to engage with new ideas.

Potential Obstacles

These practical ideas for incorporating rest into the creative writing classroom are not made without awareness of potential obstacles to rest. There are sociocultural expectations of constant production, both inside of and outside of the academic setting. And how do we, for instance, balance institutional demands for rigor with a more relaxed pacing that acknowledges writers’ embodied realities and lived experiences? Even the answer to this question will change depending on the particular institutional demands, the particular curricular demands, and what the learning outcomes are for a particular Creative Writing program/department.

Something that should not get lost in this—while prioritizing student writers’ experiences and acknowledging institutional demands—is the embodied lived realities of instructors themselves. Incorporating rest into the classroom may very well be more challenging depending on the instructor’s positionality. This can include issues of the systemic delegitimization of marginalized instructors (such as women and people of color). It can also include the teacher’s status. Are they contingent faculty? A Graduate Teaching Assistant? Tenure-track? Tenured? Different instructors will be treated as having different levels of power and self-determination in their classroom environments.

There is much to value about rest. As a pedagogical tool, it resists the path of burnout, stress, and difficult learning experiences. As an aspect of the writer’s life, it resists narratives that insist upon constant production. And as human beings, we all need and are inherently entitled to rest, despite cultural narratives that value hustle and capital above all else. Overall, we have the potential to craft, as Wilcox puts it, “a learning space that acknowledges students as bodily beings [which] can become dynamic, invigorating, joyful, and even healing” (116).

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Queering the Curriculum with Shakespeare: Arthur's Transformation in *King John*

Kalie Chapman

If we can't reach students with Shakespeare in the classroom, then why are we teaching him? Why do we force literature like the works of Shakespeare on students in secondary school—always with the same few well-known plays taught in the same formulaic ways? Why are we shocked, then, that there is a significant lack of engagement with these texts from students? As a result, there have even been conversations among educators about eliminating Shakespeare from the classroom⁴. We need to change that. How? With Queer Theory.

Queer theory poses the provocative question of utility. What *is* the utility of Shakespeare in the classroom? How does it resonate with the students it is being taught to? How does it resonate with our *now*? The way Shakespeare was taught in the classroom, say, twenty, thirty years ago—when our current educators were in the classroom themselves—does not match the *now*. There is a generational gap following the question of who Shakespeare is for. We rarely see Roman plays, for example, being taught anymore, because it does not resonate with current times. So, why do we teach conventional plays like *Romeo and Juliet*? And why do we teach it in conventional ways when our times have changed? Identifying as queer is an ever evolving and growing phenomenon in today's society, especially among younger generations with more progressive views on identifying as such. According to a recent survey, 28% of Gen Z

⁴ In her article on reconsidering the English curriculum, Amanda MacGregor concludes with the statement: “a growing number of educators say: Let what's past be prologue as we look ahead to the future of teaching literature” (2021). MacGregor shares several first-hand accounts of educators who claim that “there is nothing to be gained from Shakespeare that couldn't be gotten from exploring the works of other authors” (MacGregor 2021).

Americans identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, “a larger share than older generations” (Chavez). Queer theory brings our attention to what Shakespeare offers us in the here and now. We need to adapt with the times; we need to queer the classroom.

Switching up *how* we teach Shakespeare provides a way for this generation to self-identify with early modern literature and drama—to represent queer and transgender individuals who may otherwise feel left behind. Changing how we teach Shakespeare gives students an opportunity to see themselves in the play, which, in turn, empowers them. Rather than removing Shakespeare altogether, we must welcome a fresh perspective on what is possible. We must allow students to see that queer and trans perspectives are valid even in early modern literature. *King John* is a greatly understudied Shakespeare play; it is scarcely listed in school curriculums, and “no book-length scholarship of *King John* has yet been published” (Carroll 3). There are fewer expectations on how to teach *King John*, because it has rarely been taught in the classroom; we do not need to switch up *how* we teach it, because there is no set way of teaching it. This liberates the students and teachers from the burden of expectation with queering already well-taught classroom texts, like *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. *King John* offers queer discourse such as queering national sensibilities, royalty, power, speech, the role of the child—all of which are useful conversations to have in the classroom that resonate with society today. Revolutionizing which plays are taught can do a lot of work that changes the kinds of questions on what cultural work we are activating in young minds.

Ultimately, this essay aims to answer one question: How can we rebuild outdated teaching pedagogies *with* works of Shakespeare? In conversation with Kathryn Stockton’s theory of *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, and Jennifer Higginbotham and Mark Johnston’s *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*, this

essay engages with how Queer Theory transforms early modern literature to complement the contemporary classroom. Applying anachronistic readings of queer theory to rarely-studied texts like *King John* opens the classroom door to fresh ways of studying Shakespeare.

In *King John*, Arthur is not only a prince, but arguably the rightful heir to the throne—and yet he wants nothing to do with the role. After saving his own life with the agency he gains through control over language, Arthur climbs onto the castle walls, determined to seek a life he wants to live, or die trying. Through Rachel Prusko’s lens on agequeerness⁵ and the boyking⁶ Arthur’s royal childhood is no longer about his failure to grow into a normative king, but rather, how he transforms by discovering his queer voice through subjugated silence. Despite the adult-constructed fragility of Arthur as a powerless child, he reverses his own story. As soon as he utters his final lines, climbing down the castle walls, Arthur becomes an immutable voice in an often-mutable play.

Higginbotham and Johnston argue that early modern representations of children and childhood are inherently queer because defining such an identity is unstable: children are not independent agents of society, and therefore rely on the authoritative figures around them to define their childhood, and what exactly even constitutes a child. It is rather a fluid term; we have no label to apply directly to such “abstract linguistic constructs” of early modernity (Higginbotham and Johnston 2). Higginbotham and Johnston tell us to “suspend our preconceived ideas about what we think we already know about children and childhood in order to seize upon their discontinuous historical, cultural, and narratological peculiarities” (2). An anachronistic viewing of the term queer allows us to move away from homosexuality and move

⁵ Agequeerness can be defined as an unstable portrayal of age. For more information on agequeerness see Rachel Prusko’s *A Prince So Young As I* in *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*.

⁶ The “boyking” refers to Arthur’s failure to grow into a normative king; he does not follow the linear trajectory both of manhood, and princehood into kingship. See Rachel Prusko’s *A Prince So Young As I* in *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*.

towards more inclusive thinking about the concept of queerness, particularly when exploring the Queer Child, and exploring the concept with today's college students. *King John* is one example of a lesser-known play that productively exposes students to the diversity of Shakespeare through queering history, age, and speech, resulting in a transformation of character, and ultimately, childhood itself.

Language in *King John* is about the discovering of one's voice—from King John's command of language to maintain his throne, or Constance wrapping herself around language to grieve, to the Bastard, who reinvents his own title and royal rights, gaining respect from King John himself, all through careful manipulation of speech. Language in *King John* is transformative. The language of Arthur's self-discovery, however, varies between Shakespeare's *King John* and his probable source text *The Troublesome Reign of King John* by George Peel. The most notable difference of Arthur's character between Shakespeare's play and *The Troublesome Reign* is Arthur's age, which Shakespeare queers. In the placement of *King John*'s timeline, historical Arthur is the one who led the French Battalion at fifteen years of age, in an attempt to take the throne back from John. Shakespeare's portrayal of the prince is quite the opposite. He agequeers historical Arthur, presenting a silent, mother-knotted child. In *King John*, Arthur's sudden surge to agency by choosing to live how he wants to live makes him seem to grow up in an instant, largely due to how the authoritative figures around him rhetorically cast him down as a helpless child. Shakespeare's agequeers Arthur in the same way that Prusko understands Christopher Marlowe's unstable portrayal of Prince Edward's age in *Edward II*: "he queers this early modern child by suggesting that he may not be a child after all, but an adolescent, thereby deliberately destabilizing childhood" (196). By doing so, Shakespeare spotlights the childhood rhetoric imposed upon Arthur's character, which calls greater attention

to the queering of Arthur's "childhood" as a Shakespearean-staged "young boy" (Shakespeare 3.3.61) who recasts his own narrative through self-induced agency, despite his young age.

Mark Heberle notes in his contribution to the journal *The Voice of the Child in Literature*, that Shakespeare also replots history to make John's treatment of Arthur the fundamental action of his whole reign, centering the "play's moral catastrophe . . . upon Arthur's claim to the throne" (34). In *King John*, John first opposes Arthur's claim by warfare in the first two acts, while historically, Arthur was granted the duchy of Brittany in 1200. John then frustrates him through a dynastic marriage with the French in Act Three of *King John*, which is actually an event that occurred historically four years after Arthur's death in 1203. John's order for Arthur's death in Shakespeare's text results in a revolt of some of John's nobles and then a French invasion of England that did not occur until the 1214-16 period and had nothing at all to do with avenging or rectifying Arthur's demise at John's hands (Heberle 33). Unlike both Raphael Holinshed and *The Troublesome Reign*, Shakespeare presents Arthur's claim as legitimate, and we see John's mother admit this legal illegitimacy of John's rule in the play's first scene. As Heberle notes, "this striking innovation from all previous accounts of John's rule, which never questioned his legitimacy, makes Arthur's cause just, and the child himself a figure of powerless virtue, manipulated for their own purposes by all the adult characters in the play" (34). Another major difference between the texts is Arthur's implicit indifference to pursue his dynastic claim, which would have been unthinkable in the historical Arthur (Heberle 35). Holinshed notes that the historical Arthur helped lead the army that captured John's mother in Anjou in 1202, which is an exploit dramatized in scene three of *The Troublesome Reign* (Heberle 34) and absent entirely from *King John*. The exact circumstances of historical Arthur's death are still unknown.

Heberle's findings claim that he was certainly kept prisoner under Hubert de Burgh, but how he died is uncertain.

Another way Arthur is queered is through his transformation from the silence of his royal childhood. For the first three acts of *King John*, Arthur only speaks four times—three of which are single-line responses addressed to his mother, Constance. It is not until act four where Arthur truly uses his voice for the first time. In conversation with Kathryn Stockton's theory of the queer child, Arthur's voice becomes an event of self-discovery where he gains his own agency as a result of taking control of his own life, a child on the cusp of adulthood. Stockton observes that a society's desire to protect children from learning or discovering painful understandings of life can mean that children are forced to grow sideways because they cannot follow the linear timeline of advancement to adulthood (Munro 218). In light of this wayward growth, Stockton proposes the concept of the "queer child" to describe "the plight of the individual who cannot, or will not, advance beyond adolescence to realize a presumed heteronormative future" (Welshans 80). Adolescence itself is a queer stage of growth because it cannot be defined by binaries or normative labels such as age or linear time. Thus, the queering of Arthur lies in his adolescence, and the rejection of his royal childhood identity.

In her chapter on the "Boy King," Prusko brings attention to Paul Griffiths's acknowledgment of the flexibility in defining "age" in the early modern period through analysis of language in judicial records: the phase of adolescence did, in fact, exist (Prusko 198). Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos deduces that "adolescence was a long and dynamic phase in the life cycle rather than a mere prolongation of childhood" (qtd. In Prusko 198). In early modern religious and educational texts, the young are defined as reckless, rash, and sinful, but also as figures ingrained with hope. These labels are paired with more negative connotations of youth

experience and therefore their stage of growth. The paradox that a young person is inclined to sin and therefore oppose social norms is both natural and queer: “If sin itself is queer then queerness comes naturally to the adolescent” (Prusko 199). This paradox increases adults’ desire to control or stifle the behavior of the adolescent—who is meant to grow and discover the world for themselves—denoting the adolescent as a child, who otherwise needs adult guidance to grow. This historical paradox of expectation for youth rings true for Arthur in *King John*. As a royal child, Arthur is inherently queer by being forced into the role that comes with his title and lineage; he does not get a childhood—his role in life is predetermined at birth. When conforming to normative expectations, Arthur stands as an involuntarily silent prince, denied an opportunity to explore the idea of growth until he is forcefully removed from his mother’s side.

In the first three acts, Arthur is merely a pawn in the ongoing political game structured around his silent presence; he is a passive object both of his mother’s speech and from the other adults’ childhood labels put on his princehood. In Act Two, Scene One, Arthur utters his first line, acknowledging his own powerless state as a prince by enacting the same rhetoric imposed on his youth: “I give you welcome with a powerless hand” (Shakespeare 2.1.12-17). Arthur is then a silent observer until line 163 when he speaks to his mother’s anguish, and is a silent observer again until his physical exit at line 299. Despite barely speaking in this scene, he is the center of the political conflict. Arthur enters again at Act Three, Scene One, where he speaks a single line to his mother, “Good my mother, peace” (Shakespeare 2.1.168). The exit listed for Arthur in the text is editorial, leaving no indication of any exit for Arthur in this scene within the text, which means he may not actually leave the stage. Arthur remains a silent figure for the rest of the 345 lines in this scene. He is not heard from again until he utters one single line regarding

his mother's grief (Shakespeare 3.3.5) before falling silent for another seventy lines while King John determines the fate of Arthur's life.

Arthur is a silent figure in scenes he stands around in, subjugated to authoritative figures around him. When he chooses to break the silence—three times out of the four occurrences of his speech in these first three acts—it is in one single line regarding his mother, connecting his only voluntary identity and agency to speak, before Act Four, with her. The separation from his mother in Act Four forces him to use his voice to save his own life, as opposed to Constance speaking for him in the political game. At this point, we don't see Arthur again until Act Four, Scene One, where he engages with Hubert. He once again speaks to his own stature before the scene gets too far underway: "As little prince, having so great a title / to be more prince, as may be. You are sad" (Shakespeare 4.1.10-11). With Hubert, we see Arthur manipulate language to serve his own ends (Shakespeare 4.1.64) where he toys with emotion and sadness, bringing the heart out of Hubert, who called upon this very scene occurring before Arthur entered: "[I]f I talk to him with his innocent prate / he will awake my mercy which lies dead" (Shakespeare 4.1.25-26). As readers, the emotional connection that Arthur develops is visually demonstrated in the text. Arthur and Hubert often partake in shared verse lines, particularly at 4.1.40, where their dialogue dances one after the other—question, then answer—completing a single line before Arthur jumps in posing the question, "Have you the heart?" at line 41, taking over the shared line to pour emotion back into his plea, using rhetorical questions that he answers himself, often paired with the word "love." The two also share many ending and beginning lines to their dialogue, connecting their conversation through meter itself. Hubert consistently carries the end of each of Arthur's lines, except on two occasions: when Arthur throws the question, "And will you?" (Shakespeare 4.1.40) and at the end, when he thanks Hubert for sparing his life

(Shakespeare 4.1.131). Hubert is one who interrupts Arthur's poetic plea to try to maintain composure until he gives in, and Arthur's life is saved.

Unlike Arthur, who is a silent figure on stage for the first three acts of the play before he discovers his voice, Blanche hopelessly self-reflects on her suffering, knowing that "whoever wins" in the battle, "on that side shall [she] lose" (Shakespeare 3.1.335). Without being able to do anything about the situation she has been placed in as part of her royal duties, she is forced into silence as subjugation to the "assured loss" she is handed "before the match be played" (Shakespeare 3.1.336). Speech becomes her only comfort as a form of self-expression in the otherwise overall lack of agency she possesses as a royal child. Blanche's forced silence in obeying her normative royal trajectory rules in opposition to Arthur's growth, granting Queer Theory a narrative to work against in lifting Arthur's successful royal transgression.

Arthur's royal childhood is no longer about his failure to grow into a normative king, but rather how he grows by discovering his queer voice through subjugated silence. After being rhetorically demoted to a child and participating in the rhetoric himself, Arthur engages with the power of his own voice. The only reason Arthur is placed into the situation with Hubert is due to King John's order for Hubert to blind Arthur; King John attacked the reproductive futurity of the kingdom and Arthur's title as heir to the throne, because John wants the crown for himself. Even after saving his own life, Arthur—an inherently queer prince—discovers that this royal role is not the life he wants to live. In the rejection of normativity, Arthur the bastard-heir finds his queer voice.

Arthur's character is essential to Shakespeare's plot of *King John*: he is the main agent of King John's plot to maintain his throne. Arthur's final death, however, is not by John's doing. The next and final time we see Arthur after he saves his own life in the scene with Hubert is Act

Four, Scene Three, where he enters the stage on a wall and utters his final ten lines. Alan Armstrong discusses how Shakespeare put Arthur—and the boy actor who played him—into “the spotlight, so to speak, rejecting (like his primary source, the anonymous *The Troublesome Reign of King John*) several alternative historical accounts of Arthur’s death to stage the version that is both the most theatrically compelling and the most technically difficult” (Armstrong 2). Armstrong outlines that “this whole scene seems to be built around the silent presence of Arthur’s corpse, a real body lying onstage for 139 lines, until, near the scene’s end, the Bastard directs Hubert twice to pick up the dead child [Shakespeare 4.3.139]” (Armstrong 5). Hubert then exclaims, “How easy dost thou take all England up!” (Shakespeare 4.3.142). The tiny royal corpse is the focus of this scene. The suggested stage direction spoken by the Bastard to Hubert and “the Folio’s initial stage direction, ‘*Enter Arthur on the walles,*’ seem to demand a visible body on the stage and a wall for Arthur to fall from” (Armstrong 5). Under the disguise of a “ship-boy’s semblance,” (Shakespeare 4.3.4) Arthur enters the top of the castle walls and utters his final words. He reveals his inner dialogue by stating that he is “afraid, and yet [he’ll] venture it” before proclaiming, “If I get down and do not break my limbs,/ I’ll find a thousand shifts to get away./ As good to die and go, as die and stay” (Shakespeare 4.3.5-7). Through the dramatization of climbing up the castle walls—the tallest part of the would-be set design—Arthur promises to himself that if he makes it safely down the wall, then he will seek a new life, because staying in this royal life is as good as death anyway. From a boy who was more seen than heard, when Arthur falls from the castle walls, he is both seen and heard, at least by the audience.

Applying Arthur’s story to an educational context begs the question of what Arthur’s death offers both as part of the Queer Theory contextualization and to students. It is important to

note that the stage direction for Arthur to leap down is an added note, meaning it was not part of the Folio directions, and is more of an editorial suggestion. The only direction that remains in-text is Arthur entering the walls and his death after his tenth line. Based on Armstrong's discussion of past productions of *King John*—of the few that have even been put on—Arthur has often been staged to carry a ship-boy's rope, as a prop for the boy actor to climb down the wall after he speaks his eighth line. It does not look like Arthur is committing suicide, because Arthur did not climb the wall to die, but rather in search of a life he actually wants to live. The scene is less about his actual death, and more about his rejection of normativity: the life he was handed but does not desire.

For educational contexts, it is worth exploring how productions stage Arthur, especially when applying Queer Theory to raise up the voice of a Shakespearean child on stage who transformed his involuntary silence into control of his own speech. Heberle outlines how the BBC/Time-Life Royal Shakespeare Company cut the final nine lines of Arthur's speech, which means Arthur's exit of the entire play would end with: "the wall is high, and yet will I leap down" (Shakespeare 4.3.1). This textual alteration completely changes Arthur's placement in Shakespeare's play, furthering the normative narrative that he is nothing but a helpless, powerless child, who was never fit for the throne anyway. Heberle notes that "thirty more lines of the more than eighty that the boy speaks in the rest of the scene" (Heberle 29) with Hubert are also cut from the BBC production. Cutting is necessary in many theater productions, "but the silencing of the boy in this scene . . . seems to suggest that his words are relatively unimportant," (Heberle 29) that the production can do without them. "It implies that the child's role is less essential to this scene than Hubert's and, in doing so," as Heberle continues, "it resembles the contemporary critical depreciation of children's voices and roles in the most canonical of English writers"

(Heberle 29). Placing *King John* into educational settings allows for this discourse to continue. Queer voices of transformation, especially in Shakespeare's canonically abandoned history plays, are left behind, easily forgotten, and quite literally cut out of curriculums.

Another option for bringing *King John* to the classroom lies within queering Arthur's death itself as an absence in the remainder of the play. After Arthur dies, Prince Henry enters the play as the normative solution to Arthur's non-linear growth against kingship. Because King Henry only comes into the play after Arthur dies, there is a double casting opportunity presented, which places the remains of Arthur's voice into the physical boyhood of the new valorized prince who is given the title that Arthur rejected. Not only is he presented as a physical link between the characters, but also through his speech. After Prince Henry steps into his royal role as successor to the throne, he proclaims, "Even so must I run on, and even so stop. / What surety of the world, what hope, what stay, / When this was now a king, and now is clay? (Shakespeare 5.7.67–69). Prince Henry is the verbal link between Arthur and King John: "now is clay" calls back the image of Arthur becoming part of the earth when he fell from the castle walls (Shakespeare 5.7.69). With Arthur out of the picture, the child that is now at the center of the last act is Prince Henry. By filling the royal title Arthur refused, Prince Henry fills the normative stage of adolescence in *King John*, completing the linear growth that Arthur was once expected to carry out as a prince. In other words, Prince Henry's normativity allows Queer Theory to breathe life back into Arthur's voice, his transformation, and into the contemporary world.

Queer Theory transforms Arthur's story into an empowering one. However, this is just one example of what applying Queer Theory can extend to *King John*. What of the Bastard's transformation, queering his own title-less stature to hold power in John's court? What of Lewis's transformation of childhood when he confronts King John and demands the return of his

inheritance? What of the power that the mothers—Constance, Lady Falconbridge, Queen Elinor—hold in their speech? Queer theory allows Shakespeare to serve as a vehicle for opening discussion of what queerness can look like, and *King John* is just one example of a Shakespeare play to which we can apply an anachronistic, queer reading. It is time to queer the classroom. It is time to bring the Queer Child to the children of today.

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a shamefaced recollection

C.C. Apap

I recall defending dostoyevsky
in a neon gay bar in washington.
it was the mid-90s, and she
had a curly auburn quiet
framing her. we worked
together for a year, but I
could not name her if I tried—
only say that her eyes were
lamps casting guilty shadows
as she leaned in toward my voice
as I was defending dostoyevsky.

pre-emptive elegy for r. okaji

C.C. Apap

enjoy each flavor. you speak about the way
poetry might sit, waiting, as if a month might
soften its edges enough to prepare it properly.
as if lines may be fit for consumption beyond
the forlorn meals we prepare ourselves.
find exigency, you say, in the day to day. discard
the poems that make you work for it. I am jealous—
the urgency of a palate. a poem does not need to be
a meal. it's enough to place it on your tongue
for just a few moments, until it dissolves
as if a sonnet were a form of communion.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS AND EDITORS

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