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Hermeneutics Across the Horizon

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Ramsey Eric Ramsey *But in a Fiction*

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An Affectionate Welcome to the Next Generation: A Brief Introduction to Volume 17— Hermeneutics Across the Horizon

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All is not lost, however. Our campuses will still have teachers who can inspire, believe in, and be there for those students who want to learn how to think, write, and create. Not everyone will fall for the AI trap. True, there will be fewer professors, and they will not have the cushy academic and economic situation that has existed since WWII . . . But there will always be some young people who want to learn about the wonders and complexities of literature, art, history, the sciences. So we go back to educating the few rather than the many.
—Jennifer Delton

Those of us who spend our philosophical lives thinking (about) hermeneutics share a commitment to its universality. This commits us to claims about hermeneutics being fundamental to being-in-the-world wherever and whenever human being has been, or is, or will be. Furthermore, we claim hermeneutics is not something we might sometimes do, it is something that we cannot help but being. However, despite this universality of the hermeneutic condition and the traditions of overtly undertaken hermeneutic study, I fear, judging from my experience of these last three decades, fewer persons today are studying in humanistic disciplines where they might encounter the texts leading them to become hermeneuticians, where they could come to understand the universality of having to interpret. Despite forces arrayed against this type of thinking, we remain committed to nurturing the coming generation because,

of course, in future we shall need the next generation's diligent work to keep this essential thinking alive. In future and in their turn, they will need to inspire the generation following theirs to continue in their wake.

How fitting, then, to have this issue of *Analecta Hermeneutica* contain essays (apart from "But in a Fiction") and a lengthy multi-book review all written by young scholars who have recently completed their graduate work or are quite near the end of their graduate study. Their work published here should give some sense to the readers of *Analecta Hermeneutica* that the future study of hermeneutics as a self-aware practice is brighter than we might imagine in our lowest moments. These essays taken together demonstrate the universality of the hermeneutic question by taking as their various foci several disparate themes. As the Aims and Scope of *Analecta Hermeneutica* makes evident, we extend a broad welcome to the many situations and practices authors might take as the motivation of their work.

As the epigraph that heads this introduction makes clear, the next generation of hermeneutic scholars will be required to engage any number of changes to the situations in which they shall be undertaking their work, artificial intelligence so-called at present foremost among the many. It suggests likewise other challenges will be a significant part of the circumstances in which they undertake their endeavors. *Analecta Hermeneutica* is pleased to publish these few promissory notes to the future health and survival of hermeneutic inspired thinking.¹

¹ The Editors of *Analecta Hermeneutica* wish to thank all those scholars who completed the anonymous peer reviews for these essays.

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But in a Fiction: Eminent Texts and the Horizon of the Philosophy Seminar Room

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Abstract

This essay repeats the case for the power of fictional texts as works used in philosophical seminars focused on hermeneutics. It provides reminders of the truth disclosing power of fictional texts, not as evidence of other hermeneutic theories, rather as a way of doing hermeneutics itself. It concludes with an image of cartography to assist readers as they make their way in the world.

Keywords: hermeneutics, fiction, novels, truth, aesthetics

Since the Beginning

We live a great portion of our lives in the surrender to stories about our lives, and about possible lives; we live more or less in stories, depending how strongly we resist surrendering to what is “only” imagined.
—Wayne C. Booth

For all the other differences between them, in the tales told concerning Socrates and Jesus of Nazareth, when they are confronted by looks of incomprehension, they at times each respond in quite similar ways. To attempt to turn the looks of their interlocutors from bewilderment toward a better understanding they each enact this prologue which in essence says: let me tell you a story. When a series of propositions, however profound, fall short of saying what they wish, fiction comes to their aid. These fictions, say the Cave Allegory for the former and the story of the Prodigal Son for the latter, although massively distant from what will come to be called the novel, nonetheless, share this essential feature to our living well *viz.*, truths are able to be disclosed through fictions.

For some time now (or since the beginning) stories have come to the aid of philosophy, yet I do not hesitate to say philosophy understands how to return the favor when the stories themselves do the baffling. However, in this short set of reflections, whose only overt goal is but to open a discussion of the broad horizon of hermeneutics, education, and eminent texts, I shall say again a few words about the imaginative power of fictions to further the pedagogical cause of hermeneutics as it confronts those of us for whom the main lesson we wish to share is to persuade and/or remind ourselves hermeneutics is at the heart of being human.

The Pleasure and Progress in Repetition

I would like to insist on this because it is a recurrent accusation and, given the constraints of time and context, I will have to speak a little brutally: I have never tried to confuse literature and philosophy or to reduce philosophy to literature. I am very attentive to the difference of space, of history, of historical rites, of logic, of rhetoric, protocols and argumentation. I try to be attentive to this distinction as much as possible.
—Jacques Derrida

As with hearing an old story still comports the power to bring news and insight into our way of being today, I take a nearly indescribable pleasure in repeating this familiar

hermeneutic claim about fictions, which is no doubt familiar to all of us. Consequently, I wish to remind by sharing, if for no other reason than to act as prompt, a few words about how novels translate the everyday goings on of the life-world into disclosures that are able to enhance hermeneutic thinking when they experiment with what human beings might do together. This brief sketch is based in large part on my pedagogical experience in seminars when long weeks of studying and engaging philosophical texts is followed by the reading of one or more novels whose way of translating experience is unique yet their disclosures—because they are works of art—are housed in the neighborhood with thinking itself. Accordingly, when novels are assigned in philosophical seminars as something other than a mere example of some philosophical concept, their proximity to hermeneutic theory makes them not simply texts in need of interpretation but texts thinking interpretation itself—or, perhaps more to the point, thinking life itself.

The neighborhood shared by story broadly thought and thinking beyond mere calculation does not mean they are completely coincidental, however, movement between them is part of the task of thinking as such. Of course, these border crossings are types of translations as they move by way of interpretation to understandings of how one might live, how life might go were we to go about it this way or that, or how we might have a chance of saying things that matter about the universality of hermeneutics, or how to make peace, or how we might go about better in the next moments confronting us.

As works of art, eminent novels do the work of art, which is to say, when doing their best they make novel what has grown mundane—they make the way we care about ourselves and care about others new; they make news of what has grown stale and obscure, obscure not for being absent rather by being ubiquitous and habitual and thus hidden by this very everywhere-ness. In this way both novels and philosophy in their own ways, due to how each is able to use words, makes foreign what shows itself as native.

This setting into relief by submitting the everyday for our consideration, often achieves its profundity, ironically perhaps, by the novel taking the mundane and the quotidian as its object of study.¹ In its way the novel interrogates what goes on all the time and makes it special. Literary fictions turn our attention to all we have missed while attuning us to the living of life itself while highlighting the constant requirement to enact interpretation as our way of having to be who we are as Dasein. What we have

¹ For a full-length articulation of the ethics of relief, see Ramsey Eric Ramsey, *The Long Path to Nearness* (Humanities Press, 1998).

trouble seeing because of its always already being too close and being seemingly understood through and through, eminent texts translate these goings on into stories allowing us the distance we need to focus on what has been too near to see clearly. These experiments in the translation of experience might be put this way: they are from experience about experience so as to activate through the artifice of fiction a way to return us altered to our own experience of the life-world.

What versus How

For man's relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature, and hence intelligible. Thus, hermeneutics is, as we have seen, a universal aspect of philosophy . . .
—Hans-Georg Gadamer

In spite of putting it this way, it is also the case that novels are seldom about anything all that new. In David Mitchell's masterpiece *Cloud Atlas* we find the character of Timothy Cavendish, a book editor, showing us the way art has of being ever-new without ever being other than it is (and has been). In imagining a cynical critic responding to the manuscript he is reading and of which he is fond he hears this critic saying: "but it's been done a *hundred* times before!" Cavendish grants this (and how not?) yet we would do well if his further rejoinder became a part of our reservoir of response: "as if there could be anything *not* done a hundred *thousand* times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void Webber! As if Art is the *What* and not the *How*."² Novels, as we know, are the place where words mix together in as yet unimagined and experimental ways to see what will come of this new concoction, what results will result from trying things this way in this particular formulation, what will happen to thinking this time if put this way. Albeit too quickly, let us put it this way: No one mistakes Virginia Woolf for Ernest Hemingway and yet, because they translate the experience of the life-world in their unique manner, they nonetheless cover similar ground—each discloses via their singular *how* the universality of the hermeneutic dimension of our being-in-the-world (i.e., the ever-present *what*).

As we know, in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell nestles six different novels written in six different genres into a single interconnected story. Thus, in terms of perspectives akin to Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, this genius novel discloses an essential hermeneutic lesson, which stated simply is this: it matters how you look at things. One marvelous beauty

² David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Random House, 2004), 357 (Mitchell's italics and capitalizations).

of *Cloud Atlas* is its way of being six different manners of disclosing some nuanced view of the same *what* via six different genres. If the *what* is, generally speaking, the predacity human being together has manifested for centuries, then it is also about love and the need for solidarity if the excellence of responsibility and freedom is to be achieved. Insofar as these two ways of being that are in obvious tension with one another are the theme of *Cloud Atlas* across all six narratives, it is thus an embodiment of the hermeneutic claim that even six stories about the same thing—even six as brilliantly told as Mitchell’s—are not enough to get the whole story. Even this inventive and imaginative how is finite and incomplete because, as hermeneutics teaches, never having access to the whole story is a central part of what finitude writes into the narrative of our being together.

If, as George Elliot says “Art is the nearest thing to life,” then art is to be forever welcome in our hermeneutic seminars.³ Furthermore, if it is also the case, as Elliot goes on to say, art “is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot,” then the art of the novel has an especially welcomed place in hermeneutic philosophy. They are so welcomed because, like the best hermeneutic philosophy, they say what does not get said otherwise and elsewhere.

On this point, writing of the experiment undertaken by Hanif Kureishi in his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Zadie Smith sets out for us why novels of any genre are able to do what other forms of communication are unable: “To Kureishi the world is weird and various, comic and tragic. If this mixed reality can’t always be fully admired while standing on soapboxes, sitting in parliament, or marching down Whitehall, it should at least be allowed an existence in novels.”⁴ It seems we ask both hermeneutic philosophy and novels to say what appears only to be able to be said by them.

We need both hermeneutic philosophy and fiction to see who we might become. Furthermore, the stakes are high. As the novelist Ursula K. Le Guin makes succinct when she writes of these: “All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don’t, our lives get made up for us by other people.”⁵

³ George Elliot, *The Natural History of German Life*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2016).

⁴ Zadie Smith, *Feel Free* (Penguin Books, 2018), 241.

⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Operating Instructions,” in *Wave of the Mind* (Shambala, 2004), 208.

To close, a word about maps and guides and what they might provide.

Were we to ask how to get to the seminar room, how to get to the café we adore just off Prešern Square, or how to get to any great city's museum of fine art, then cartographers are there to help; they have methods to produce directions that when followed place us at our desired destination. However, as hermeneutics goes to great lengths to show, such maps with such efficiency and ready success do not exist when we ask how do we get to love, how do we get to genuine experience, or whence the way to the multi-variant solidarity needed to refuse the many and various attempts of those who would program our lives for us? Here we need a cloud atlas, which like the attempt to map the ever-moving and ever-changing canopy overhead, is only able to give a general sense by fostering an attunement to ever-changingness itself. In this way, then, I suggest, all eminent texts add to the wisping pages in the cloud atlas we require in this constantly moving lifeworld.

To help us see our studies as attempts to add provisional coordinates into this impossible cloud cartography, let's act as if we are they who desire to understand ourselves and one another, and who consequently make these (among other) requests of eminent texts and philosophy: tell us a story that might help us understand better; tell us story in which we might see anew what we have grown accustomed to seeing; tell us a story after the encounter with which we might be better practitioners of hermeneutics. In a word, please tell us a story so we might simply be better at accomplishing the inescapable task of having to get around.

Following *El Río*: La Llorona's Past and Present Interpretations Across the U.S.–Mexico Border

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Abstract

Before the Spanish invaded Tenochtitlán, the Mexica heard a woman crying. She wailed and asked a question which would haunt Mexico for centuries: what will happen to my children? The woman, who eventually became known as “La Llorona,” cemented herself as a critical figure in Mexican culture. Her story was retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined within Mexican households, developing into a source of cultural knowledge and memory. As her children migrated across the border, La Llorona moved with them, continuing to inquire over the fate of her children as they settled and created Chicano communities within the United States. La Llorona’s story evolved to fit the needs of her people and the context of the era in which her story was needed. The fluidity of La Llorona’s interpretations across space and through time reminds her children of the pain they endured in the past and the empowerment they may find today.

Keywords: La Llorona, Mexican folklore, migration, Chicano/a, oral storytelling

The story of La Llorona has resided within the bones of Mexican culture and people since her first wail that preceded the Spanish invasion. While La Llorona's fate remains unchanging, the details of her narrative are constantly evolving. La Llorona is sometimes depicted as a poor beautiful woman or a beautiful Indigenous woman, or any combination of the two. Her husband was thought to be a rich man and more likely a rich Spanish man who eventually abandons, sometimes violently and sometimes not, La Llorona and their children for another woman.¹ In every variation La Llorona drowns her children in the river sometimes as an act of revenge and in other circumstances as an act of desperation to keep her children from starving to death or potentially facing the wrath of society.²

Understanding the evolution of her details is necessary in order to recognize how deeply rooted she is within Mexican culture, and how she has followed the cultures movements through time and space. While her origin is tied to Tenochtitlán and to what is now known as Mexico, La Llorona has migrated across the border and settled within Chicano spaces, continuing the rhetorical haunting she began in Mexico. As Chicano communities developed, La Llorona gained broad recognition as a cultural touchstone. Every retelling or reinterpretation of the story layered new meanings and transformed the character from a creature of fright into one of empowerment, representation, and ancestral connection. Chicanos identified with her and found that her story could be infused with new contexts which allowed the story to remain relevant in the era it was being retold and reinterpreted. Traditional stories and storytelling practices preserve Mexican culture and create a space within communities across both sides of the border, allowing for the story to be made anew according to the context and needs of the era.

A woman's cries preceded the invasion of the Spanish and the eventual establishment of a new culture in Mexico.³ The upheaval of infrastructures and the blending of cultures can be considered the origin of present-day Mexico because it created new social, political, and economic structures. Although La Llorona is not a figure who played any physical role in the development of the country, La Llorona did contribute to the narratives that developed after the invasion. She makes an appearance within the story of Mexico's origins in the form of an omen which

¹ Domino Renee Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 1 (2012): 155-56.

² Miriam L. Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," *Journal For The History of Rhetoric* 24, no. 1 (2021): 67.

³ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (University of Texas Press, 2015), 52.

anticipated the arrival of the Spanish and warned the Mexica of the evil that sought to ruin everything they built.⁴ It was the sixth omen Moctezuma II experienced and which he attempted to decipher with the help of his counselors.⁵ The omen came in the form of an unseen woman wailing in the night, asking where can she take her children and wondering what will happen to them. Although the horrors that awaited the Mexica could not have been predicted or altered, the counsel understood that the woman's cries signaled that an evil was lurking, waiting for its moment to strike. The woman's cries attempted to warn Moctezuma II about the invasion of the Spanish colonizers and prevent the destruction and devastation that would fall upon the Mexica empire.⁶ The woman, who would later become La Llorona, mourned her children's fate and ingrained herself into Mexico's history and culture. In the ruins, Tenochtitlán became a new city, one which blended cultures and relied on a story of a woman weeping to perpetuate the new identity created. After the invasion, stories of the woman's wailing were passed down, evolved, and transformed until she became the figure now identified as La Llorona.

The earliest written acknowledgement of La Llorona appears in the Florentine Codex which details the weeping that rang throughout Tenochtitlán.⁷ The Florentine Codex contained stories which centered around experiences that occurred before the Spanish's arrival.⁸ In "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," Miriam L. Fernandez highlights the significance of the Florentine Codex which was written by natives from Tlatelolco between the year 1575 and 1577.⁹ The Codex recounts the history of the invasion and the omens that warned the Mexica of the horrors that awaited them. The authors of the Codex included the story of a woman crying and attempting to warn them of the danger that sought to destroy their land and culture. Writing about the cries heard before the invasion cemented the woman's role as an omen and her signaling of changing times. Fernandez notes that from the beginning, the woman's cries signal death and the inescapable violence that awaits the Mexica.¹⁰ Many of the accounts found within the Florentine Codex were later translated from Nahuatl into Spanish and written into Miguel León Portilla's *The*

⁴ Miguel León Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Beacon Press, 2006), 6.

⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶ Domino Renee Perez, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2008), 16.

⁷ Portilla, *The Broken Spears*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico. Although she is not given a name in either source, La Llorona begins to emerge as a figure central to Mexico's history through this text.

The development of La Llorona's earliest written narrative serves as her first retelling and establishes the necessity of keeping her story alive. Her first cry warned the Mexica of danger and what she could not stop from happening. In writing about her cries, the Florentine Codex reveals the past trauma that entire communities endured while also capturing La Llorona in the present moment. Furthermore, in writing her story, the Florentine Codex operates as her first retelling and gives space for La Llorona to develop as a cultural touchstone. She existed prior to the arrival of the Spanish and she follows the country's development through her various interpretations. La Llorona eventually emerges as an essential cultural figure that moves with her people and time. The fluidity of La Llorona's interpretations begins with the method through which her story is retold within the household.

Oral storytelling is critical to transmitting culture within Mexican households and is a significant way stories such as La Llorona are passed down across space and through time. For many indigenous groups, oral storytelling served as a critical source and method for sharing cultural information. As Leslie Reese argues in "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," sharing stories, narratives, *dichos*, and *consejos* is "a prominent experience among families in Mexico . . . An opportunity . . . to share cultural values and construct identity."¹¹ Families told stories not only to bond, but also to share the values of their society and to cement identities within people. It became an important method to instill behaviors and highlight expectations for children. Reese explains further that, indigenous ". . . oral traditions predating the conquest . . . include a rich history of poetry, prayers, and discourse through which cultural content was transmitted from generation to generation."¹² After the arrival of the Spanish, indigenous oral traditions continued to be a significant part of indigenous lives, but the stories evolved as Spanish ideas began to change the culture and communities within Mexico. Specifically, the story of La Llorona portrayed the changing times, highlighted the effects of the conquest, and depicted the Mexica's views on life before and after the conquest.¹³ The Spanish influence on the legend contributed to its evolution and transformation into the story that is retold today.

¹¹ Leslie Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," *Bilingual Research Journal* 25, no. 3 (2012): 277.

¹² Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes," 278.

¹³ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 18.

In the 200 years following her first retelling, La Llorona's story remained popular across different regions in Mexico among working-class people, who shared her story with fondness and fear. While traveling through Mexico in the 1880s Thomas A. Janvier spoke with older generations of working-class people across different regions in Mexico and gathered popular folkloric stories.¹⁴ These stories were ones which the older generations already knew by heart because they had been passed down by word of mouth many times over. Janvier notes that stories such as La Llorona, are cherished by the older people of Mexico City "alike lettered and unlettered" and passed down with a "lively faith" from "heart to lip and from lip to heart again through the centuries" and which retain the "full flavor" of their origin.¹⁵ The people who told these stories shared them with a "simple-souled faith in their verity," allowing for characters such as La Llorona to live as an ever present figure in Mexican households.¹⁶ The version of La Llorona which Janvier captures in his collection, he notes, was popular in Monterey and nearly identical to the version he heard in Mexico City.¹⁷ In the version of the story Janvier hears, La Llorona, dressed in a white *rebozo*, walks quietly down the streets crying for her children. She is seen by different people in multiple places at once. When La Llorona appears before someone, their senses seemingly abandon the body, leaving the person with the feeling of being "dead."¹⁸ The question La Llorona asks, which is the one she is always asking, is "where shall I find my children?"¹⁹ La Llorona, Janvier notes, migrates with the people who believe in her and although she is fluid in her movements, she remains unchanged in the search for her children.²⁰

While La Llorona was an oral story passed down for generations, it was not until the late 19th century that the folkloric version we know now would be written down and officially titled "La Llorona." The story of the crying woman found within the Florentine Codex was the first retelling of the story, but the version that formed through the passage of time had not been documented under an "official" title. In "Absolving La Llorona: Yda H. Addis's 'The Wailing Woman,'" Rene H. Treviño explains that in 1885 Vicente Riva Palacio and Juan de Dios Peza published *Tradiciones*

¹⁴ Thomas A. Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910), 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 164.

y leyendas mexicanas which contained a story titled “La Llorona.”²¹ The foundation of their written version was the popular oral story which Janvier wrote about in his collection.²² The written story detailed the experience of a beautiful woman who married a Spanish man and because of his betrayal she murdered their children. In Palacio and Peza’s version, the story ends with them referring to the woman officially as La Llorona.²³ Giving La Llorona a name aided in the development of the story’s details and contributed to her evolution as the character that is well known today. Her name made her tangible, a figure who could be evoked for the needs of the storyteller. Her story continued to be published and passed down through generations, with the details of her story constantly changing each time it was told.

The details of La Llorona’s character such as her indigenous identity and class status are part of her *historia* which gives audiences an insight into Mexican history and culture in both the past and the present. When people retell the story of La Llorona, they are participating in the tradition of oral storytelling which passes cultural information between storyteller and listener. In “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” Perez states that the story of La Llorona is a “cultural touchstone,” a way for people to connect to a Greater Mexican community.²⁴ By connecting to a Greater Mexican community, the story is capable of reflecting a reality which exists in both in the past and within the present moment. La Llorona can be portrayed as a poor or indigenous woman, acknowledging the economic and social oppression women experienced at the time of the invasion and continue to endure in modern day Mexico. “In some configurations of the legend, La Llorona’s story is a metaphor for what happens to the Indigenous residents of Mexico as a result of Spanish colonization.”²⁵ When storytellers portray La Llorona as indigenous, they imbue the story with the discrimination indigenous residents face and how little social power they hold at any moment throughout Mexico’s history. Furthermore, when La Llorona is depicted as a poor woman, she teaches audiences about class prejudices made severe after the invasion and the lack of economic power women continue to experience.²⁶ These retellings reveal that La Llorona’s story is happening in the present while remaining rooted to her past. Much like the water she is said to haunt which

²¹ Rene H. Treviño, “Absolving La Llorona: Yda H. Addis’s ‘The Wailing Woman,’” *Legacy* 36, no. 1 (2019): 124.

²² Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico*, 164.

²³ Vicente Riva Palacio and Juan de Dios Peza, *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1927), 51.

²⁴ Perez, “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

holds the memories of her children, La Llorona's fluid interpretations are rooted in critical memories.

The story of La Llorona provides a platform to discuss modern day injustices and to remind Mexican society of the country's violent past. La Llorona's story holds a place in many Mexican households. However, her story plays a more particular role in Mexican society because it operates as a haunting. In "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," Fernandez dissects the concept of rhetorical haunting and asserts that it ". . . is specifically tied to the critical memory of trauma and injustice. Not all critical memory invokes a rhetorical haunting, but all rhetorical hauntings are rooted in critical memory."²⁷ Rhetorical hauntings encapsulate the trauma marginalized communities experience and ensure that the memories are never forgotten. The story of La Llorona operates as a haunting because she reminds all Mexican people not only of the country's history of colonialism, but also the continuing impact colonialism has had on communities across both sides of the border. An example of the effects La Llorona's haunting has on people can be found in *Recuerdos de Durango: Narraciones y Leyendas*, Tomás Dimas Arenas version highlights the way people feel after hearing La Llorona's wails. Arenas writes, "*Los hombres se encontraban cobardes y a las mujeres les temblaba todo el cuerpo; los corazones, se sobresaltaban al oír este gemido terrible, largo que penetraba hasta los huesos.*"²⁸ The men trembling in fear and the women feeling her cry in their bones demonstrates the power behind La Llorona's haunting and her ability to pull on the critical memories. La Llorona offers people a space to reflect on the culture that has embedded and interwoven itself within her narrative.

La Llorona's hauntings makes her existence throughout Mexico's public sphere fluid, further emphasizing how she rises above time. As Perez notes, to "those who participate in the transmission of the lore . . . through storytelling or as interlocutors, La Llorona is alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, a person, legend, ghost, goddess, metaphor, story, and/or symbol."²⁹ La Llorona takes on many forms with the time and place in which people retell her story influencing the shape of the narrative. La Llorona's story is a rhetorical haunting and her hauntings can be seen as responses to economic, political, gendered, and social oppression.³⁰ Additionally, her hauntings demonstrate the fluidity of her interpretations because she pulls from critical memory to haunt the present moment, following her community

²⁷ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 57.

²⁸ Tomás Dimas Arenas, *Recuerdos de Durango: Narraciones y Leyendas* (Durango, 2001), 107.

²⁹ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 2.

³⁰ Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," 155.

wherever they need her. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes in “Artworks in Word in Image,” audiences must understand that artworks or, as with La Llorona, folkloric stories “are marked by an immediate presentness in time and at the same time by rising above time”³¹ Sometimes La Llorona takes on the role of a poor woman, or an indigenous woman, or any combination of the two. The husband may be rich, a white man, or both. These identities shift the story’s meaning and make it adaptable to the era in which it is needed while also keeping it rooted within history. Each of her identities informs the audience of present social norms, but also rises above time, connecting communities across both sides of the border to their cultural origins and to the current challenges they endure. The adaptability of her story allows for her story to be molded and layered as necessary. As La Llorona follows the flow of rivers in search of her children, she follows the flow of communities and takes on the needs of her community. While her story exists in Mexico’s public sphere, the story of La Llorona has made its way into the Chicano mainstream.

La Llorona’s movements across the border further illustrate the fluidity of her interpretations which allow her to be shaped to the needs of the storyteller and audience. The story of La Llorona has moved beyond Mexico, crossed the border, and settled into many states that are near the border such as Arizona, California, Texas, and New Mexico.³² As a result, La Llorona takes on new forms, becoming, for some, a voice of reason and a space for reflection. Specifically, her ties to Chicano culture have allowed Chicano communities to reclaim her as a symbol of empowerment. One example of La Llorona’s fluid interpretations in communities across the border can be found in *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* in which Catrióna Rueda Esquibel argues for the recognition of La Llorona and her connection to lesbian Latina motherhood. She analyzes stories where La Llorona is rendered as a lesbian which makes her capable of experiencing both great love and great violence.³³ Esquibel argues that the variations of La Llorona’s story serves as a reminder of colonization and as a warning to women to be careful of the partners they pick, their sexuality, and even abortion. Perez’s “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” analyzes the story not only from the Chicana perspective but also looks at La Llorona’s evolution within popular culture. She identifies La Llorona as the bogeywoman of Mexico and Chicano folklore, emphasizing that she exists in multiple

³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Artworks in Word and Image,” *Theory, Culture, Society* 23 (1992): 58.

³² La Llorona is told across many Latin American countries and states within the United States. However, the scope of this analysis remains on her connection to Mexico and the borderlands.

³³ Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, *With Her Machete in Her Hand* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 33.

spaces.³⁴ La Llorona's existence in multiple spaces further solidifies her ability to move with the tides of temporal and spatial distances. As she has settled within Chicano spaces, La Llorona reaffirms her power to champion the causes of her community.

Chicanos have retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined her story. As Domino Renee Perez establishes in *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, La Llorona's story became intertwined with Mexican culture and society, playing an important role in the shaping of social norms and expectations even as families migrated and created new communities away from Mexico.³⁵ La Llorona has since followed her children and migrated into Chicano spaces and taken residence in their communities as a figure of resistance. Chicanos have reinterpreted in their oral storytelling and reimagined her story in the literature and music they create because she often takes on the role of muse.³⁶ Her status as muse serves as a means to haunt and La Llorona's presentness within Chicano communities requires methods which reach a contemporary audience. Works such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* provides a platform for La Llorona to reach modern audiences while remaining rooted in history. Chicano communities have retold her story through different media in order to continue conveying her significance in the context of what is needed for the community. As Perez explains, reinterpreting La Llorona within Chicano spaces presents an opportunity to forge connections and highlight her ability to both take and bring forth life.³⁷ She becomes a source of strength and a site for reflection.

La Llorona houses a convergence of worlds within her story and creates a site for Chicanos to reflect on the issues that their community faces, ultimately reaffirming the significance of her position within the community. La Llorona's movement across the border and settling in Chicano spaces demonstrates a convergence between Mexico and the U.S. and the way in which a new world is being created.³⁸ The creation of this world does not change the way that La Llorona rhetorically haunts communities.³⁹ Similarly to the way La Llorona rhetorically haunts Mexico, she haunts Chicano communities. She voices concerns of deportation, the strength of cultural connections, and the desire to be recognized. As Perez argues, La Llorona reflects the cultural and national concerns of Chicanos.⁴⁰ While she voices fears, La Llorona also allows for the community to reflect through the process of telling her story and coming

³⁴ Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," 154.

³⁵ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 10.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁷ Ibid., 45.

³⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 11.

³⁹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 56.

⁴⁰ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 11.

to an understanding of necessity for action. La Llorona's haunting provides an opportunity for Chicanos to empower themselves and challenge oppressive institutions and systems.⁴¹ Chicanos tell stories in order to construct identity and perpetuate the rich history of cultural content.⁴² The story of La Llorona and her role within Chicano culture cannot be separated or isolated. To do so would be to untether her from her cultural and historical essence. "Therefore, in every present moment not only is a horizon of the future opened up but also the horizon of the past is in play."⁴³ The peculiarity of folklore lies in its essence which reveals the problems of the era and moves communities toward a place where they may reflect on the past that is always at play and use the past to create a future that is one of strength and resistance.

The new world created by La Llorona's haunting within Chicano communities exists both beyond the physical border and outside of time. "This demonstrates, I think, the absolute presentness of art to all times and places. Art is able to build bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it originated."⁴⁴ La Llorona's interpretations are fluid both in time and space. Her folklore is steeped in the cultural history of Mexico while also continuing to meet the present needs of communities across both sides of the border. The retelling, adapting, and layering of her story allows storytellers and audiences to learn from La Llorona and become aware of the context in which people tell her story. La Llorona exists in Mexico's past and in this moment within Mexico's public sphere. After her migration, La Llorona did not leave Mexico and instead she continued haunting Mexico while haunting Chicano communities across the border. Each household which retells her story forges a bridge to her origins and to the necessity of retelling her story in the now. La Llorona takes on many faces with each reflecting the current state of her community.

The story of La Llorona has been retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined for generations. Through the different versions of La Llorona's story, scholars have identified many variations of her character and analyzed the slight shifts in meaning that come as a result of the changes. As people retell her story, the significance of her wailing and her role in shaping Mexican and Chicano culture becomes more and more pronounced. Each meaning generates a new layer which cements La Llorona's status as critical to Mexican and Chicano traditions and storytelling. Scholars suggest that the transformations and adaptability of her story not only reconnect her with the past but also give La Llorona the ability to call attention to the issues that impact certain groups

⁴¹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 55.

⁴² Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," 277-78.

⁴³ Gadamer, "Artworks in Word and Image," 59.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

in today's society. Her story connects to issues such as colonialism and gender expectations, but also to resistance across borders. La Llorona's story can be molded to fit the needs of her audience and of the storyteller in order to bring awareness to the challenges they find critical. La Llorona builds a bridge beyond time and across space, connecting the children she first cried for to the children who now call upon her for the cultural knowledge and empowerment she carries.

More Than a House: Encountering Beauty as a Site of Disclosure in *Howards End*

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Abstract

This essay argues for greater engagement with the country house in *Howards End* as a work of art. Rather than approaching the country house merely as property or decoration, this essay demonstrates how the house can function as a site where truth is disclosed through aesthetic encounter. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer alongside Elaine Scarry's account of beauty as unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving, this essay contends that *Howards End* calls its characters into transformative experiences where life might be quickened, realtionships reconfigured, and self-understanding deepened. Through the examination of the Schlegel sisters alongside the Wilcox family, this essay argues that those who yield to the house with patience and openness experience its capacity to disclose a richer vision of being, while those governed by calculation and property remain closed to its transformative possibilities. Through this lens, Forster's country house emerges as an aesthetic event that invites readers to connect, yield, and participate in the transformative power of art.

Keywords: *Howards End*, E. M. Forster, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics, aesthetics, beauty, truth

Art is for increasing life. That, I believe, after all the other purposes receive their due, is really what it's for—why we revere it, why we give our hearts to it.
—William Deresiewicz¹

Introduction

In the opening lines of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, Helen writes to her sister:

It isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful—red brick . . . Then there's a very big wych-elm . . . leaning a little over the house, and standing on the boundary between garden and meadow. I quite love that tree already . . . Oh, the beautiful vine leaves! The house is covered with a vine.²

Rather than simply appearing architecturally, Helen describes the country house as something that exceeds her expectations and interrupts prior understanding. "It isn't the least what we expected," she insists.³ From the novel's opening pages, readers enter a conversation about encountering beauty and its call for a new way of seeing. As such, *Howards End* does not merely sit as an object in a landscape; it addresses Helen and, in her attentiveness, she responds.

Such a scene resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that understanding is not a method we apply to objects but an event that happens to us. In encountering a work of art, there exists the possibility of genuine, deep experience that "is never merely a confirmation of expectations but a surprise of them."⁴ The experience of beauty disrupts our expectations and discloses something about ourselves as interpretive beings. If, as philosopher Dennis Schmidt suggests, aesthetic experience reaches "the deepest center of being human," namely, our hermeneutical core, then Helen's astonishment before *Howards End* signals more than delight in a charming country house.⁵ Instead, it marks a moment of interpretive enlargement and truthful illumination of her world.

¹ William Deresiewicz, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Art," *Salmagundi*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://salmagundi.skidmore.edu/articles/477-thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-art>

² E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, Dover Thrift Editions: Classic Novels (Dover Publications, 2002), 1–2.

³ Forster, *Howards End*, 2.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, edited by Richard E. Palmer, (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 200.

⁵ Dennis Schmidt, *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis*, (Indiana University Press, 2013), 10.

Since *Howards End*'s publication in 1910, some critics have read Forster's portrayal of the Schlegels as reflecting elitist sympathies, particularly in contrast to the wealthy Wilcoxes and the lower-class Basts.⁶ At first glance, *Howards End* may read as a romanticization of art, literature, and the longing for an uncomplicated countryside. As Anna Grmelová notes, critics have further argued that such nostalgic pastoralism renders the ending of *Howards End* ahistorical as the country house becomes a refuge "from the impending expansion of London."⁷ However, nothing stops at first glance. Rather than carrying on such lines of criticism and distancing ourselves from aesthetics, this essay argues for greater engagement with the country house as a work of art.⁸ If we approach *Howards End* not merely as property or decoration but as a site of aesthetic disclosure, as I argue the women of the novel do, we begin to see how it functions as an event of truth within the novel. As a work of art, *Howards End* calls its characters into a transformative encounter where life might be quickened, relationships reconfigured, and self-understanding deepened if we know how to look.⁹

Between the Work of Art and the Beautiful

Works of art carry the beautiful with them. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry outlines three key features of beauty as unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving.¹⁰ Although philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Schiller likewise describe aesthetic experience as disclosive and transformative, Scarry's account provides a particularly helpful vocabulary for identifying the work beauty performs in *Howards End*.¹¹ What makes a work of art beautiful is not its perceived prettiness or painterly skill but its unique ability to intensify or deepen one's sense of life in a way akin to sacred experience. In preparing to encounter a work of art, Scarry writes it this way,

⁶ David Deutsch, "Reconnecting Must to *Howards End*: Forster's Aesthetics of Inclusion," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 21, (2010): 163, DOI: 10.1080/10436928.2010.500586

⁷ Anna Grmelová, "'We Murder to Dissect': Enjoyment of Beauty versus Theoretical Rigour in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," *Brno Studies in English* 38, no. 1 (2012): 82, <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2012-1-5>.

⁸ My reading seems to gesture toward, in a broad stroke, why Zadie Smith wrote *On Beauty*, which is a tribute to Forster and *Howards End* in particular.

⁹ In Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, which is a homage to *Howards End*, it is not a country house but a painting that preoccupies the novel.

¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 22–24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400847358>.

¹¹ Of particular note would be Hans-Georg Gadamer's essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival" as play, symbol, and festival could be another great lens through which to view *Howards End*.

“You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, lifesaving, something that deserves from you a posture of reverence or petition . . . through your careless approach, you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life.”¹² On Scarry’s account, to be careless before beauty is to fail to give oneself over to its transformational potential. In a careless approach, one might remain quite closed off: confident about what the piece means historically or to what ends we might employ it. In this, the beautiful is merely one more consumable, interchangeable object rather than something particular that, in its presence, invites one’s presence. In one’s inattentiveness, the “retraction of life” Scarry describes is a contraction within the self or a shrinking of one’s capacity for attention and responsiveness. To be experienced as a life-quickenning event, beauty asks a certain comportment of us—one that is patient, open, and willing respond. In this way, Scarry’s account of caring for beauty aligns closely with a hermeneutic understanding of encounter and Gadamer’s concern for dwelling with a work of art. “We must learn” he writes, “how to dwell upon the work in a specific way . . . [for] the essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way. And perhaps it is the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity.”¹³ Beauty addresses us—even offers us the chance at eternity—but only those willing to give themselves to its call have the chance to experience its unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving force.

In *Howards End*, the country house takes on each of these features as demonstrated in various conversations throughout the novel. For example, Margaret remarks, “Howards End must be a very different house to ours. We are fond of ours, but there is nothing distinctive about it. As you saw, it is an ordinary London house. We shall easily find another.”¹⁴ Margaret recognizes there is something different and distinct between these two houses when it comes to their interchangeability. Whereas the “ordinary” Schlegel house can be easily exchanged for another, Howards End is “distinctive” and therefore resists such a swapping transaction. The emphasis on distinctiveness also marks Margaret’s growing understanding that this house carries meaning that exceeds basic function. Her awareness of its unprecedentedness becomes clearer when the Schlegels must move from Wickham Place and Margaret finds herself confused and unable to settle. “London only stimulates, it cannot sustain,” the narrator observes.¹⁵ Even more, Margaret hurries “over its surface for a house without knowing

¹² Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 27.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

¹⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

¹⁵ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

what sort of a house she wanted.”¹⁶ The language of surface and stimulation highlight the replaceability of city houses as they may excite but do not endure. As a work of art, *Howards End* is unprecedented not because of its architectural originality but its ability to press upon Margaret’s imagination as remarkable and sustaining. Those who approach it with attentiveness find themselves drawn into relation with it, while those who seek only shelter or ownership remain untouched.

Taking the idea of the unprecedented one step further, *Howards End* is also seen by Mrs. Wilcox (and eventually Margaret) as sacred. For example, Margaret initially declines Mrs. Wilcox’s invitation to come visit *Howards End* only to realize that her answer of “another day” will “do for brick and mortar, but not for the Holy of Holies into which *Howards End* has been transfigured.”¹⁷ Such transfiguration suggests a change from drab, common house to holy, sacred dwelling place. Margaret notices how *Howards End* is set apart from average, unremarkable buildings and made to be something more unique and sublime. Additionally, given the passive language of “has been transfigured,” one might see Mrs. Wilcox as the being whose participation was required for such transformation. In this example, the act of becoming sacred is an interpretive act of cooperation and co-creation. As Mrs. Wilcox tarries with *Howards End* it discloses to her a mode of belonging that resists the speed of contemporary life. What might appear to others as merely rural property shows itself to her, in her sustained attention, as a site of wisdom and ancestry.¹⁸ Rooted in place and history, the house, in response, nourishes Mrs. Wilcox’s own sense of self and gathers her life into a larger web of significance. Through this ongoing exchange, the house is lifted from the sphere of utility and into the realm of the sacred. Thus, the transfiguration of *Howards End* into the sacred is an interpretive event that occurs between being and beauty. Luce Irigaray puts it this way, “The celestial lies not only above our head but also between us.”¹⁹ Her claim reminds us holiness is not just something of the heavens, but what can be disclosed in the interpretive moments shared between beings and beauty in conversation. When an encounter with the beautiful is held with reverence, the sacred emerges in the interpretive space between Mrs. Wilcox and *Howards End*. In this, the transformative power lies not only in the act of witnessing and attending but also in the ongoing relationship between Mrs.

¹⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

¹⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 76.

¹⁸ Forster, *Howards End*, 18.

¹⁹ Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic et al., Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (Continuum, 2002), 147.

Wilcox and the country house, where each contributes to the evolution and enrichment of the other.

Finally, *Howards End* is crucial to life as Mrs. Wilcox notes, “*Howards End* was nearly pulled down once. It would have killed me.”²⁰ If the beautiful work of art quickens life, then the absence of quickening drains life. Although Mrs. Wilcox eventually dies from poor health, she suggests her life would not be worth living without the country house. Rather than a threat of physical death, “it would have killed me” registers as a kind of existential diminishment.²¹ The house sustains a mode of being that finds little affirmation within her family’s ethos. Where the Wilcox men devote themselves to business, expansion, and property management, Mrs. Wilcox “had only one passion in life—her house . . .”²² This stark difference becomes unmistakable after death, when her written wish to leave *Howards End* to Margaret is dismissed and destroyed by the Wilcoxes. To the family it seemed “natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it on to their dining-room fire . . . For one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal. The woman who had died did say to them ‘Do this,’ and they answered, ‘We will not.’”²³ The burning of the note enacts symbolically what the demolition of the house would have accomplished materially, namely the erasure of Mrs. Wilcox and her desires. Thus, as a work of art, *Howards End* is a lifesaving force not because it prolongs Mrs. Wilcox’s life, but because it deepens the meaningfulness and coherence of her life against forces that would render it forgettable. Further, Niklas Cyril Fischer notes that the relationship between Mrs. Wilcox and *Howards End* is more than that of owner and object.²⁴ For she also maintains “an alliance with the mythical” and ancestral past which “sublimates her character into the house’s spatial and temporal order.”²⁵ When Forster first introduces Mrs. Wilcox during Aunt July’s frantic visit to the country house, he writes, “[Mrs. Wilcox] seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it.”²⁶ Such relationship of belonging suggests an interconnected vitality between *Howards End* and Mrs. Wilcox. Although Mrs. Wilcox cannot help but exist in the modern world, Forster offers *Howards End* as the sustaining force which quickens her life. Thus, in each of these

²⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

²¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

²² Forster, *Howards End*, 75.

²³ Forster, *Howards End*, 88.

²⁴ Niklas Cyril Fischer, “E.M. Forster, Realism, and the Style of Progressive Nostalgia,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 45, no. 2 (2022): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.45.2.05>.

²⁵ Fischer, “E.M. Forster, Realism, and the Style of Progressive Nostalgia,” 73.

²⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 18.

instances, *Howards End* is rendered not as an everyday object of use but rather as a work of unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving art.

Howards End and the Disclosure of Truth

Insofar as we follow Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer on the understanding of beauty, we can now add the disclosure of truth and the bringing forth of being to Scarry's key features. Treating *Howards End* as a work of art not only means it is beautiful (in the sense discussed above), but that the experience of the country house reveals meaningful truth about being human and brings forth the possibility of our humanness. Rather than serving as a synonym for fact, truth in art is better understood as disclosure. Art discloses truth not as methodological inquiry or search for certainty and correctness. Instead, art's truth is that human beings are the site of understanding and meaning making, and this alters the way we interpret our world.

In his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Rainer Maria Rilke writes of this altering experience of art in the closing line: "You must change your life."²⁷ Like Heidegger and Gadamer, Rilke notes that part of the truth disclosed in the experience of a work of art is the possibility of transformation. In this way, the hope of art and beauty is that we might uncover the truth of life as such: that we are interpretive beings who, as the site of understanding, have the possibility to change the way we relate to others. Gadamer writes it this way, "Works of art possess an elevated rank in being, and this is seen in the fact that in encountering a work of art we have the experience of something emerging—and this one can call truth!"²⁸ In other words, in our experience of the work of art—that moment when we are struck by or invited into beauty—we are not simply viewing a static object apart from us. What we experience in this encounter is the experience of disclosure, understanding, and possibility, which is the truthfulness of life. The work of art brings forth being in that it gives us the chance to be "drawn out of our everyday selves and drawn into a conversation" where we might understand ourselves and better our relations with others.²⁹

²⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed March 7, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1679348/archaic-torso-of-apollo>.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of The Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 207.

²⁹ Ramsey Eric Ramsey, "Before the Work of Art," *Phainomena* (SI) 28, nos. 110–111 (2019): 93, <https://doi.org/10.32022/PHI28.2019.110-111.14>.

In *Howards End*, Forster's phrase "only connect" acts as a reminder to readers and characters to draw out of themselves such that we build better relations through understanding. The country house opens up a clearing where the call to "only connect" prioritizes both internal connections of ideas and consequences and external connections between one another.³⁰ Margaret thinks to herself, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height."³¹ As a work of art, *Howards End* makes much of Margaret's plea in its bringing forth and intensification of life. Reflecting on English farms on her way to *Howards End*, Margaret experiences both love and sadness as she contemplates life and death, and such thoughts give her a "feeling of completeness."³² Speaking hermeneutically, we understand completeness not as an absolute, definitive conclusion at which she has arrived. Instead, it might be said that Margaret's feeling of completeness is one of great depth, fulfillment, and meaningfulness. In remembering her experience of *Howards End*, Margaret seems to understand a new complexity to the richness of life. In this scene Margaret thinks, "In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers."³³ This vision holds together the tension of what had initially been understood as contradictory: life and death, transition and eternity, and joy and sorrow. Yet now, Margaret reveals a richer understanding of life.

This is further demonstrated as Margaret is better prepared to hold both the sweet and the bitter, which give dimensionality to her understanding. For example, when Helen returns disgraced after Leonard Bast's death, Margaret refuses the Wilcoxes' impulse toward condemnation. Instead, she recognizes the tragedy of the situation while still defending her sister demonstrating a capacity to hold both moral complexity and familial love. In attempt to callout Henry Wilcox's inability to connect his own affair with Helen's pregnancy, Margaret cries, "In what way different? You have betrayed Mrs. Wilcox, Helen only herself. You remain in society, Helen can't. You have had only pleasure, she may die. You have the insolence to talk to me of differences, Henry?"³⁴ Where Henry divides and judges, Margaret attempts to hold together such complexities. Thus, part of the work of *Howards End* as a work of art

³⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 168.

³¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 168.

³² Forster, *Howards End*, 242.

³³ Forster, *Howards End*, 242.

³⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 279.

is to reveal, intensify, and connect our experience of life so that its contradictions may be met with a deepened sense of wholeness.

Yielding to the Country House

For *Howards End* as a work of art to have its say, there must be someone to listen. To tarry with a work of art means to spend time, reside, and linger such that we remain sensitive to art's address. Without one who encounters the work of art, the quickening, transformative potential of *Howards End*'s is not received, even if it may be subtly felt. Throughout the novel, many characters know about and engage with *Howards End*. However, not all experience or encounter it. The notion of "yielding" to the work of art, following philosopher Ramsey Eric Ramsey, suggests a comportment of readiness, surrender, and freedom. Characters like Ruth Wilcox, Margaret, and Helen yield to *Howards End* because they experience it not as mere utility or something to be controlled for profit. Rather, their broader sense of living well (outside of control, utility, and profit) frees up a meaningful space for possibility and futurity to arise within their encounter. On the other hand, Mr. Wilcox and Charles are almost completely unable to remain sensitive to *Howards End* as a work of art because they remain steadfast in the world of objects, control, and utility. These men have learned that living well means owning but not experiencing, collecting but not connecting. Because of their desire for control, they have learned to "think [themselves] subjects standing over against objects there for [their] manipulation and use."³⁵ Thus, even when they feel fond of *Howards End*, the Wilcox men are primarily concerned with its utility and potential to maximize their own material ends.

Given the reign of technology and calculation in both our contemporary moment and in London in 1910, it is unsurprising how one is thrust into the realm of utility without much say. Take for example, the pace of progress and practicality as the narrator remarks of Margaret, "In the streets of the city she noted for the first time the architecture of hurry, and heard the language of hurry on the mouths of its inhabitants . . ."³⁶ This sense of hurriedness and urgency speaks to the sprawling urbanization of London, which includes railways, apartment flats, and motor-cars. The Wilcoxes, as wealthy, multi-property-owning, imperialist-venturing capitalists seem to be situated in the heart of such progress.

³⁵ Ramsey, "Before the Work of Art," 95.

³⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 97.

As the men of the Wilcox family are engrossed in the realm of development and calculation, they are only ever accustomed to seeing items as objects to be controlled or accumulated and then measuring its usefulness. The novel reflects this in its portrayal of the Wilcoxes often as shallow, thoughtless characters. For example, when Helen notices Paul's shame and embarrassment after their kiss, she "felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness."³⁷ This lack of substance but accumulation of things is also reflected in the progress of London, which is contrasted with Howards End. "London only stimulates, it cannot sustain" writes the narrator.³⁸ And later, "The mask fell off the city, and [Margaret] saw it for what it really is—a caricature of infinity."³⁹ In these examples, both London and the Wilcox men are financially successful, but vitally hollow. Both promise much but offer little sustenance. The Wilcox men talk of life but obscure it through the clamoring collection of objects. This connection between London and the Wilcoxes is made clear when Margaret says, "If Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No—perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm."⁴⁰ Thus, the novel seems to suggest that London and the Wilcoxes have shaped and informed one another.

As successful London men, Henry and Charles are particularly fluent in the language of property and finance. They do not make any decisions without first considering an endeavor's viability toward some material success. This is keenly showcased in many conversations they have about Howards End. Expressing his frustration at Margaret and Helen's stay at the country house, Mr. Wilcox argues, "The house is mine—and, Charles, it will be yours—and when I say that no one is to live there, I mean that no one is to live there. I won't have it. . . . To my mind this question is connected with something far greater, the rights of property itself."⁴¹ In this conversation between Mr. Wilcox and Charles, Mr. Wilcox harps on his need for ownership and control of the house above all else. His strict commitment to traditional notions of property rights obscures his relationship to his wife and sister-in-law. Thus, rather than attempting to connect the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels in this scene, Mr.

³⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 22.

³⁸ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

³⁹ Forster, *Howards End*, 252.

⁴⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 157.

⁴¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 297.

Wilcox's obsession with control causes him to forbid connection by placing more value in the tangible possession of Howards End than on relationships.

Mr. Wilcox is ill-equipped to encounter Howards End as a work of art. He cannot yield to Howards End because his being is distorted by impulses of control and obscured by the use of property. Thus, as Hattice Yurttas writes, "... the Wilcoxes represent vulgar capitalist-imperialist greed and blindness which goes along with their abstaining from literature and art."⁴² Caught up in the historical moment of modern technology and utility, the Wilcox men are unable to listen or make way for Howards End in conversation. For example, Margaret points at Mr. Wilcox's lack of compassion for Helen's request to stay at Howards End as she mockingly asks, "Will Helen's condition depreciate the property?" and later, "Tonight [Helen] asks to sleep in your empty house—a house which you do not care about, and which you have not occupied for over a year."⁴³ Mr. Wilcox cannot imagine anything outside of Howards End's usefulness as this is what the domination of calculation and practicality have taught. Under the reign of calculation, objects become separate from us and appear not as meaningful items in our world in relation with us, but as objects to be made useful. Without a perceived usefulness, such items appear to us as broken objects, good for nothing.

Perhaps this is precisely why Ruth Wilcox did not initially leave the house to her family as she knew they could not connect without trying to own. For example, when the Wilcox family discusses Ruth's note stating that Margaret should inherit the house, they feel betrayed and confused: "To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her [Ruth] it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir."⁴⁴ Although Howards End holds family memories, the Wilcoxes are unable to understand how its beauty was so much more than decoration or pretty object for Ruth. Because Ruth experienced the house as sacred, she sought someone who could encounter it for all its life-saving, life-altering potential. The family's confusion in this scene stems from the tight reign of utility and technology, or what Heidegger calls calculative thinking that "races from one prospect to the next ... [it] never stops, never collects itself ... These forces ... everywhere and every minute claim, enchain, drag along, press and impose upon [us]."⁴⁵ The encompassing grasp of this dominating way of thinking hides and distorts the Wilcox family's ability to contemplate and reflect. It

⁴² Hattice Yurttas, "Class and Art in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*," *Language and Literature Studies* 18 (2018): 231.

⁴³ Forster, *Howards End*, 277–78.

⁴⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 87.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 46.

makes them believe the only way of relating to others, items, and the world is through objectification rather than meaningful connection.

The inability to step outside the realm of utility is further demonstrated when Charles says, "If Miss Schlegel had been poor, if she had wanted a house, I could understand it a little. But she has a house of her own. Why should she want another? She wouldn't have any use of *Howards End*."⁴⁶ Here, Charles (and the rest of the family in agreement) cannot begin to imagine *Howards End* outside of a house for someone who needs one. When Margaret does not fit this description, the family is utterly perplexed as to why Ruth would suggest such a thing. And in the midst of their mother's death, here lies another tragedy: The family's inability to understand *Howards End* outside of utility makes them incapable of understanding Ruth. In this same scene discussing their mother's note Forster writes, "it was contrary to the dead woman's intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that nature was understood by them."⁴⁷ Although the family claims Ruth's leaving *Howards End* to Margaret is against her nature, Forster suggests this is not so. The phrase "so far as that nature was understood by them" suggests that if they had truly known their mother, they would have understood her decision. Thus, the family's confusion is less about Ruth acting out of character and more about the family's inability to connect with their mother, *Howards End*, and the relationship between the two. If the family truly wished to understand their mother and her decision, controlling *Howards End* and ignoring Ruth's wishes do not bring them closer to an understanding. Instead, they would do well to practice yielding to *Howards End* not as an object, but as a work of art as Ruth did. In this way, as Leslie White notes, "Art's immediate elusiveness and 'unintelligibility' paradoxically establish its abiding relevance, even (perhaps especially) to those who do not care about art at all."⁴⁸ In this, White demonstrates the Wilcoxes' inability to yield to *Howards End* as a work of art makes it even more painfully relevant both to their lives and to the plot. Had they been sensitive to the country house outside of its utility, perhaps they would have understood both their mother and her request a bit differently.

It seems that Ruth, Margaret, and Helen would agree with Gadamer that "the beautiful is something about which it is never appropriate to ask what it is 'for.'"⁴⁹ If one asks what *Howards End* is for, they have already extracted art from the realm of beauty and forced it into the realm of objects to be used and manipulated. For the

⁴⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 88.

⁴⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 87.

⁴⁸ Leslie White, "Vital Disconnection," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 51, no. 1 (2005): 49.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," 203.

Wilcox men, *Howards End* is merely a country house. And after Ruth's passing, they do not know what to do with it besides treat it as profit-making rental property. For them, *Howards End* becomes simply a way to increase family wealth instead of a site where beauty ushers in the possibility of a more sensitive, connected life. And it is only Ruth and the Schlegel sisters, as Kaoru Urano notes, that maintain an "aesthetic sensibility" that attends to the "conceptual depth" and value of *Howards End*.⁵⁰ Their departure from the transactional, utilitarian approach of the Wilcox men allows them to embrace the contemplative, transformative pull of *Howards End*.

Words Toward the End

In asking what we might find in viewing *Howards End* as a work of art, we are better prepared to understand its magnetizing, intensifying pull on those who extend their hand. Rather than a country house property of bricks and mortar, when we view *Howards End* as a work of art, we see its unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving qualities. For Ruth Wilcox, *Howards End* was holy and unlike anything she had known in its ability to give meaning to her life. By the end of the novel, for the Schlegel sisters *Howards End* has come to mean a future of possibility. In the final chapter Helen remarks, "I feel that our house is the future as well as the past."⁵¹ As a work of art, *Howards End* makes it possible to notice the movement of life. Because of this, the Schlegel sisters come to sense the past as well as the future while they are presently moving within the house. In other words, Margaret and Helen have the gift of reckoning with their life and making something of it. Viewing *Howards End* as a work of art invites us to reconsider our relationships with the beautiful and with others, encouraging a move beyond profit and utility. Through this lens, we find a profound call to connect, yield, and immerse ourselves in the transformative power of art.

⁵⁰ Kaoru Urano, "From the Country House to the Painting: An 'Aesthetic' Adaptation of *Howards End* in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," *Textes et Contextes* 7, no. 1 (2012), <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=359>.

⁵¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 309.

Law That Holds the Line: Preserving the Potential for Utopia Through Hauntological Hermeneutics and Common Law Legal Precedent

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Abstract

Much has been said on the necessity of civil disobedience and the need to reject the excuse of passivity based in a false sense of powerlessness. But those in the legal profession, who have the opportunity to develop and interpret our laws, have an added responsibility that is their necessary fitting response to current political oppression. While the legal wins that strive for Justice must remain a beacon for forward fighting, additionally—and perhaps more importantly—we must embody what Ernst Bloch calls an “anticipatory” view of our legal work towards utopia. In the face of likely, if not inevitable, legal losses we must take a dedicated defensive position. Such protection of the ground we can hold, and the future we can begin to create, must take root in the dichotomy between the deconstructibility of law as an institutional force and the undeconstructability of Justice as utopian ideal. By use of Jacques Derrida’s paradox of deconstruction as Justice, legal professionals may make hermeneutic and strategic use of the “slack” of the law: finding these cracks that allow for the preservation of the potential for future utopian Justice in our legal precedent. This protective positioning parallels Bloch’s idea of “educated hope,” that arises out of political, rather than epistemological, necessity as a praxis of commitment to the

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realization of concrete utopia. This work is not merely conservation but cultivation: a supplanting of future potential in the here and now. Whether by defensive lawyering or dissenting opinions, this recognition of, and response to, our impending losses in the pursuit of utopia is not a kind of abstract wish fulfillment, it is work.

Keywords: justice, law, common law, deconstruction, utopia

The practice of law is largely the practice of interpretation, and this essay attempts to argue that a practical, or concrete, utopian practice of law is possible if we take the work of hauntological hermeneutics seriously; if we listen to what the specter of Justice calls for, and work to make it so. Such work is not easily accomplished, in part because Justice—like Utopia—can never be truly reached, but also because the likelihood of such progress rightfully seems rather slim in light of the current legal and political climate. But in a common law system, like that of the American legal system, the ability to invent the precedent of the future through our present work can preserve the potential for utopian progress even in the worst of political circumstances.

This essay begins with a discussion of John D. Caputo's explication of Jacques Derrida's writings regarding, (1) the deconstructibility of the law, and (2) the undeconstructibility of Justice—a utopian ideal. This ideal may be made more real through Derrida's paradox of "Deconstruction as Justice," in which the utopian imperative may find form in our world through the interpretation and creation of legal precedent. This praxis takes place in the "slack" of the law, that being the space for reform.

Notably, this work is risky: With every attempt to answer Justice's open-ended call via our re-interpretation of existing precedent "we take what has proven itself in the past and put it at risk."² More importantly, the very *possibility* for such work is at risk in America today. The opportunities, spaces, and slack in the law that must remain flexible to allow for movement toward the call of Justice, are being ever further restricted in today's age of canonized restrictive interpretative constitutional lens, rising fascism, and the growing actualization of the unitary executive theory through President Donald Trump's second term.

Turning to the work of Ernst Bloch, as detailed by Ruth Levitas, this essay attempts to argue that a concretely utopian stance requires us to carefully consider our current position, recognize and reconcile with our impending legal losses, and use this anticipatory mode to engage in work that preserves the slack as it stands in the hopes of ensuring the potential for future utopian interpretations of our present precedent.³ Utilizing the concept of the concrete utopia, this interpretative work can be seen as anticipatory rather than compensatory. Such work is not merely conservation but a kind of cultivation—a supplanting of future potential in the here and now. Yet, before one can construct and cultivate a garden of concrete utopian legal interpretation and

² John D. Caputo, "The Call of Justice and the Short Arm of the Law," in *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (Pelican Books, 2018), 214.

³ Ruth Levitas, "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 13-26.

practice, it is helpful to begin a bit more abstractly with Derrida's notes on deconstruction.

Derrida tells us that everything is deconstructible, including the law. "To a great extent, the force of law is the result of the fact that it has been constructed."⁴ The law's "mystical authority" as the concept of a collection of words that governs a given population's conduct is derived from a "historical construction," that "the law has force because it exists, because it happens to be the law and has been for as long as we can remember; in other words because of custom."⁵ This presumed authority, as propelled by the force of custom, relies on the law's continual reference to and reliance on itself as a self-executing social construct, always recursively returning to its base authority as "the law." While there are "origins" to the law outside of this assumed authority, such founding moments are "by definition beyond the opposition of legal and illegal."⁶ Sticking to the American context of this essay, the "Founding" of America constitutional law is exemplary. After the shoving off of British colonial rule, the Founders of the Constitution creditably declared the foundations of America's governmental system, its foundational texts, and its associated constitutional rights as the "new law" of the land because: (1) the people and political bodies of colonial America would no longer defer to the Crown its expected, customary, and "legal" authority over them; and (2) the force of British law and rule could not overcome the actual force of the American revolutionary army and its allies so as to impose the rule of the empire. This example of a "revolutionary" creation of new law and power is not given to lionize the so called "Founding Fathers," The American Revolution, or the founding principles of America's creation, but rather by reference to the real violence of the American revolutionary war we see that this declaration or ringing in of an era of "new law" was an action outside the bounds of the law itself (as decrying the King was inherently an act of treason under British rule) and only made real by a reliance on tangible power and violence—both to actualize the rejection of British rule and to enforce the new rule of the American Republic. Said more succinctly, the origination of law is "‘interpretive violence’, that is, a hermeneutic violence which acquires a real violence, in which the law is proclaimed *as* the law."⁷

This "American" form of law, just like the British rule and common law in place in the American colonies before the revolutionary period, has continued on and

⁴ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 203.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

carried itself throughout generations “by the common consent to accept its value, to ‘believe’ (*credere*) in its value, like giving the currency credit.”⁸ In the last 250 years, America has continued to believe in the custom of our sovereign law, originally conceptualized in our Constitution and its Amendments, because we collectively agree and ascribe to it such authority.

This same circular practice, of reliance on the law because it is and has been the law, can also be seen in the legal system most American courts use to both interpret the Constitution and enforce our nation’s law. The legal system of “common law” was in fact a British system of legal practice that the Founding generation kept in practice in their new nation (likely because many of the Founders were lawyers already practicing in this vein), and we have seemingly kept the system in place because, well, it’s the custom, it’s the law. The “common law” is a noncorporeal body of law, nonreliant on comprehensive compilations of legal rules and statutes, that bases judicial rulings on uncoded case law and on “precedent,” meaning “judicial decisions that have already been made in similar cases.”⁹

Our Constitution, codified statutes, and the judicial rulings of their appropriate interpretations and application to various situations via the common law system, hold authority because we agree to say they are the law; standing only because we say so. By this understanding, then, nothing—not even our most hallowed laws—are without the potential for deconstruction.

Through this theory, if everything—including our law—is deconstructible, Derrida’s surprising description of “Justice” as something *undeconstructible* seems to suppose that the contrapositive must be correct: if everything is deconstructible, then Justice, if undeconstructible, must be nothing—but that does not mean there is nothing to it. Importantly, “[t]his nothing is telling us something.”¹⁰ Justice, as something undeconstructible, has no form in the here and now, but it calls to us from somewhere, somehow: “It is an interpretive imperative—not an Imperious Voice, but a spectre we are not even sure is there.”¹¹ In part, discerning what Justice calls to us through this voice is itself a challenging feat of interpretative work. Justice, as a kind of spectral apparition—“the promise of a coming justice”¹²—requires incredible skill

⁸ Ibid., 204.

⁹ *The Common Law and Civil Law Traditions* (The Robbins Collection, University of California, Berkeley School of Law, 2010), 1, accessed March 1, 2026; <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CommonLawCivilLawTraditions.pdf>.

¹⁰ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 193.

¹¹ Ibid., 194.

¹² Ibid., 195.

to distill because “what [could] demand[] more of our powers of discernment, than communicating with a ghost?”¹³

Derrida’s own declaration of Justice as a concept, if not the only concept, that can resist deconstruction suggests that (although such an argument would seem all too Platonic or Idealistic to expect from the father of deconstructionism) Justice perhaps edges on something akin to an Absolute Truth.¹⁴ It seems that it is for this very reason that Derrida is adamant that Justice cannot have a form, that is a kind of “may-being,” a specter which takes dedicated and delicate work to decipher.

Arguably, is through such hauntological hermeneutic work of engaging with the voice of “nothing” that we attempt to interpret the call of Utopia. Derrida’s undeconstructible concept of Justice, without caporal features, can be called a form of Utopia because, like Utopia, Justice “does not exist. Justice is always coming, always promised, but it never quite arrives, not as such.”¹⁵ It is akin to what Bloch describes as the “dreams of a better life,”¹⁶ that can be discoverable in art, and literature, and music; Justice, then, is the vehicle which “ventures beyond the present reality”¹⁷ as the utopian element of the law.

Yet still, accepting Justice as a form of Utopia is both unsatisfactory, and potentially a disservice to the hermeneutic work necessary for its interpretation, if we do not also examine the direction of these utopian or Justice-oriented calls. Bloch explains that “because the function of utopia is not just to express desire, but to reach forward and be the catalyst of a better future, [we must] also [be] critical of the content of theses wishes.”¹⁸ As such, just as “not all utopian imagining is as good as any other”¹⁹ and we must take on the critical project of weighing the better and worse interpretations of what Justice calls for. While Derrida edges towards, but does not quite name, Justice as a kind of higher principle or Absolute Truth that our interpretative work must be in search of, many others have given greater shape to what exact form of society the call of Justice beacons us towards. To provide a full survey of such scholastic work would be outside the scope of this work as this essay does not seek to center on a definitional argument of “justice,” but rather hopes to serve as an outline of a descriptive application of Justice as an interpretative act to the realm of

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Ibid., 195.

¹⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶ Levitas, “Educated Hope,” 14.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

law and lawmaking. Still, certain examples of seminal definitions of “justice” are provided here to guide the following discussion.

Firstly, and perhaps most famously, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” provides a succinct test: “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law . . . Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”²⁰ Here, Dr. King also points to the man-made nature of the law, asserting its deconstructibility. Since “segregation distorts the soul and damages personality . . . it is morally wrong and sinful.”²¹ Seeing as “sin is separation,” togetherness or equality is akin to morality.²² Such mortality is akin to the “law of God,” and justice is akin to the call or action of bringing forth into existence a society with laws that are attune with the law of God. For Dr. King, “law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and . . . when they fail in this purpose they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.”²³

Additionally, Dr. King describes the work of the Civil Rights Movement as a “mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice.”²⁴ Justice, when discussed alongside utopia, is also often in conversation with such economic contentions. Such themes can be seen in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The described island of “Utopia,” is as a society which has very few laws,²⁵ has no need for lawyers,²⁶ and has rooted out the “cause” of many crimes—there is no money, no private property, everything is held in common, and everyone’s needs are supplied. Conversely, petty-thieves in More’s contemporary England are sentenced to death for the crime of stealing food, even if done as a means of survival. His central critique is plainly stated: “[I]t [is] not right nor justice that the loss of money should cause the loss of man’s life.”²⁷ More too ties his understand of justice to the authority of a higher power, a power even higher than the divinely anointed King, as More writes: “God commandeth us that we shall not kill. And be we then so hasty to kill a man for taking

²⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, (Penguin Classics, 2018).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Ralph Robinson (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 112.

²⁶ Ibid., 113 (“But in Utopia every man is a cunning lawyer, for (as I said) they have very few laws, and the plainer and grosser that any interpretation is, that they allow as most just.”)

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

a little money?”²⁸ Such that, if God has forbidden the killing of fellowman, and yet the law of the land can define and defend such killings to be lawful, “then by this reason follow that the power of God’s commandment shall extend no further than man’s law doth define and permit?”²⁹ By emphasizing the incongruency between the law and God’s commandments, More points to violence, separation, degradation, and death that the authority of the law, although deconstructible, can inflict under its real power. Conversely, in More’s titular island of Utopia—outside of any dedication to following God’s commandments—the matter of preventing pretty theft, and the need for punishments for such crimes, is well enough provided for already: Their society is such that no man should have the material need to steal.

This is not to argue that Justice, for the purposes of this essay, is definable as something inherently economic, equal, or theologically driven. Nor does this essay attempt to suppose that justice is the achievement of a perfect society whose man-made codes perfectly align with the moral law or God’s law: Such a claim would improperly focus on an absolute end goal, rather than on our current reality and the rhetoric needed for the pursuit and production of any similar societal goals through our law. This essay works to describe, rather than define, Justice. Such a description, as informed by Derrida’s conception of Justice, allows us to see Justice as a form of Utopia, viewable as a process rather than a proper noun. Therefore, these definitions are only provided to color what the direction of that process might be toward, even if these “Absolute Truths” can never be fully achieved under this essay’s conception.

Then, as stated, Justice, like Utopia, can never exist as such. And yet, its call from elsewhere and elsewhen can impact us in the here and now. The potential for shaping our present by and through this call can be found in the described paradox of the deconstructibility of the law and the undeconstructability of Justice, such that we can begin to perceive the praxis of “Deconstruction as Justice.”³⁰

Because “the law, inasmuch as it has been constructed, historically founded and instituted, is always and in principle deconstructible,” it is through this very basis that it is changeable, reformable, moldable.³¹ The deconstruction of the law allows for its reconstruction into laws that are *more* just, or closer to what Justice calls for us to interpret into existence. Derrida explains that such Deconstruction as Justice takes

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 204 (“We deconstruct the law in the name of justice, which calls for just laws, even as no law is ever up to what justice calls for.”)

³¹ Ibid., 204.

place in the “slack” of the law,³² the spaces where law can be deconstructed to let the undeconstructible in, the crack in the concrete, the distance between the law and Justice, the current and the utopian.

But this practice of identifying and utilizing potential avenues of change to push toward what Justice calls for is doubly difficult. What makes the law distinct from other potential vehicles for utopia is a distinction of form. While Justice is “not a closed, calculable, programmable system but an open-ended call,”³³ the law, as we believe in it, is built on a sense of calculability (such that we call it “the rule of law”). This distinction between law and Justice, the calculable and the incalculable, is clearly apparent in practice. The law often does not calculate a just outcome and “the decision between just and unjust is never ensured by a rule.”³⁴ But in its application, the law, although deconstructible, is built on calculable rules: standard levels of scrutiny,³⁵ multi-factor tests of review, and, by our common law system, a constant reference to past precedent which can be argued to be outcome determinative of present cases. While the law is deconstructible, Justice is undeconstructible. While the law is rigid, Justice is fluid. While the law is built from past precedent, Justice pushes us towards the always coming but never arriving future.

These paradoxes and dichotomies indicate the delicate balance that an attempt at concretely utopian legal praxis must be predicated upon. The slack, the space for our reform, only exists between the possible and the impossible, the incalculable and the calculable, the here and now and elsewhere and elsewhen—of both our past precedent and our possible future. The interpretative call to action, deconstruction as Justice, takes place between these especially small spaces. Specifically, in America’s common law system we must work to create present, justice oriented legal interpretations out of the interpretations and judgements made by those of the past; therefore our utopian pursuit lies in this double-space, in the interpretations of interpretations.

But even with the small spaces for possible utopian action identified such deconstruction toward the utopian and toward Justice can only be truly achieved—and can only carry hope—if we act in a concretely utopian orientation and recognize the

³² Ibid., 205.

³³ Ibid., 207.

³⁴ Ibid., 207.

³⁵ Courts traditionally review the constitutionality of challenged state actions are under three levels of scrutiny: basis review, intermediate scrutiny, and strict scrutiny. The level of scrutiny applied depends on several factors of the case and could include which specific constitutional right was allegedly infringed, if the state action was allegedly applied with discriminatory intent, or where an allegedly unconstitutional restriction applies.

real, practical challenges that currently face our pursuit. The slack is shrinking. The cracks which allow for deconstruction as Justice are being closed.

As stated, the law as an interpretative practice is a *given* condition of its ontic structure and methodological practice. But our law's existing progressive precedent has been a *made* condition, and has never been promised. The recent past of recognized protections against restrictions on personal liberties, legal emancipation and autonomy, and the expansion of fundamental rights, have been shaped largely by Justice minded people, lawyers and non-legal workers alike.³⁶ The arc of history does not bend towards Justice but rather has been actively bent by hermeneutic listeners to Justice and by believers in a more just utopia. As better said by Bloch, it is "human activity" that plays a central role in choosing which possible futures become actual.³⁷ But plainly put, such a future is at risk.

In our current legal and political climate, the "real possible futures"³⁸ for the foundations of our legal system, are particularly dark. A simple count of the current American Supreme Court justices tells you there will be inevitable legal losses for legal democracy ahead.³⁹ The fall of federally protected abortion-rights and the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade*⁴⁰ was foretold well before the release of the Court's final decision—not by oracle on high, but by the basic reality of the high Court's makeup.⁴¹ Similarly predictable was President Donald Trump's and his second administration's disregard for the rule of law and the sovereign power of the judiciary in pursuit of his political retribution campaign, immigration policies, and rollbacks of government

³⁶ For examples of such historical figures see "Civil Rights Leaders." NAACP, February 11, 2022. <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/civil-rights-leaders>.

³⁷ Levitas, "Educated Hope," 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ Currently the United States Supreme Court is made up of six conservative Justices (Chief Justice Roberts, Justice Gorsuch, Justice Alito, Justice Thomas, Justice Kavanaugh, and Justice Barrett) and three liberal justices (Justice Sotomayor, Justice Kagan, and Justice Jackson). The ultimate holding of a case is determined by a majority of the Justices, often resulting in 6-3 or 5-4 splits. See Quinn, Martin. Supreme Court political leanings: Justices by ideology, July 3, 2023.

<https://www.axios.com/2019/06/01/supreme-court-justices-ideology>.

⁴⁰ 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

⁴¹ In fact many predicted the overturning of *Roe* many years before the Supreme Court's official ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* which overturned the previous legal precedent that had enshrined the right to abortion as a matter of privacy. See What happens if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned? (published 2020). Accessed March 2, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/10/15/upshot/what-happens-if-roe-is-overturned.html>.

oversight on the financial sector,⁴² all actions which then-candidate Trump promised to pursue if elected President.⁴³

To ignore this truth is an ignorance which Justice cannot bear. And yet it must be said that to observe the legal codification of our oppressive political reality through law and regulation in real time is a ripe cause for depression and disheartenment with the process of deconstruction as Justice. For instance, the functional dismantling of Section 2 of Voting Rights Act of 1965 (originally enacted shortly after the murder of Dr. King and which is/was often considered the crowning achievement of the Civil Rights Movement) by the Supreme Court in *Louisiana v. Callais* has laid the grown work for increased, unregulated, and largely unchallengeable racial gerrymandering by state legislatures across the country.⁴⁴ But a distinction must be made between engaging with the possibilities of our impending legal losses, and what Jose Estaban Munoz describes as relentless focus on the present that may lead to “disabling political pessimism.”⁴⁵

To acknowledge our losing position is to contend with what Derrida would describe as our “future present,” our here and now, but also our likely tomorrow.⁴⁶ This is our reasonably foreseeable future, and if we could not reliably predict this period the world would be chaos. This contention is juxtaposed and yet simultaneously imposed within Derrida’s description of the “absolute future,”⁴⁷ as related to what Bloch’s calls the “Novum,” the part of reality which is coming into being on the horizon of the real—the elsewhere, the elsewhere.⁴⁸ This absolute future, perhaps a utopian future, is something contained *in* politics and law, but not contained *by* politics and law.⁴⁹ It is this possible future which allows these concepts and institutions of law,

⁴² Ariana Baio, “What Order? Trump Team Ignoring 1 in 3 Major Judicial Rulings against Them, Analysis Finds,” Yahoo! News, July 21, 2025, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/order-trump-team-ignoring-1-152550741.html>.

⁴³ Yasmin Abusaif and Douglas Keith, “What Courts Can Do If the Trump Administration Defies Court Orders,” Brennan Center for Justice, May 1, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/what-courts-can-do-if-trump-administration-defies-court-orders>.

⁴⁴ Just days after the Supreme Court’s ruling defanging Section 2 of the VRA, the Louisiana State Legislature approved a mid-cycle redistricting map which eliminated one of the state’s two majority-Black districts. See, Cochrane, Emily. Louisiana approves map eliminating a majority-black district - The New York Times, May 29, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/29/us/politics/louisiana-redistricting-map-majority-black-district.html>.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban, Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, Tavia Amolo Ochieng’ Nyongó, and Ann Pellegrini. *Cruising utopia: The then and there of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 8.

⁴⁶ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁸ Levitas, “Educated Hope,” 17.

⁴⁹ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 214-15.

governance, and all others to be continually reinvented and transformed. As Bloch describes it, “this [is the] location within but on the edge of real.”⁵⁰

But the “unpredictability of what is coming is not meant to provide an alibi for not calculating the possible outcome.”⁵¹ We have been in seemingly “unprecedented times” for some time now, and it is within these crucible moments that we must be the most careful. For although the absolute future is open, as Bloch describes, “it is not unconstrained”⁵² as it stands—it is through our present actions that we might shape the future present towards the just vision of our desired absolute future, but as such the absolute future’s possibilities are dependent on our present actions. This recognition of our future present, and the reach toward the “real possible future” is what Bloch describes as concrete utopia, as it is precisely a concrete utopian’s anticipation of the future which simultaneously affects it.

As stated, we know what we can expect in our future present—it is more than reasonably foreseeable. In the rise of global fascism and by observing the Supreme Court’s continual capitulation to the Trump administration and other far right legal theories intended to consolidate power in the executive branch largely for the benefit of the corporate class, we can count on the American Supreme Court to continue to churn out decisions that only further entrench systems of capital punishment, capitalism, and careen us toward the climate crisis. Importantly, we must anticipate not only such rulings individually, but their transcending potential impact on our absolute future, as each present ruling shapes the constitutional common law precedent of the future.

To recognize these present conditions, and anticipate their effect on our legal precedent, is not simply the end of our work, but the beginning of a strategic position. We are losing and by the practical implications of the law’s use of precedent as its interpretive tool our losses affect our ability to win in the future, as each case becomes entombed in the body of our nation’s case law. By anticipating how the current, and reasonably foreseeable, legal climate might impact our present—and therefore future—precedent we gain a greater understanding of how we can shape our real-possibilities in the absolute future by the use of our precedent as a kind of time-traversing-paper-trail. This work is not meant to dwell on the daily wins and losses, but anticipate, and make use of our defeats to defend the possibility for future wins. It is a forward fighting, albeit from a losing position in our current circumstances.

⁵⁰ Levitas, “Educated Hope,” 17.

⁵¹ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 214.

⁵² Levitas, “Educated Hope,” 15.

Importantly, in our present moment, concrete utopian action may take place through a concentrated effort to *preserve* the potential for future utopian interpretation in our present legal precedent.

To put a finer point in this distinction, we might begin by making note of the difference between preservative, anticipatory, concrete utopian legal work, and conservationist, reactionary, and abstractly utopian legal rhetoric. The concrete utopian work as discussed, by its essence, according to Bloch, cannot be reactionary. For our interpretative work, if done concretely, cannot be considered a reaction to the present, but an anticipation of the present future, as concrete utopia is “anticipatory rather than compensatory.”⁵³ Reactionary legal strategy itself is a backwards looking perspective, attempting to respond to an opponent’s first tactic without looking forward to the next. Some have argued that such a short-minded perspective has plagued progressive spaces, specifically in terms of reproductive rights, as many believe the push for congressional codification of bodily autonomy came too little too late, as the writing had been on the walls since the ascension of the modern conservative majority on the American Supreme Court in 2018, or perhaps since the constructive efforts to dismantle *Roe v. Wade*’s⁵⁴ trimester protection scheme outlined the ruling of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992,⁵⁵ or even since the use of admittedly shaky science to establish the trimester/viability standards outlined in *Roe* in 1973.⁵⁶

Similarly, we must make a clear distinction between preservative work and conservative work. To simply maintain or codify the status quo is not utopian nor in the face of our present reality can such a stance be considered concrete. In part, such work often fails to “play ball” with the particular circumstances of a losing position. Heels that are dug in the ground will only hold for so long, and even still, it makes it all the harder to take a step forward. Often, a “just” attempt at conservation of classically progressive issues in our present precedent fails to reconcile with the deconstructibility of the law. As Derrida describes, when we pound on the table and say, “this is the law,” we must confess that we are pounding in no more than our interpretation.⁵⁷ Often these misguided protectionist standpoints seek to secure a current policy by relying on precedent that is next up on the chopping block. This might be best expressed in the dichotomy of dissenting and concurring opinions of liberal and conservative American Supreme Court justices. Justice Elena Kagen,

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ 401 U.S. 113 (1973).

⁵⁵ 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

⁵⁶ 401 U.S. 113 (1973).

⁵⁷ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 208.

although often arguing for what would be considered a “more liberal” outcome, characteristically takes a conservative methodological approach to her writing and reasoning, often using her separate opinions to dismantle the majority’s argument in great detail to defiantly declare that whatever newly defunct protection, policy, or law is actually, or at least was, sufficient to withstand constitutional scrutiny.⁵⁸ While this produces powerful dicta, the discussion does not read well for future use as the particular law at issue, now rendered unconstitutional, will likely never again be before the court for review and the case’s particular and material facts will almost certainly never repeat. As such this work is a kind of compensation, not creation.

Conversely, conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas takes no issue with making big swings, often ignoring the issue described in the majority’s concurrence and writing constitutional jurisprudence as he hopes to see it used in the future. Looking to Justice Thomas’s concurring opinion in *Trump v. United States*, his opinion rested little on the issue of presidential immunity, but focused on the legality—or rather illegality—of appointed special prosecutors all together.⁵⁹ This standalone, nonminority opinion was then used three months later by Federal District Court Judge Aileen Cannon to dismiss special prosecutor Jack Smith and the federal charges against President Trump for his alleged mishandling of classified documents.⁶⁰ Because the alleged mishandling of classified documents at President Trump’s Mar-a-lago resort occurred after the completion of his first term⁶¹ even the incredibly broad umbrella of presidential immunity granted via the majority opinion in *Trump* would not have saved Trump’s skin in the subsequent case.⁶² Yet still, Justice Thomas’s writing continued to advance the line of scrimmage, establishing another line of argument that allowed then-former president Trump to avoid prosecution or legal repercussions, thus ground work for future arguments against presidential accountability. Plainly put, these legal conservatives do not preserve that status quo, they push it and our legal precedent to their liking.

⁵⁸ See e.g., *Biden v. Nebraska*, 143 S. Ct. 2355, 2385 (2023) (Kagen, J., dissenting).

⁵⁹ *United States v. Trump*, 144 S. Ct. 2312, 2348 (2024) (Thomas, J., concurring).

⁶⁰ “Judge Cannon cited three times in her decision a concurring opinion by Justice Thomas in the Supreme Court ruling in which he questioned whether there was a legal basis for naming special counsel.” Madeline Halpert, Ana Faguy and Anthony Zurcher in Milwaukee. “Trump Classified Documents Case Dismissed by Judge.” BBC News, July 15, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz5rpdrxevro>.

⁶¹ Goitein, Elizabeth, “Government Classification and the Mar-a-Lago Documents.” Brennan Center for Justice, December 19, 2022. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/government-classification-and-mar-lago-documents>.

⁶² *Trump*, 144 S. Ct. at 2343 (majority opinion).

We cannot expect either of these forms of legal work, reactionary or conservative, to meet the burden of concrete utopian praxis, as both fundamentally are at odds with Derrida's description of Justice as "an imperative, an open-ended call to be brought to bear in particular and ever-shifting and unpredictable circumstances."⁶³ In simple terms, reactionary work does not anticipate the next shift, and conservative work attempts to constrain the status quo in the present, particular, and soon to be passed, circumstances. Conversely, a concrete utopian praxis of preservation attempts to protect what precedent may be applied to the unpredictable, the incalculable, and unreachable by anticipating our present future and its attacks. To say that Justice is a call is to describe "the open-ended demand that the law remain flexible, plastic, pliable, reinventible, exposed to what is coming."⁶⁴ One cannot expect to know how those in the absolute future will use our present precedent for utopian, Justice oriented work, we can only anticipate that they will need it, and thus be called, by the interpretative imperative of Justice, to preserve it.

But importantly, this posture of preservation is not meant to push off or obfuscate the responsibility of those in the present. This is not stagnation of our interpretative imperative of Justice, it is in each instance a strategic decision. This work, the interpretation, the negotiation, between the deconstructible and the undeconstructible, the calculable and the incalculable, the present future and the absolute future, takes a great amount of discernment and is never finished. Whether by defensive lawyering, dissenting opinions, or the extraction of deliberate concessions in each case, this recognition of, and response to, our impending losses in the pursuit of utopia is not a kind of abstract wish fulfillment, it is work. It is not merely conservation but cultivation: a supplanting of future potential in the here and now. It is the concretely utopian, anticipatory, appropriate response to the here and now, with an eye towards the elsewhere and elsewhere. Derrida agrees that justice deferred is justice denied, but both Derrida and Bloch may instruct us that Justice preserved is the potential for Justice ensured. "So let's get practical. The interpretive imperative is a call for action."⁶⁵

⁶³ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 212.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁵ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 215.

Now and Always: A Utopian Retort to Political Pessimism

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Abstract

This essay proposes the concept of *utopian pragmatism* as a synthesis of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic and John Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, arguing that together these frameworks constitute a more adequate response to political pessimism than either offers alone. Drawing on Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, and Mariame Kaba's *We Do This Till We Free Us*, the essay argues that assimilation—understood as the foreclosure of political imagination in favor of access to existing hierarchies—is not only ethically insufficient but pragmatically impoverished. Against this, utopian pragmatism insists that imagination is itself a moral faculty, one whose proper exercise is grounded in the conditions of the present rather than divorced from them. Historically, this capacity is illustrated through the student and labor uprisings of May 1968. In the contemporary moment, it finds expression in the prison abolition movement and the transformative justice framework articulated by Kaba. The essay contends that utopian pragmatism names a practice already operative in these movements, and a practice whose theoretical articulation may assist in clarifying its stakes and broadening its appeal.

Keywords: utopian pragmatism, José Esteban Muñoz, John Dewey, assimilation, prison abolition, transformative justice, queer theory, political pessimism

1. Introduction

Today we are faced with challenges in our social and material world of an astonishing complexity. These include the shaping of our identities and relationships by technological platforms, social expectations to value personal achievements and productivity, and continuous pressure to maintain one's own viability in the job market through ongoing self-education. At the same time, we are provided, in real time, visceral updates of wars, acts of state violence, ripple effects of the climate crisis, and visions of global economic insecurity. Now, more than ever, to be human is to be exhausted and overwhelmed. This is not to discount the toll taken by previous historical movements—the abolitionists, the labor movement, and the anticolonial struggles each have tested the limits of human capacity, creativity, and endurance. Our present moment is distinguished by the form of its crisis rather than its magnitude. We are situated between untethered technological advancement, the disruption of tradition, and (in the case of the current US administration) the blatant assault on truth as a category, which has devastating consequences for the psyche. Unfettered access to mediated images of horrific acts, without communal structures that gave the crisis its meaning, produces a specific kind of exhaustion. Exhaustion today is not due to the weight of one struggle, but rather the demand to respond to all of them, individually, in real time as they are delivered to our devices. Real-time news delivery creates a leveling effect in which the identical nature of the form produces an equalization of its content's value.¹ The omnipresence of this form means that even the best of news leaves us without any capacity to reflect on our world. The demands of modern life on the psyche situate pessimism as a legitimate response to things, if one is able to respond at all.

Such conditions inspire queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's description of our social world as a "prisonhouse of the present" ever demanding another ounce of energy.² In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that modern life encourages assimilation as a way of being without room for reflection on the past or consideration of potential

¹ Sloterdijk identifies this leveling mechanism in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 313–314, where he analyzes the "And" of mass media. He refers to the practice of indifferently conjoining disparate events that produces a false equivalency of value, what he calls the elision of "And" into "Is-equal-to." Sloterdijk explicitly connects this to Marx's analysis of the kind of false equivalence characteristic of the commodity form. What he identifies in the newspaper has become the structural logic of social media and real-time news delivery. The form is unchanged but its reach and velocity are radically transformed.

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 21.

futures. Muñoz recalls the work of 20th century LGBTQ movements to articulate a utopian hermeneutic that lauds the efficacy of revolutionary impulses en masse. While Muñoz criticizes the claim that assimilationist ideas could be rooted in pragmatic thought, this essay argues that philosophical pragmatism, properly understood, holds a radical potential in resisting assimilation.

Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic draws its philosophical lineage, in part, from Ernst Bloch's distinction between *abstract* and *concrete* utopia. Abstract utopia refers to mere fantasy, to a compensatory dream that leaves existing conditions untouched. Conversely, concrete utopia is latent within the present, discoverable through an attentive receptiveness toward what is already straining toward something better.³ This distinction is essential to the argument developed here, for it immunizes utopian pragmatism against the familiar charge of impracticality. To think utopically, on this account, is not to flee the world but to read it with particular care. The synthesis of Muñoz and Dewey proposed in this essay has not yet been developed in existing scholarship, though recent work in queer pragmatism has begun to map adjacent terrain.⁴ In naming and theorizing this convergence, the essay offers a framework that is both philosophically grounded and politically operative. From this vista, the work of utopian pragmatism is best apprehended. It does not embark from a blueprint in search of its realization. Rather, it relies on an attuned reading of the unmet demands generated within present conditions. The content of utopian possibility is a continued discovery-through-praxis, not a set of conditions that equate to liberation. Liberation is an activity, a disposition, and an orientation towards the world. This is what distinguishes concrete utopia from abstract utopia in Bloch's terms. Furthermore, it is what also separates utopian pragmatism from a political program or mere wishful thinking.

³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (MIT Press, 1986), 3-4. Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopia is essential to Muñoz's project. The latter explicitly credits Bloch as the enabling inspiration for his own utopian hermeneutic. See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

⁴The closest exploration of this idea is Mark Tschaepé's essay, "Cruising Uncertainty: Queering Dewey Against Heteronormativity," *Education and Culture* 38, no. 1 (2023): 1-18. Tschaepé situates Dewey's criticism of certainty against the work of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Stockton. He argues that Dewey's criticisms should extend to heteronormativity. Tschaepé's work "provides a view of his work as a form of queering that coheres with Muñoz's utopian concept of queer futurity." The present essay shifts this conversation in a distinct direction. Rather than queering Dewey, it synthesizes his pragmatist philosophy with Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic. The result of this move is a politically operative concept, utopian pragmatism. From there, it deploys that concept against assimilation and political pessimism through the case studies of May 1968 and the prison abolition movement. The difference is both of argumentative aim and scope.

This essay draws from Muñoz's notion of a utopian hermeneutic to conceive of a utopian pragmatism. We will begin by studying his explanation of assimilation as both pessimistic and impractical. We will see how assimilation functions as an alibi to harmful systems of economic distribution and social organization. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey's articulation of a philosophical pragmatism coheres with the principles of utopian thought. Both describe a flexible form of imagination that is derived from responding to life in motion. Dewey's pragmatism is a clearing whereby the radical insights of Muñoz find kinship in the experiences of a more general audience. It is the insistence on imagination against assimilation that charts pragmatism as a utopian philosophy. Finally, this essay will demonstrate how utopian pragmatism responds more effectively to the calamities of the day.

2. Assimilation in Practice

During its earlier stages, the LGBTQ movement in the United States was unflinchingly radical. In 1971, an article titled "What We Want, What We Believe" in the publication *Gay Flames* cited 16 demands held by the Third World Gay Revolution movement for society's future: "We want . . . a revolutionary socialist society . . . [including the] liberation of humanity, free food, free shelter, free clothing, free transportation, free health care . . . [among others]."⁵ Muñoz notes the temptation by some to scoff dismissively at these sorts of statements, to consider them "impractical, or merely utopian." However, he responds with conviction of the need to make space for the lessons of history in our present moment. Remarkably, since the publication of his book, variations of these demands have come to pass in various countries across Europe and Latin America. As such, they sidestep claims of impracticality, even in areas of the world where they are not yet in place. These are concrete utopian movements which demand a reinterpretation of our belief about what is possible. Muñoz is seeking to call into question what we mean by utopia. For him, not only is utopia an "elsewhere" and "elsewhen," it is found in those projects where "multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a being in collectivity."⁶ Not only does this metric align with the demands listed by the *Gay Flames* article, it also gives inspiration to other possible futures that bend toward utopia. Utopia may remain perpetually

⁵ Third World Gay Revolution, "What We Want, What We Believe," *Gay Flames* 7 (1971), reprinted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20–21.

⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.

elusive but, for Muñoz, it is certainly cosmopolitan because of its propensity to acknowledge and respond to individual or group differences within a larger collective.

Muñoz's critique of what he calls the Gay Pragmatist Movement is reflected well against this backdrop. He takes Evan Wolfson, a gay marriage advocate, as emblematic of this movement. Wolfson argued that the LGBTQ movement should give its full attention to the legalization of gay marriage as an entryway for gay people into legitimate standing with the dominant culture. Muñoz terms this approach as "gay pragmatism in the vernacular sense...not referring to the American philosophical tradition."⁷ For Muñoz, Wolfson's platform encourages a level of assimilation beyond collaborative necessity. The implication of Wolfson's approach is that thinning the movement's goals to prioritize gay marriage will produce a more palatable form of gayness for the dominant culture. It requests access to social hierarchies rather than rejecting their insufficiency to account for alternate ways of being. Gayness then becomes a path into economic participation without addressing the gaps produced by such participation in the first place. It naturalizes and accepts the established hierarchies in the world, and strays far away from the idea of reconstructing them. As such, it is a pessimistic viewpoint that lends itself as a technique of crowd control, rather than a true response to existing needs and desires. It is worth clarifying that for Muñoz and this essay, the argument against gay pragmatism is not intended to spurn activism that works within existing institutions as such. Indeed, action within existing structures that pushes their composition is a necessary component of a well-developed political strategy. The most pressing concern is the principle guiding this vein of action. Wolfson seeks legal recognition for good reason: the material benefits are real and immediate. However, he stops short of exposing the insufficiency of the hierarchies that make such recognition necessary in the first place. The distinction here is whether institutions are an instrument for mass transformation or whether access to these institutions alone is itself conceived as sufficient transformation. This distinction becomes clearer through Dewey's account of aims and their environmental embeddedness, explored in the next section.

Muñoz then shares a sophisticated apology for utopian hermeneutics. He claims the vista of a utopian hermeneutics challenges us to greatly stretch our sense of the possible in direct relation to the actual. His utopian hermeneutic implores readers to reject assimilationism which ultimately erases their essential differences of desire in exchange for subtler symbols of second-class citizenship. Muñoz references bathing culture, drag, and other institutions of queer community as worth defending as

⁷ Ibid., 24.

legitimate means to continue relating with one another. Bathing culture (and cruising generally) is a formation of sexual self-expression that cannot sufficiently be accounted for by a culture that dominates through heterosexuality. Dominant heterosexuality views courtship as preparation for the bonding of sexuality to economic agency. It thus ensures a steady supply of invested labor as parents seek to further their own family's advantages within an existing system of social hierarchies. Bathing culture utterly rejects this premise by seeking connection for its own sake; the joys of which may include the ephemerality of the encounter. It is inherently unpredictable and it need not serve a higher purpose outside of its own enjoyment—a quality that is deeply disruptive to the dominant culture.

There is a similar case that can be made for the work of drag as an artform. Drag may be somewhat less controversial than bathing culture but it holds an equally subversive potential. At its core, drag is a form of gender bending. It speaks to an insufficiency in the concept of gender to express the experiences and needs of the people to whom gender is assigned. Moreover, it does so in a highly performative, irreverent fashion. Drag is an intentionally obnoxious middle finger to the coercive features of the expectations of a gender binary. The question of whether such practices constitute real political agency or reflect a pleasurable distraction is integral to the theme of this essay. The answer is a matter of refutation, rather than a proposal. Neither bathing culture nor drag offer a political program and they do not seek to develop one. What both practices do is sustain, under antagonistic conditions, the imaginative and embodied practice of a social world grounded in radically different principles. They are certainly not sufficient conditions for political transformation, but they are deeply necessary. They preserve an embodied knowledge that another way of being is possible, without which a demand for social transformation has no lived content. Their radicalism lives in the refusal to accept the dominant culture's account of what is natural, necessary, and possible go unchallenged. For Muñoz, assimilation is a pessimistic act that ignores actually-existing utopian forms of being-in-community. Bathing culture and drag came into existence within a violently unreceptive culture. Their continued resistance to social prohibitions indicates their connection to a vital need that has so far been left unattended. This lack of receptivity towards humans in their natural environment is the starting point for Dewey's philosophical pragmatism and reveals pragmatism as an inherently utopian enterprise.

3. Pragmatism Responds

Renowned educator and pragmatist philosopher John Dewey thought deeply on this subject, albeit under different terms. He opens the book *Human Nature and Conduct*, by questioning traditional morality's historical record of responding to the human condition. Dewey notes that traditional morality governs human behavior in the spaces where we gather most, such as the church, the state, industry, and through conventionality. He ponders that these institutions have come to "enforce a moral code that seems directly opposed to human nature."⁸ The church pushes virtues in an unfortunately strict Platonic sense, where they are represented as ideals that stand in opposition to the particularities of a situation. Here we can think of the Christian adage to unconditionally "turn the other cheek" and, indeed, Dewey points to religious extremists who, through piety, consider themselves separate from the world in a form of shallow spiritual egotism. Similarly, the morality of many offices and workspaces are fueled by the corporate virtues of productivity, agreeability, and competition. He observes astutely that the role models of morality, the so-called "good people have been those who do what they are told to do, [while] a lack of eager compliance is [conceived as] something flawed about their character."⁹ Dewey argues that conventional morality sacrifices personal autonomy for a stable social environment. It conditions people to be accustomed to ignoring their own circumstances and desires for the sake of convention. In this way, assimilationist practices have the potential to become deeply unhealthy influences in society.

In order to engage in this kind of behavior, one must ignore the world around us in favor of the world we have been instructed to seek. Modern capitalist culture in the United States is the pinnacle of such a conventional morality. It defines freedom as the choice to disavow one's reliance on community for a chance at class mobility. Dewey counters this by arguing that part of the challenge of becoming free is to see how freedom is achieved only in the inclusion of the other. For Dewey, freedom is unquestionably bonded with civic engagement. He observes that it is only by making space with and for the other that we have the possibility to understand or even enjoy our own freedom.

It is worth pausing to consider the stakes of this move. Dewey's critique of conventional morality extends beyond a simple warning against social conformity. More fundamentally, he is making a claim about the nature of imagination itself.

⁸ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Henry Holt, 1922), 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

Dewey does not conceive imagination as a form of escapism. Imagination instead is the faculty through which we perceive possibilities housed within present historical conditions. Conventional morality attempts to excise aims from their environmental context. It treats them as fixed ideals to be replicated rather than discovered. As a result, conventional morality does not simply restrict behavior. It atrophies the imaginative capacity necessary for genuine moral agency to occur. In this sense, Dewey's quarrel with assimilationism is identical in structure to Muñoz's: both identify the foreclosure of imagination as the defining feature of a politics that, however pragmatic it appears, is in fact deeply impractical. Wolfson's gay pragmatism is not impractical because it is too modest in its ambitions. The issue is that Wolfson's pragmatism misunderstands what practice requires. Genuine practice demands that one remain open to the world's unfinished character. The challenge then is to learn to act from within that openness rather than in spite of it. This is the pivot on which utopian pragmatism turns, and it is one that neither thinker fully articulates without the other.

To comprehend the significance of conventional morality's present formulation, Dewey charges us to reconsider how we conceptualize the nature of goals or aims. He points out a handful of elements of the human condition that conventional morality is unable to register. The most critical of these are that the nature of goals and aims themselves are always already tied to the environment that inspired them. He gives the example of a mariner whose craft does not involve her "sailing towards the stars, but by noting the stars [s]he is aided in conducting h[er] craft." Described this way, aims become activated as *an aiming*, as our aims become available only in contact with our environment, and thus remain in motion.¹⁰ Dewey conceives the completion of each aim not as an ending but rather a pivoting in activity towards a new aim. His description of the *aim as activity* involves both past memories and future possibilities in our perception of, and negotiation with, the present. For this reason, the excision of aims from inspiration or consequence by conventional morality warps one's agency tangibly. We need experimentation with aspirations and outcomes to measure the degree to which we are actually able to experience freedom.

The resonance between this account and Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic is not incidental. Dewey insists that aims are never terminal, that they are always an act of a pivoting rather than a status as 'arrived'. To a similar effect, Muñoz insists that utopia is never a fixed destination but a directional pull. He describes the utopian mode as a "striving" whose value lies precisely in its ability to orient a perspective rather than

¹⁰ Ibid., 72.

provide concrete answers. For both Dewey and Muñoz the political and moral life is understood as fundamentally open-ended: neither thinker permits the imagination to rest in the accomplished. The resonance of their works is made possible by Muñoz's influence from the works of Ernst Bloch. Bloch develops the notion of a "vor-schein," or "forward dawning," to name the unrealized potential within the present that political imagination frees us to realize. Muñoz uses Bloch as a means to better articulate queer life. In contrast, Dewey arrives at a structurally identical position through his own methods of inquiry, found in his insistence that aims are always environmentally embedded and never complete.¹¹ To sever aims from the environment that gives them meaning, or to capitulate to the prisonhouse of the present, is, for both thinkers, a form of political and moral failure. The concept of utopian pragmatism names a convergence between two already existing traditions, evident in both texts, awaiting articulation.

Dewey's insistence on this point distances him from the popular reactionary notion of freedom in today's political discourse. Reactionary freedom involves a severing of ties from the other to a conceptual freedom from social restriction. Dewey describes this concept as a "general freedom abstracted away from any positive abilities." He calls this freedom pointless because it acknowledges human agency in an abstract sense but it does not account for how humans actually engage with one another in the world.¹² Such a notion of freedom disregards the idea that progress has been achieved through collaborative efforts which can only occur by the sacrifice of certain freedoms. Dewey's focus remains on the freedom that comes from living in a way that individuals can flourish while still responding to collective need. Responding to the needs of one's civic and social world occurs in tandem with an attendance to one's own needs. But Dewey is explicit: responding to the world in no way gives the world a supremacy over the mind or imagination. It simply recognizes that civic institutions are best positioned to make social improvements en masse. As such, pragmatism avoids the assimilationist tendencies that concern Muñoz.

From this vantage point, we can study Evan Wolfson's work with fresh eyes. Keeping Dewey at the forefront, Wolfson's drive towards marriage equality is seen as one option for engaging in the larger struggle for social freedom. It is clear that

¹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97. Muñoz's invocation of Bloch's concept of *Vor-Schein*, or "forward dawning," appears in his discussion of utopia as a horizon of potentiality that is neither fully present nor entirely absent. For Bloch, the "not yet conscious" is the forward-reaching dimension of the present, the unrealized latency that political imagination can make available for action. Muñoz inherits this structure and applies it to queer life: the "striving" of queer futurity is the affective counterpart to Bloch's anticipatory illumination. See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 11–18.

¹² Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 82, 84.

Western society provides meaningful benefits, incentives, and privileges to those who participate in the institution of marriage. Prioritizing access to these already existing social benefits is sensible; it has the potential to produce immediate and meaningful improvements in people's lives. But it does not account for the fact that marriage equality is insufficient to satisfy the ongoing needs of gay people (or anyone else for that matter). It is by coming to terms with the shortcomings of the existing world seen against the backdrop of human need that the latent possibilities underwriting our world present themselves. Imagination as the faculty through which we understand our present is thus attuned to the discovering of possibilities housed within worldly conditions. It is worth addressing the choice to term Dewey's philosophy as utopian rather than optimistic. Optimism is appropriate where one looks at the world and is and remains satisfied with its trajectory. Dewey's reliance on creativity and imagination—drawing from a space neither actualized in nor divorced from the present—is a utopian move. Conceived as such, utopianism continues to evade criticisms of impracticality. Utopianism cannot be mere escapism or fantasy because its realm is within the possibilities contained by the present state of affairs.

The ploys of political pessimism are readily apparent. The root effect of such a perspective contributes to assimilationist behaviors that do not permit the fullest apprehension of worldly events. More importantly, it does not account for the ways that we are always encountering and navigating our environment anyway. Pessimism involves giving a fixed interpretation to changing events, regardless of the consequences of doing so. Within modern life, pessimism requires adherence to the fixed ideals of capital accumulation and a paucity of disruptive behaviors. In turn, our ability to apprehend and respond to our environment diminishes. As does the chance of engaging in a kind of opportunism that will find in our environment those strategic moves that may better humanity.

4. Utopian Pragmatism in Practice: Two Cases

To understand what utopian pragmatism looks like in practice, it is useful to begin with a historical example before turning to the present. The student and labor uprisings of May 1968 in France are among the most frequently cited instances of mass revolutionary action in the twentieth century, and for good reason: they illustrate with unusual clarity the movement from concrete conditions to radical imagination and back again. The protests began at the Sorbonne, where students organized around specific, material grievances: university policies restricting sexual autonomy in

dormitories, inadequate teaching standards, the government's direction of university funding, and the de Gaulle regime's tight control of media outlets. These were not abstract demands; they arose directly from the environment that produced them, in precisely the Deweyan sense.

The government's heavy-handed response, however, transformed what might have remained a campus dispute into a national crisis. Solidarity strikes spread rapidly through the French labor movement, and at the movement's peak, roughly one-third of the French population had joined the work stoppage. To use Dewey's terms, the students' concrete concerns became a *clearing* through which a far wider set of social aspirations became expressible: demands for wage reform, challenges to emerging consumer culture, and critiques of class hierarchy that had long been suppressed in the postwar economic consensus. The momentum was such that Charles de Gaulle briefly fled the country, fearing civil war. This led to some of the immediate demands being met including a move toward dormitory autonomy and a raise in the national minimum wage. Consequently, the broader political imaginary of the French left was fundamentally transformed. Indeed, the artwork, slogans, and organizational courage of May '68 can be traced directly into the wave of feminist and gay liberation movements that followed, including those referenced by Muñoz.¹³

May '68 thus exemplifies utopian pragmatism as a historical practice. The students did not begin with a vision of utopia and then seek to impose it; they began with their actual circumstances and, through the exercise of the kind of attentive, environmentally embedded imagination Dewey describes, discovered within those circumstances a demand for something that did not yet exist. The "not yet" was latent in the "already," and the movement made it legible. To use Bloch's terms, this concretizing from the abstract is the defining feature of the practice this essay seeks to name. It is also, importantly, a practice with a historical record of partial success; its demands need not be assigned to the register of the merely wishful.

The lesson of May '68, however, belongs to a resolved historical cycle. The question of what utopian pragmatism demands of us now is more urgent and less settled. Pessimism itself is not a difficult position to understand. Anyone who spends time immersed in the larger political conversations of the day will recognize it as a rhetorical tool among their neighbors and elected leaders alike. It has even come to be

¹³ Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Ross's account is essential reading for a critical treatment of the events. Her central argument is that the official memory of May '68 was systematically depoliticized in the decades that followed, stripping it of its egalitarian and anti-imperialist dimensions. Such depoliticizing is itself a demonstration of the assimilationist dynamic this essay references.

used as a deflection response by those less interested in sharing their political perspective than yelling it. Its status as a deflection tool leaves people in the employ of pessimism much more often than they realize. The prison abolition movement offers a contemporary instance of utopian pragmatism actively contending with precisely this dynamic.

The US prison abolition movement has been active since the 1980s but was reinvigorated in recent years by the Black Lives Matter protests. At times, the public reception of these protests has been as incendiary as the events inspiring them. Systemic critiques about police brutality are commonly met with the sentiment that the murder of innocent civilians is, at best, an unfortunate necessity of retaining a police force. Furthermore, the concept of abolishing the prison system entirely remains heavily divisive. To some, police accountability is unmanageable in its own right, let alone conceptualizing the idea of eliminating mass incarceration as a whole. The underlying premise of such responses is that state interference with police behaviors will negatively impact “law abiding citizens” and remove the only safety against criminality that the public has been exposed to. These sentiments mirror the pessimistic attitudes critiqued by Muñoz in the gay pragmatist movement. Their narrative acts as a stop-gap in the conversation that serves to shorten the transition time between crises back to social equilibrium by avoiding any critical examination of the causes of criminality or state violence. Moreover, none of these attitudes accounts sufficiently for the horror entailed by the loss of innocent life and the irreparable damage done to families and communities. The public is thus positioned to view the prison-industrial complex as only preventing future miseries, rather than being recognized as a major factor in our present circumstances.

The prison abolition movement is frequently charged as being abstract, politically irresponsible, and impossible to bring into fruition. However, these claims conflate the registers of abstract and concrete utopia. Abstract utopias are compensatory acts that, at best, shield us from taking to task our existing conditions and finding a pathway to an alternative future. Prison abolition, as theorized by its most serious practitioners, is entirely different. It begins with an analysis of the material conditions, specifically the interplay between land surpluses, capital, labor, and state power so deftly articulated by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as the vehicle of the carceral state.¹⁴ It then derives a practice from this analysis. That is, building, within and despite present conditions, new institutions of care, accountability, and community that would

¹⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007).

make mass incarceration unnecessary. This is Bloch's concrete utopia in a most precise form, as the "not yet" that is present within the already, to be found in attunement to what present conditions generate as an unmet demand. The question is not whether a world without prisons is possible, but whether the conditions mandating it can be transformed. Abolition is the name for that practice of transformation.

Mariame Kaba's *We Do This Till We Free Us* is perhaps the most sustained recent example of utopian pragmatism in action on the question of mass incarceration.¹⁵ Kaba does not qualify as a utopian in the abstract sense. She is, above all, a practitioner and an organizer, and her work reflects a consistent preoccupation with what can be built now, using the conditions in front of us. This is precisely what makes her work such a productive instance of utopian pragmatism. While Muñoz provides the hermeneutic and Dewey the philosophical architecture, Kaba provides praxis.

Kaba's work is deeply in conversation with the transformative justice tradition. At its core is a refusal of the carceral system's account of what safety means or requires. The transformative justice movement rejects the logic of the prison as a means for organizing responses to harm around punishment and containment. Instead, the transformative justice tradition identifies conditions giving rise to the harm. From there, it clarifies what relationships and structures would need to change for harm not to recur. From Dewey's perspective, this amounts to an insistence on reading aims in their environment rather than treating punishment as a fixed moral ideal outside of its context. This would amount to, using Muñoz's terms, a refusal of the "prisonhouse of the present": a refusal to accept the present state of things as inevitable.

Kaba's notion of prefigurative politics is where the utopian leanings in her work become most palpable. For her, prefigurative politics involves an injunction to continue building the world one wants to live in now, within and despite present conditions. Waiting for a revolutionary threshold to be crossed misrecognizes the conditions which create action. If one is always waiting for the revolution, one might be missing the chance for it to become materialized. From this vantage point, community accountability processes, mutual aid networks, and violence interruption programs are not merely stopgap measures. To the contrary, they are the embryonic forms of a social world organized around care rather than punishment. This is Bloch's concrete utopia in operation: the "not yet" recognized within the "already," and acted upon. Kaba's work does not shy away from the real difficulties of this project. She

¹⁵ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This Till We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Haymarket Books, 2021).

acknowledges that abolishing prisons will not lead to a world without conflict or harm. She also acknowledges that the road from here to there is neither clear nor easy. This candor does not undercut the utopian dimension of her work. Rather, it makes her work philosophically pragmatic. She insists on imagination against assimilation, undertaken with full acceptance of the world as it is.

It is worth noting that the sophistication of Kaba's work does not rely on a theoretical vocabulary in the same manner that Muñoz and Dewey do. The synthesis performed in this essay seeks to name the theoretical structure of a practice that is already underway. The hope in doing so is to sharpen its articulation and, as Dewey would have it, expand its communal appeal. Utopian pragmatism is not a framework imposed on the prison abolition movement. It is, rather, the name for what that movement is already doing when it is at its most intellectually serious.

5. Conclusion

Thinking of a utopian hermeneutic alongside utopian pragmatics is a practice which can offer guidance on many issues. Pragmatism injects an awareness of contingency and a re-prioritization of the social environment into public discourse. Individually and collectively, it prepares us for adaptation to human needs (for shelter, health, meaningful work, community, and the conditions of genuine self-determination) that express themselves at every level of social life. This is not to say that pragmatism will provide rapid solutions to the complications of living in a community. Rather, it is a paradigm through which the unwritten nature of the future is both accounted for and celebrated. Pragmatism is, in this sense, utopian as it relies on the creative responsiveness a person brings to their world. Furthermore, it encourages attending to one's personal needs as they are linked to the collective world. Utopian pragmatism could never be reconciled with the modern choice to allow capital accumulation to supplant human flourishing as the organizing principle of social life. There are enough existing examples of progressive societies, e.g., Scandinavian social democracy, the cooperative economies of the Basque Country, or the participatory budgeting experiments of Porto Alegre, to demonstrate that a road to deprioritizing capital accumulation in favor of human flourishing is both possible and historically actual. These are examples which prove the longstanding efficacy of collective action and the influence utopian pragmatism can provide.

The concept of utopian pragmatism developed in this essay seeks to engage the ongoing conversations at the intersection of queer theory, hermeneutics, and

pragmatist philosophy. Viewing Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic and Dewey's philosophical pragmatism as not merely compatible but structurally convergent allows the essay to offer a perspective that is both theoretically grounded and politically operative. Each supplies what the other leaves unnamed and both are indebted to Bloch's anticipatory logic. Utopian pragmatism names a practice with a history, visible in the movements of May 1968 and in the ongoing work of prison abolition. It also names a disposition that insists on the exercise of imagination as a condition of genuine political agency. Against the twin temptations of assimilationist pragmatism and abstract utopianism, it proposes a third path: one that is attentive to the actual, oriented toward the possible, and unwilling to mistake the two.

Responding to the Liberal Arts Education Crisis, as A Hermeneutic Education Crisis: A Multi-Book Review

College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be by Andrew Delbanco; *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* by Anthony Kronman; *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* by Roosevelt Montás; *In Defense of a Liberal Education* by Fareed Zakaria

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Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need

For this bright morning, dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain,

Cannot be unlived, and if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.

—Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning”

Crisis (n.): early 15c., crise, crisis, “vitally important or decisive state of things, point at which change must come, for better or worse,” from Latinized form of Greek *krisis* “turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death.”¹

¹ Harper Douglas, “Etymology of crisis,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis>.

Hermeneutics is fated with the liberal arts.² To contemplate the state of the liberal arts education in the U.S. American college today is to, in the same breath, debate the significance and relevance—the utility—of the liberal arts as a praxis, particularly when in juxtaposition to a trade or profession-specific education. Presently and specifically, though unoriginally, there exists a debate regarding the “usefulness” of an education that produces not a career, but a certain liberated mind oriented towards asking meaningful questions as an approach to being in the world. This approach is itself a skill, one that is born from professors teaching students to read in such a way that enables them to ask meaningful questions as they interpret meaning from humanistic books. As the skill is developed, the student begins to interpret not just the meaning of the book, but the meaning of her life. The presence, resurgence, and reoccurrence of the utilitarian debate regarding the liberal arts education is itself a hermeneutic phenomenon of communication, one that identifies the taken-for-granted methods of becoming as that which are in a state of waning interest, and thus in a state of crisis.

What is set into relief is a lack of interest in thinking well as an end in of itself, evident in the recession of interest in liberal arts programs, in lieu of job security and a livable wage.³ Arguments attacking and defending the utility of the liberal arts education have always occurred among “those who understand [it] in instrumental terms and those who see it as an end in and of itself,” and have always taken place in, around, and outside of the college/university.⁴ As the number of voices calling for alarm and attention to the recession of interest in the liberal arts increases, we also find an increase in the addresses that assert the liberal arts are worthwhile. In identifying the liberal arts education as being discernably different from that of a trade or profession-oriented education, we find that the education in question is pertaining to the site of ontological disclosure of meaning, one that is constituted in and of language (communication) and thus always already demanding our interpretation. Consequently, this quality reveals hermeneutics as inextricably intertwined with the liberal arts, for better and for worse. This can be so since both liberal arts education and hermeneutics concern themselves with the nature of being in the world. If we can grant this intertwined condition from the start, then the crisis etymology above brings our attention to the recession of interest in being well and for asking wonderful

² What will be made clear in the pages to come is the ambiguity of this phrase, “liberal arts,” and its synonymous interchangeability with “liberal education,” “humanistic education,” or “the humanities,” to list a few. It is my intention here to add “hermeneutics” to that synonymous use.

³ Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University, 2023), 148; Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (W. W. Norton, 2015), 157. Authors note the shifts towards more “marketable” programs that may result in higher employability success.

⁴ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42.

questions. This risk makes clear our obligation to the liberal arts, to which we must also respond to today if there is to be a hermeneutics tomorrow. Hermeneutics, as being in and of the liberal arts, are in a decisive state at which change is already underway, a change which indicates recovery or death—the responsibility of which rests upon us. A defense of either is a defense of each other, a defense for that which enables being and living well. Henceforth, a defense of the liberal arts education is a defense of hermeneutics.

Readers of *Analecta Hermeneutica* are undoubtedly familiar with the hermeneutic experience in which one's life is set into relief among past, present, and future horizons incited by the passage from a good novel, a breathtaking art piece, or a memorable poem, and they are not alone. There are numerous textual artifacts in the form of books, anthologies of essays, reports, and research studies authored within the last century that praise the liberal arts education, which is broadly defined as teaching through—and learning from—engaging with humanistic texts/artifacts in the tradition of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). Simply put, the liberal arts transform the way one creates and contemplates meaningful questions by consistently practicing engaging with the humanities and through asking meaningful questions, which changes the way one sees the world. The liberal arts, although undoubtedly hermeneutic, are less often referred to as such. This world-changing quality makes obvious the relationship between hermeneutics and the liberal arts insofar as they are practices of liberation in the form of language, meaning, and understanding. This connection, however, reveals a second, less obvious albeit significant, hermeneutic phenomenon of communication: although there is no approach to the classical texts so often central to a liberal arts education that is not hermeneutical, there remains an absence of defense for hermeneutics among the defenses for the liberal arts. Given the relationship between the two, in addition to the porous and ontological nature of arguments for the liberal arts education, it is reasonable to identify the absence of hermeneutics from the liberal arts dialogue as a hermeneutical phenomenon in as much as the crisis itself.

It is because of the dual hermeneutic phenomenon of communication outlined above, the first being the presence of textual artifacts defending the liberal arts education in response to a crisis and the second being the absence of hermeneutics from that dialogue, that I have chosen to respond to the editor's request with a hermeneutic book review. One which reports on the former phenomenon while addressing the latter insofar as one can review books on the liberal arts education crisis as books on the hermeneutic education crisis in the U.S. American college, thereupon reporting on the crisis while also bringing hermeneutics into the dialogue. The style,

organization, and depth of this review is such so that it will not only aid readers in their selection of one or two books for a closer first read, but also enact a bridge between the liberal arts and hermeneutics, which (if performed well) will enable readers to draw parallel the qualities, characteristics, and futures of both.

In the first half of this review, I follow a more traditional approach. In the second half, I lead tradition astray as I put authors into a dialogue in the pursuit of answering three hermeneutical questions all the while continuing to review them: first, what is liberal education (for); second, how and why are the liberal arts this way; and third, where do we go from here? I have selected for this review four books that put forth a defense of the liberal arts education as a response to the crisis; however, these are by no means all-encompassing of the innumerable defensives and perspectives with which one could investigate the growing defenses of a liberal arts education.⁵ Rather each book offers both overlapping and unique perspectives regarding the outcomes, historical shifts, and problematics of the liberal arts education we know today. It is their book as a whole (the purpose & intents, the collection of history, and the evidenced of crisis) that serves as a “defense” against those arguments that position the product of the liberal arts—a liberated mind—as inadequate or useless. It is adequate, to say the least, that each book reviewed here takes the liberal arts as that which incites the kinds of questions that lead us to wonder, to being-together, and towards living well; to put another way, as the about which college is for.

To this point, I have called attention to two hermeneutic phenomena of communication, the first being the liberal arts education crisis, which is marked by the increase of language, meaning, and understanding for a recession of interest in becoming liberally educated; and the second, the absence of “hermeneutics” from the lexicon constituting the dialogue of the former phenomenon. I have also lightly sketched how a liberal arts education and a hermeneutical education are akin as having

⁵ Other texts that were considered for the review, but remain unselected and thus warrant closer investigation, are: Mark Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (University of Notre Dame, 2010); Richard A. Detweiler, *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs* (MIT, 2021); and Randall Stross, *A Practical Education* (Stanford University, 2017). Several anthologies were also considered: Jeffrey Bilbro, Jessica Hooten Wilson, & David Henreckson, eds., *The Liberating Arts* (Plough, 2023); Justin Buckley Dyer & Constantine Christos Vassiliou, *Liberal Education and Citizenship in a Free Society* (University of Missouri, 2023); and Julie Christina Tatlock, *Restructuring General Education and Core Curricula Requirements* (Mount Mary University, 2024). Lastly, several texts on the practice of, history of, and alternatives to, modern education were considered early in the formation of this concept: bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 1994); hooks, *Teaching Community* (Routledge, 2003); hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking* (Routledge, 2010); Laura Rendon, *septipensante pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Richard Brennenman, *Fuller's Earth* (New Press, 2007); Scott Nearing, *The New Education* (New Press, 2007); and Judith Rényi, *Going Public* (New Press, 1993).

the same intentioned outcome (*telos*) to orient one's reflexive habit (*ethos*) in the formation of an active practice (*hexis*). Rendering these two phenomena into communication has made them available for interpretation, which enables a hermeneutical phenomenological inquiry. Largely, the first phenomenon has been addressed by the books selected for this review. This is to say, these books have, in one way or another, made the purpose of liberal arts strange so that we may ask basic questions to make it familiar and understandable. In the explication of the signs, symbols, and meaning each author strives to create transversal comprehension so that conflicts of interpretations can be avoided. In order to address the second phenomenon, to bridge the liberal arts education and hermeneutics over their shared *telos*, which will demonstrated their parallel nature to each other, I have organized the remainder of this book review into three parts. First, in answering what a liberal arts education is for, readers will find my interpretation of the liberal arts education constituted from a place (the college), a process (doing liberal arts), which form a product (having a liberal mind). These are the necessary conditions for transformation of the student into a liberal artist, which enables her to interpret hermeneutically and thus simultaneously (re)create the world and (re)create herself, which is the purpose of college. Second, in answering what are the histories, traditions, and crises of the liberal arts college education, I paraphrase and review selections from each book to assemble for the reader a truncated history narrative. This will provide readers a necessary past horizon situates each authors response into a context as they answer the third and last question: how can we respond to the liberal arts crisis? In this final section, I again paraphrase and review selections from each book as a way of showing where they agree and where they do not. As I conclude in the summary, this review reveals how each book understands the liberal arts to be that which can deliver us to the experience in which we find no mutually exclusive, universal answers to life's most interesting questions, poignantly "what is the meaning of life?"⁶ What we find instead is our being, undergoing the process of becoming, as we pursue wonderful questions. "The real power of hermeneutical consciousness," Gadamer reassures us, "is our ability to see what is questionable," which is the position all four books put forth.⁷

⁶ Each book makes use of, or a variation of, this question.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, trans. by Richard E. Palmer (Northwestern University, 2007), 85.

What Liberal Arts Education is For

To paraphrase all four authors, the phrase “liberal (arts) education” has a pluralistic meaning that describes a type of trinity—a particular place, a product, and process, with each part being a necessary yet insufficient condition for change and transformation. To illustrate this point, I find that each author draws distinctions among the taken-as-granted words and phrases to, in a hermeneutic phenomenological fashion, disclose meaning and assumptions; however, each author varies in their approach to this task with respect to specific parts of this trinity. Montás primes our attention towards the kind of education being alluded to as a starting point. He writes,

We err fundamentally if we think of education in narrowly instrumental terms—when we confuse it . . . with training. To educate means, literally, to ‘draw out,’ to *educe* from the student something that is already there and whose successful cultivation represents the fulfillment of the highest human good. Education, in this sense, is liberal education—education not for making a living but for living meaningfully.⁸

Clear here is the purpose for a liberal education, to live meaningfully, and that it ought not be confused with job training/professional development. Liberal education is, at its core, a process of becoming liberated, “using the word *liberal* in its original Latin sense, ‘of or pertaining to free men.’”⁹ Yet when Montás, or any author here, refers to such an education, it is not one that happens anywhere or on any specific set of terms. The product of such an education, the liberal mind that can see the world in terms that can be questioned for living meaningfully, happen in a specific place. According to Kronman, some institutions result in more settled goals and outcomes while others enable more curiosity and openness, the latter of which can lead students to be curious, confused, and “can help them confront the question, which comes before all vocational training and goes beyond any answer that such a training can supply, of what living itself is for.”¹⁰ While a professional degree may offer value in (the possibility) job security, a liberal arts program is specifically designed to orient students to open-mindedness and curiosity and to be “a value of a different sort, for it is the very absence of those settled goals that give all vocational education its utility

⁸ Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, (Princeton University, 2021), 64 (emphasis in original).

⁹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Vail-Ballou, 2007), 39.

that makes the question of what living is for so important.”¹¹ Kronman, in his assertion that place is a necessary component to produce one who can confront meaningful questions, draws attention to the qualities and characteristics of the place all four authors tend to refer to as the site of transformation: a residential, four-year, non-vocational, liberal arts college/program.¹² Delbanco, in his differentiation of specific college places, provides a description of the purpose and intents of one college-place as different from the other university-place. He writes,

[College] is about transmitting knowledge of and from the past to undergraduate students so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future. [University] is mainly an array of research activities conducted by faculty and graduate students with the aim of creating new knowledge in order to supersede the past.¹³

Delbanco’s assertion here is that the college, a liberal education specific one, is oriented towards producing people as ideas are given to their common stock of knowledge, whereas the university is designed for producing research for consumption. Kronman avers the result of this education as the propensity to ask and answer the most foundational question, “the question of what living is for—of what we should care most about and why,” which is learned through repetitious encounters with the texts, plays, artwork, music, and (an)other, all capable of asking one to change their life.¹⁴ In other words, liberal arts education is a specific place that produces specific kind of person, one who can be with meaningful questions. This person not only possesses the product that is a liberal arts education, but they themselves are the product of the conditions that make up a liberal arts education.

Delbanco relates the substance of the liberal arts, the humanities, to what was once called “liberal knowledge,” or the knowledge that remains through time for “contemplation.”¹⁵ The humanities here can be simplified to “humanistic subjects like

¹¹ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 40.

¹² Kronman, who notes his experiences at Williams College in the 1960s in his introduction, is the only author to have attended a liberal arts residential college. Delbanco, while having attended Harvard University in the 1970s, writes from the perspective as a professor at Columbia University, which is shared by Montás who attended the same school in the 1990s. Zakaria attended Yale University in the 1970s.

¹³ Delbanco, *College*, 2.

¹⁴ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 27.

¹⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 34. Delbanco, in describing the humanities, cites John Henry Newman. Newman describes liberal knowledge as “knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* . . . by any end, or absorbed into any art, in

language and history,” taught traditionally in the trivium.¹⁶ The relationship between “the humanities” and secular/religious/philosophical/political texts narrating humans being in the world is constituted insofar as the former is presupposed of containing the latter. Kronman’s description of “arts and letters,” a tradition “in which students and teachers pursued the perennial puzzles of human existence through the disciplined study of . . . the question of how a person ought to spend his or her life,” has been central to the humanities.¹⁷ In each book reviewed, the process of the liberal arts is an integral, active nature of engaging with the humanities through reading, writing, reciting, reflection, and repetition. The constant practice produces a reflex for interpreting something as something with meaning. This process necessitates a yielding to the something—a purposeful action to slow down, look with intentionality, and allow for time to reflect on your past amid this present something—which can incite meaning from the most unexpected places. Delbanco gives a pointed illustration of finding such meaning in the unexpected in which two student roommates attend a play, yet afterwards only one “finds himself thinking about every aspect of his life in a new way,” and that “the world has been transformed for him while it remains utterly unchanged for his friend. And yet they have heard the same voices and words, seen the same [play].”¹⁸ Delbanco highlights the difference between someone looking *at* something in juxtaposition with someone looking *for* something, the latter of which we can assume is the liberal artist who has been taught reflexively to see meaning in and out of the classroom.¹⁹ Delbanco goes on to describe this happenstance as a mystery that is the intent and purpose of liberal arts education, to (re)create the whole that is a place, product, and process necessary to incite “thinking about every aspect of [one’s] life in a new way.”²⁰ The liberal arts education/program is a place devoted to the undergraduate education in which one practices the process of (and thus leaves with as a product of) the ability to interpret and “articulate communication [that] helps you speak your mind” with the past, present, and future Self.²¹

order duly to present itself to our contemplations.” *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (Yale University, 1996), 81 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 43.

¹⁷ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 41.

¹⁸ Delbanco, *College*, 49. Delbanco’s illustration begins, “Imagine that two college roommates go out together to see a production of Shakespeare’s great play, *King Lear*,” in which he describes the play and the two students’ differing reaction to it (Ibid.). What I summarize as the same “play,” Delbanco describes as having “heard the same voices and words, seen the same bodies and props moving on the same stage . . . the same aural and visual stimuli,” (Ibid.).

¹⁹ Emphasis added.

²⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 49.

²¹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 75.

Although each author connects how reading, writing, and speaking, on the humanities/classic books can transform your life by way of leading to you to wonder about your life as it is held up for comparison against the art of human existence, they do not all agree on how this is best accomplished.²² Each author, like the student roommates, offer something unique in their description of the “same” phenomenon that is the liberal arts education. Where Delbanco, Kronman, and Zakaria write from the outside looking in, Montás writes from the inside, taking us with him outward through his firsthand accounts. While Delbanco and Zakaria write with more regard as to where this way of being will take you in the world, Kronman and Montás focus more so on the ways in which the changing of your being changes the world. Consistent in each is the significance of becoming a liberal artist, one who can ask meaningful questions and who can interpret the response, which is also to say one who engages with the world hermeneutically. Seeing that this way of knowing and being in the world does not come from just anywhere, it is relevant to ask, what are the histories, traditions, and crises of the liberal arts education?

The History, Traditions, and Crises of the Liberal Arts College Education

All four books offer a sufficient, and similar, account of historic events that outline the history, traditions, and transformations that have led us to a crisis of the liberal arts college education; however, three of the books—Kronman, Delbanco, and Zakaria—provide a more linear analysis of the historicity that constitutes the liberal arts education. There is noticeable overlap of the historical accounts offered among these books which is, on one hand, due to each interpreting the “same” history from their unique positions; and, on the other hand, is due to each author brining the previously published author into their defense.

Kronman’s book, the earliest of the four (2007), is cited by the other three authors, all of whom make use of his critiques regarding the evolution from secular humanism into the research ideal. This refers to the modernization of research, and the socio-political changes that catalyzed the exponential growth of research, which

²² As will be explored later, Kronman takes a more traditionalist approach in advocating for directed studies and a “common core” of classical texts (see “Appendix: Yale Directed Studies Program Readings” in *Education’s End*, 261-265), whereas the other three authors take a more progressive approach that favors elective studies and more diverse set of readings (see Montás, “Epilogue: Nuts and Bolts” in *Rescuing Socrates*, 214-224). A shared position by all four authors: “most advocates of a core do not consider it [solely] sufficient for a liberal education.” Zakaria, *In Defense*, 60.

transformed the college of old from being a place of student transformation into a research university ecosystem with a primary function to mass produce research as a consumable product.²³ Delbanco's book, originally published second of the four (2012), provides by far the most extensive and comprehensive history of the American college, particularly accentuating prominent details of its birth from America's earliest religious institutions as he delivers to us the deeper meaning of the seminar, the professor, and the changes to their purpose as the college has transformed.²⁴ Zakaria's book was published third (2015), and offers a succinct history, albeit brief by comparison to the former, that draws on both Kronman and Delbanco's books, yet he goes back even further in history and beyond the U.S., which sets into relief the global historicity of liberal education and in which we find recurring traditions and recurring crises of the liberal arts education.²⁵ Montás book, while having been published after Zakaria, makes mention of the former three authors yet only draws upon two of them—Kronman and Delbanco—in his history excerpts that contextualize the liberal education and the crisis that it faces.²⁶

In continuing with the task of this hermeneutic book review, I will review the above-mentioned contributions from each book (though in a somewhat chronological order by starting with Zakaria, then Delbanco, then Kronman) to give inasmuch as possible the “whole” history, which will aid in the following section. Starting from ancient Greece, in which Plato and Isocrates debated the purpose of liberal arts on the grounds of utility for “knowing practically” versus “getting to know philosophically,” Zakaria situates the learning and teaching we concern ourselves as that which is necessary for democracy: citizens.²⁷ Despite this debate, both the Greeks and Romans widely accepted that neither method alone was a sufficient condition for a whole education in forming the citizen.²⁸ Education, eventually formalized into “the seven

²³ Kronman's use of these terms will be explored further in the pages below.

²⁴ Delbanco's book, *College*, was originally published in 2012.

²⁵ Although Kronman and Delbanco also make mention of the Greek roots from which liberal arts developed, they spend the bulk of their attention on the American College.

²⁶ Zakaria is only mentioned in the introduction of Montás' book. “But liberal education has always had formidable defenders. From Plato and Aristotle, to Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, to Erasmus and Galileo, to Virginia Woolf and W.E.B. Du Bois, to contemporary torch bearers like Andrew Delbanco, Martha Nussbaum, and Fareed Zakaria, eminent thinkers have insisted on the value and indispensability of the liberal education.” Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 6. Readers may notice, as I have, the absence of Anthony Kronman from that list.

²⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42.

²⁸ All authors address, to some degree—some with more concern for historically marginalized peoples than others—the power, benefits, and thus influence imposed on the determination of citizenship. Specifically, that those historically in power allowed only certain kinds of people, at certain points of history, to be citizens. More specifically, that Anglo-Saxon/white/wealthy/“West” educated/non-

liberal arts,” which always already included “science and humanities, the theoretical and the practical,” and in which humanistic inquiry and science could be investigated and understood as the constitution of a whole greater than the sum of its parts.²⁹

Zakaria’s book marks beginning of a recurring trend in which historical forces pushing on the utility of the liberal arts education results in the first humanist pendulum in the eighth century. It is there where the division of “the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—was taught first . . . [and] the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—came [second],” and that favor held true for the duration of time in which monasteries were the site of education.³⁰ Zakaria also identifies what is markedly the first pendulum towards science in the tenth through eleventh centuries as Europe’s first universities are formed with emphasis on specialization and research (while still emphasizing religious oversight) following the influence of “the most advanced civilization of the Middle Ages,” Islam, and the “madrasas” in which, for example, mathematics and research innovations resulted in how we have come to know algebra from “the Arab phrase *al-jabr*, meaning ‘the reunion of broken parts.’”³¹ Within a globalizing world context of trade and travel in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries came the need of specialization, “expertise in areas like geography, law, and science,” which came to be found in the developing “*universitas*” where, in addition to translation and study of ancient religious and philosophical texts, specialized scholars taught, researched, and produced both specialized people and specialized knowledge.³² The relevance of this is found in the emerging pattern marked by the third instance of the pendulum back towards humanism wherein the “fourteenth century the balance between practical and philosophical knowledge shifted again” as scholars of the time, “humanists, [who] rejected the . . . [specialized] approach to learning and theology,” demanded European education to return to the traditional Greko-Roman “arts and letters.”³³ Zakaria makes a point in distinguishing two features that come in the following renaissance of

slave peoples are granted citizenship (resulting from some historically enforced systemic oppression), while black/brown/aboriginal/indigenous/slave/non-west-educated peoples are not. Although the topic is outside the scope of this review, it must be remembered that, for as long as there has been a Western conception of education, there has always been *the other* about which one is educated, and always within the context of, and in relation to, power, subjugation, and oppression (emphasis my own). For further discussion, see Montás, “Epilogue: Nuts and Bolts” in *Rescuing Socrates*, 210-213.

²⁹ Zakaria notes that “science” in this time is considered abstract while humanistic knowledge, such as language and history, was considered the concrete, “practical” knowledge. Zakaria, *In Defense*, 43.

³⁰ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 44.

³¹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 45 (emphasis in original).

³² Zakaria, *In Defense*, 46 (emphasis in original).

³³ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 47.

humanism centuries. The first, this shift towards humanism happens at the college rather than the university; and the second, the European college/university “tradition” being invoked is specifically discernable as an English college tradition. A notable feature of Zakaria’s brief history of liberal education, when compared to the other three, is the way in which he captures the global influence and progression of early Western education as a dichotomy of English/European as far back as the eighth century, which we see come up again as the dichotomies (in which the pendulum swings) between the General/Specialized, Religious/Secular, Humanist/Techno-scientist, and Practical/Philosophical.³⁴

Delbanco brings us to the dawn of the American college, one that developed from the English colleges established in the early thirteenth through fifteenth centuries rooted in religious devotion. These early colleges were partially private, partially public, and held sermons that featured “the lecture—originally a medieval term (derived from the Latin *legere*, to read) for reading aloud and explicating scriptural, patristic, or classical texts by scholars.”³⁵ Delbanco notes another feature dating back to “the Middle Ages, efforts to regulate the right to teach by issuing licenses,” which highlights these early colleges as “retreats for scholars of divinity,” ones that produced licensed graduates who were able to gather by way of this licensure and by way of earning their keep through the instruction of new students (i.e., *undergraduates*).³⁶ In other words, the earliest colleges were made by and for these “preacher-teacher” graduates, who held the means to (re)produce people and knowledge, in which they delivered oratory lectures.³⁷ The most practiced and accomplished of these individuals could deliver powerful lessons from minimal notes and were recognized as professional professors, one’s who could incite faith. What Delbanco accentuates here is the significance of, and the responsibility of, the professor and her deliverance of the lecture as traditions that result from religious education with the liberal arts. She who delivers the lecture,

[S]peaks from inside the subject, with an openness to new discoveries even while moving through an argument made many times before. No good lecture . . . should be closed to second thoughts; it must have a dialogic

³⁴ Delbanco, like Zakaria, makes use of this pendulum metaphor between scientism and humanism. “Today, the pendulum seems to be swinging back toward scientism—a vivid instance of . . . the ‘change of fashion rather than progress’ that characterizes the academic humanities.” Delbanco, *College*, 98. Although Kronman and Montás do not utilize this device, I interpret each book’s presentation of utilitarian dichotomies as indicative of this metaphor.

³⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 60-61.

³⁶ Delbanco, *College*, 36 (emphasis added).

³⁷ Delbanco, *College*, 62.

quality—a spirit of self-questioning that draws the listener into honest inquiry into themselves.³⁸

Delbanco is telling us that she is not simply a professor, but *the* professor, “a term that once referred to a person who professes a faith,” and that she “must always be a professor . . . a person undaunted by the incremental fatigue of repetitive work, who remains ardent, even fanatic, in the service of . . . [her] calling.”³⁹ The college that emigrated to New England in the 1600s is the place in which one lives immersed among community, a process in which new knowledge/discoveries were professed in the lecture, and a product with which one received the skills that come with the “study [of] not only scriptural texts and commentaries, but also history and natural philosophy—a . . . triumvirate of humanities, social science, and natural sciences.”⁴⁰ Delbanco exposes a deep connection to hermeneutics, which has traditionally been employed by theologians in the interpretation of religious texts. The very art that (re)produced the prominent education leaders who structured and modernized the earliest American colleges was inherited from liberal artists, one’s that drew their inspirations, interpretations, and responses, from a source and authority that enabled speaking with confidence and conviction: her faith. However, as the college evolved so too did its role in society writ large, which affected the intents and purposes for the students as well as the role and authority of faith—and the professor—in the classroom.

Kronman annotates the developments of the American college, and the evolving liberal arts education, into three historical phases, which I will summarize here both for the readers benefit and because all other authors invoke aspects of these phases in their defense. First, “the age piety,” Kronman says, “begins with the founding of Harvard . . . and lasts until the Civil War,” and represents the college Delbanco described previously.⁴¹ The age of piety is marked by distinguishing qualities of directed, rigid studies of the Western Canon of texts, by authority of teachers underpinned by theological and spiritual assumptions, and by the absence of “[t]he distinction between faculty and administration,” which were primarily one in the same.⁴² The end of the antebellum college in the age of piety is marked by, in Kronman’s summation, the transition of teachers from theologian scholar to secular

³⁸ Delbanco, *College*, 62.

³⁹ Delbanco, *College*, 66 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 41.

⁴¹ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 46.

⁴² Kronman, *Education’s End*, 54.

scholar, relying on the humanities themselves as that which can produce an “art of living” through an education that still required a generalized, directed, rigorous study of the classic texts that could produce, “understood . . . in aesthetic terms . . . the cultivation of the senses that reacts with pleasure to beautiful things,” as well as “understood . . . more intellectually, as the mastery of a set of ideas.”⁴³ In other words, where Delbanco highlights the ways in which the professor’s faith in her lectures is what allows her to deliver, Kronman not only agrees but adds that, when the teacher lost her faith, she too lost her ability to profess.

Second, “the age of human secularism,” follows the aforementioned age from the 1860s through the 1960s. Kronman describes human secularism as the set of assumptions that presupposes the humanities as “the disciplines best equipped to provide [preparation for life]” in that they define “a philosophy of humanistic education” as the source from which teachers derive their ontological and epistemological authority from in place of theology.⁴⁴ Human secularism is in place for nearly a century before it begins to experience the division of outcomes that marks another, and yet the “same,” pendulum between the aesthetic and the intellectual. Kronman asserts the death of human secularism comes from the introduction of the “research ideal,” or what could be understood as the reintroduction of the European university’s model from which the American college originated, and came about from “[t]he German university of the early nineteenth century . . . [which] institutionalized the idea of research and gave it . . . authority and prestige,” as that which undercut the authority of the humanities while also encouraging specialization-based studies over general liberal studies.⁴⁵ This leads to the third and present age described as the age in which “the research ideal and the demands for political correctness” as that which transformed the college into something that has rebuked its roots (and can be referenced henceforth within this review as the age of the research ideal).⁴⁶

Kronman asserts that the age of the research ideal is evidenced by three shifts in liberal education (though not necessarily in this order). To start with, the push to include “modern” texts in the “core” of the arts and letters traditions occurs, which presented students “[o]n the one hand . . . the ancient model of virtue and order; on the other, modern ideas of individuality and creative freedom;” second, the research ideal promoted the introduction of an *elective* system for classes where only a *directed*

⁴³ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 72-73.

⁴⁴ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 74.

⁴⁵ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 59.

⁴⁶ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 74. Kronman leaves this third age, about which we are in, unnamed despite devoting the majority of his attention to it.

course of study system had ever been, the former leading to individuality and freedom to pursue specialization in knowing and as a vocation; and third, as the beginning of the displacement of liberal arts colleges by undergraduate students, who began to favor research universities in which specialty and profession-specific undergraduate studies could be pursued.⁴⁷

What emerges from this history is, as Zakaria identified, the liberal arts education utilitarian debate, one that is a reoccurring event in which the crisis we face today (re)emerges as a tradition in and of itself. For as long as there has been education, it seems, there has also been a disagreement over what kind of education is best fitting to meet the needs of the people in any given time period. As the liberal college shifted into a research university, and the purpose of the professor shifted from preacher-teacher to producer of consumable specialized research, so too did the people begin to interpret the function of college as not that which creates a person who can ask meaningful questions, but as that which produces a particular skill or profession of value.

The transformation of college into a research university ecosystem, as a phenomenon, is posed by all four authors as that which dislocated the liberal arts education, disenfranchised the professor, and has directed the interpretations of intents and purposes for higher/secondary learning, which has affected the ways we have come to contextualize the modern-day American college and problems there within. What each author makes clear in their offering of the history and traditions is that, if we are to defend the liberal arts, our hope is laden in this history. As we look back upon higher education traditions in which an undulating pendulum has swung between era-specific utilitarian dichotomies, which inevitably appear as the liberal (philosophical) education juxtaposition with the specialized (practical) education, we may ask ourselves: what swings it back towards the liberal arts found within humanities? In other words, we have found ourselves here once before and, as Maya Angelo informed us at the start, we need not live it again should we have the courage to engage in conversation with our inherited past. With this history reviewed, we can understand to some degree how we have arrived at this state of the liberal arts, and what remains is each book's position regarding where we go from here.

⁴⁷ Kronman, *Education's End*, 84 (emphasis added).

Responding to the Crisis

Montás writes, after recounting his reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, "I did not know where I would go, but I had been re-oriented and somehow clarified, somehow acquainted with the terms on which I would count my life as authentic."⁴⁸ The liberal arts education, as we have come to know up to this point, invites us to seek out the authenticity of our lives. If I have successfully drawn parallels between the liberal arts education and a hermeneutic education as both significant and in crisis, then readers may clearly see their intertwined fate: the liberal education that results in a praxis of asking questions, and interpreting responses, that enable us to contemplate possibilities for living authentic, meaning-full lives was once the point of college, but now is at risk for loss. While this appears tantamount to a meaning-full education apocalypse, it is important to remember the liberal arts has faced this crisis of utility once before. "One benefit of looking into the past," Delbanco writes, "is to be reminded that apocalyptic prophecies are more often wrong than right."⁴⁹ Each author has, up to this point, made an adequate defense of the benefits for a liberal mind. What remains is the exploration of just a few problems and solutions for a liberal arts, and hermeneutics, of tomorrow as we face this crisis yet again.

Kronman, in his analysis of the age of the research ideal, finds liberal arts education, and its teachers, are faced with an issue incited by multiculturalism; political correctness; and the progressive practices/policies that have developed from diversity, equity, and inclusion; all of which he attributes as coming about from the research ideal.⁵⁰ He posits that the teachers of the humanities writ large are not positioned as an authority capable of withstanding the pendulum between inclusion and exclusion whilst "the research ideal continues to define [their] attitudes and ambitions," and thus cannot contemplate life's most meaningful questions with their students.⁵¹ He makes clear that he is not refuting "the values at the heart of the research ideal—the celebration of originality, the demand for specialization, the ethic of supersession," but that "their tendency to occupy the whole of the humanities and to dictate the exclusive terms on which the worth of everything that is done in them is measured," is what

⁴⁸ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 48.

⁴⁹ Delbanco, *College*, 151.

⁵⁰ Kronman refers to "secular humanism" as the kind of education that promotes deep reflection, whereas I have taken the liberty to continue referring to that quality here as "liberal arts education."

⁵¹ Kronman, *Education's End*, 248.

obfuscates the capacity and possibility for meaningful conversations in and among the humanities to occur.⁵²

Kronman asserts that the political correctness culture of the humanities is “enforcing a deadening uniformity of opinion,” which can result in mandatory inclusion becoming no better than mandatory exclusion.⁵³ Another quality pertaining to the student he takes issue with is the academic self-election path (that gives one the freedom to select only class pertaining to their profession) as one that emboldens avoidance of that which can cause one to look inward, whereas the direct studies is that which puts one into conversation with the self by placing the other, the uncomfortable, the strange, in dialogue with the self. Despite several of his arguments conflicting with the other three authors, namely and pointedly with Montás and Zakaria as potential benefactors for policies he dismisses, he still finds company with both on the subject and significance of our attention, and its endangerment from “our addiction to technology and the equation of truth with science.”⁵⁴ Kronman continues, “[w]e live in a narcotized stupor, blind to the ways in which our own immense powers and the knowledge that has produced them cuts us off from the knowledge of who we are.”⁵⁵

With the loss of this connection to ourselves we have also lost the connection to each other. In Kronman's view, the teachers of the liberal arts must be able to assert themselves as the authority in a room, and students must be able to sit in that room with people they both do and do not agree with and have the supported freedom to navigate life's most challenging, unanswerable questions. If the teachers of the humanities continue to rely on the research ideal for authority, and students continue to embrace opting-out of material/people/ideas that are not aligned with their (current) preconditioned biases, the crisis of the liberal arts—which is a crisis of connection to self in Kronman's view, and a crisis of hermeneutics in my own view—is terminal.

Zakaria takes a primary issue with the rigor and structure of modern-day liberal education programs. “The solution to the problems of a liberal education,” Zakaria writes, “is more—and better—liberal education.”⁵⁶ In Zakaria's reflections of his own experiences, he identifies the skills and value to students that develop from requiring students to give attention to reading—and finishing—books. Reading whole books

⁵² Kronman, *Education's End*, 248.

⁵³ Kronman, *Education's End*, 255.

⁵⁴ Kronman, *Education's End*, 257.

⁵⁵ Kronman, *Education's End*, 257.

⁵⁶ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 105.

based in the humanities, such as those found on a common core or directed studies program list, allow us to “confront the realities of the world we live in and [become] educated in a way that addresses them, rather than pretend that these challenges don’t exist.”⁵⁷ Zakaria writes that the “the subjects that often define the liberal arts—the core humanities—have in particular become less structured and demanding,” which not only hurts the student in the development of their rigor, but also removes the opportunity to be transformed by a book.⁵⁸ He also highlights how the rigor for teachers and students is endangered by the demands of research.

The teacher who is aimed towards generating research in lieu of requiring rigorous work from the student, which would necessitate additional labor in the form of grading, feedback, etc., asks less of the student, and thus the student is forsaken for the production of specialized consumable knowledge. Over time, the teacher becomes less practiced and thus less capable, as Kronman described, in facilitating a liberal education. Zakaria does not shy away from naming himself as among those who lack the authority and skill necessary to teach one how to form the skills of the liberal artist. He writes,

Because of the times we live in, all of us, young and old, do not spend enough time and effort thinking about the meaning of life. We do not look inside ourselves enough to understand our strengths and weaknesses, and we do not look around enough—at the world, in history—to ask the deepest and broadest questions.⁵⁹

Zakaria goes on to describe how, as a teacher, taking a path that required less work for himself through giving higher grades (rather than awarding for merit), a path that demands less rigor from his students and himself, was positively reinforced through incentivization by the sociopolitical structure of the American college. From this perspective, the college/university as a whole can be seen to forsake the production of the student as a liberal artist for the incentives that come with high grades, high enrollment, and an optimal (profitable) ratio of research value generated to teaching course load delivered. Zakaria, who drew great value from his own liberal arts undergraduate studies, suggests like Kronman a return of rigor, high expectations, and structure.

⁵⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 62.

⁵⁸ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 103.

⁵⁹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 169.

“Liberal education lives in the questions,” Montás writes, “not in the answers.”⁶⁰ The primary problem to be addressed in his view is the lack of consideration for taking deep, self-reflective inquiry, seriously as an end goal of the college education. He states,

Liberal education is not possible without a recognition that inquiry into the life of virtue—that is, into the best and most excellent life for a human being to live—is not a futile endeavor but, in fact, leads to a deeper self-understanding and, in this sense, a fuller life.⁶¹

A factor contributing to the recession of interest for this fuller life by students is the research ideal described by Kronman that emphasizes production of a professional career and specialized research in lieu of a liberal education. Montás, in a passage describing his self-reflection through Freud, identifies the perceived lack of value for such classical texts in the professional setting as evidence for “the erosion of humanistic learning . . . [which] is directly linked to the rise of the ‘research university’ . . . and the dominance of . . . ‘the research ideal’ in higher education.”⁶² In his summation, one can learn from the humanities the same skills that are purported to only be available through specialized, profession-specific classes; however, the former contain more in skills and benefits (as the curiosity and question asking that allow one to access the self) and the same cannot be said for the latter. Montás goes on to describe how one can learn from literature analysis, as well as psychoanalysis, by learning to look inward where, upon learning to read one’s self you realize that, “[i]n liberal learning, the act of knowing transforms us. In knowing something about ourselves, we become something else; the thing that we know is changed by our knowing it.”⁶³ The college, or rather the university that has replaced it, demotes transforming the self from the start by framing messages to student recruits—and their parents paying the bill—through lenses of “employability” rather than internal self-discovery. The return on investment an education ought to have, and the job market salaries they ought to expect with the degree, especially when taken into account the rising costs of the university research ecosystem, leads one away from philosophical

⁶⁰ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 192.

⁶¹ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 192.

⁶² Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 124.

⁶³ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 132.

wonder and towards the practicality of knowing just when one can (expect to) pay off the tuition bill.⁶⁴

In Delbanco's closing chapters he addresses the question: what is to be done? Readers may find several of his arguments of interest since, as is with his book on the whole, he offers numerous entry points and with extensive evidence to support his claims that range from critiques of the classroom to the greater financial infrastructure that makes college (un)attainable. Of particular interest is his addressing the role of teaching, as compared to training, and the role of the professor, as the teacher, and how "one obvious thing to do is to try to produce more teachers who care about teaching."⁶⁵ A liberal arts education is delivered to the student by a practitioner of the liberal arts, a professor, and she teaches it with accomplishment when she herself believes it to be an act of liberation and when she models to the student that it takes practice and attunement so that, when the time should arise that she can no longer guide them, she need not worry as the student has received the gift of her tutelage.

In this way traditions of rigor and high expectations matter because it is the repetition of the motion, not the end product, that is the task to be achieved. The teacher that cares for her student's transformation challenges them, holds them to a higher standard of accomplishment, and gifts them accountability when they struggle not because she wants to see them fail, but because she knows they are capable of success through her own practice of perfecting the art of liberation herself. Without teachers who can give themselves over to teaching, who can fully invest in the art of liberating students through the humanities, we will continue to rely on instructors who merely train students with education in such a manner that supports the instructors' primary job as a researcher and/or faculty administrator. This manner of instruction leads students to contemplate their career choices more so than their own lives, and far more so than deep, profound, unanswerable questions. Delbanco writes in his closing,

Certain habits of mind—distinguishing between arguments and opinions, admitting self-doubt, rethinking assumptions—are imperative for collective life. If these habits are not nurtured in the college classroom, where else will they be found?⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Delbanco also makes this point (*College*, 27). Zakaria similarly describes how he "chickened out" of the Yale Directed Studies program. "I panicked at the idea of committing so completely to something that seemed so impractical." Zakaria, *In Defense*, 38.

⁶⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 166.

⁶⁶ Delbanco, *College*, 201.

In his addressing the need for a liberal arts revival, one that promotes curiosity and wonder by way of restoring those capable of inciting such habits—the professor—he asks to be critical of where we might find such a person who may lead us to wonder, if not the college. It is an ethical address, in my interpretation, to those who recognize that a true teacher illuminates the practicality of the liberal arts in their teaching of it to others, and who also recognizes that our classrooms have become dim. If we are to start somewhere, perhaps it is best to begin with those who bestow meaning onto those who inherit it to ensure that they do so with aim and purpose towards being well.

In Summary

What can be concluded from this review is that each of these books ultimately suggests a renaissance for the love of learning the unknown and the abstract by way of curious question asking and inciteful interpretation, knowing that the process of asking and answering again and again results in deep self-reflection, which can change the world both inside and outside of the self. “They called such an exploration *philosophy*, which means ‘love of wisdom,’” and it is the transformation that one undergoes after inheriting this love for wisdom as that which makes a liberal education worth defending as the purpose for college.⁶⁷ In these books I found their defense for asking beautiful questions as a defense for a praxis of hermeneutical engagement with the world. Each book offers hermeneutic questions as having the most utility not because they are unanswerable, but because to contemplate them is to actively participate in the process of becoming. In other words, “such an education is not to provide answers to these fundamental questions, but to bring them to life . . . [and] instill habits or reflection and inquiry that can serve as guides for [being],” since a condition of being is the fact that we are always already presented with a question that demands our interpretation, and therefore we must choose to prioritize an education that enables one to perform this task or risk a future of poor interpretations that will affect our collective being.⁶⁸ The liberal education is the summation of the place it is offered, the process one must go through, and a product that is produced under the necessary conditions.

⁶⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 139 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 110.

“Today,” Kronman writes, “increasingly few teachers . . . believe they have the competence or duty to offer their students an education in the meaning of life,” to which Zakaria both agrees and adds that students today do not want to be directed towards this outcome in lieu of the freedom to elect their own.⁶⁹ Delbanco would add that “[g]oing to college was an exercise in self-examination, self-discipline, and self-abnegation. Or so, at least, it was supposed to be.”⁷⁰ Montás not only agrees with Delbanco, but would insist that, because he has come from the college in the last century where the crisis has also been prominent, that it has been for some—and can still be—that place.

⁶⁹ Kronman, *Education's End*, 87; Zakaria, *In Defense*, 62.

⁷⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 74.