The Best of the Whitesell Prize Competition
2014–2015

The Writing Center’s Phyllis C. Whitesell Prizes for Expository Writing in General Education

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Preface

The Writing Center’s Phyllis C. Whitesell Prizes honor excellent student writing in Franklin and Marshall’s General Education curriculum. Each year the Writing Center invites submissions and awards a prize for the best essay in both Connections I and Connections II. This year, for the final time, a prize was also awarded for essays written in a Foundations course. This booklet contains the prize-winning and honorable mention essays from this year’s competition.

Named for the emerita Director of F&M’s Writing Center, the Whitesell Prizes serve several goals. In addition to honoring both Phyllis’s dedication to teaching writing and the achievements of the College’s students writers themselves, the Whitesell Prizes seek to add to the vitality of the College’s General Education curriculum by getting students to think of their intellectual efforts as ongoing enterprises (revision, often after the essay has been graded and the class is completed, is a requirement of the competition). Also, by involving faculty and Writing Center tutors in the judging of the essays—and by making this booklet available to the College community—the Whitesell competition hopes to foster a fuller awareness of the interesting work being done in our Foundations and First-Year Writing Requirement courses.

My great appreciation goes to this year’s Whitesell Prize judges. Professors Nina Kollars and Scott Smith and tutors Briana Krewson ’17 and Arya Bhattarai ’15 awarded the prizes in Connections. Professors Nina Bond and James Strick along with tutors Anh Nguyen ’16 and Euyn Lim ’17 were the judges for the Foundations competition.

Many thanks go to Nathan Gill for compiling this booklet.

Daniel Frick
Director, Writing Center
September 2015
# Table of Contents

## Connections I Writing

### Whitesell Prize Winner


By Thomas Fogel-Burlan for Professor Frick

CNX104

### Honorable Mention

“Dumpling Days”

By Raven Charleston for Professor Schrader

CNX137

### Honorable Mention

“A Comparative Paris”

By Isabelle Schellenger for Professor Landfried

CNX117

## Connections II Writing

### Whitesell Prize Winner

“A Paradox Is Like a Pearl”

By Jennifer Deasy for Professor Crannell

CNX228

### Honorable Mention

“Terror in the Name of God: The Special Case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria”

By Indira Rahman for Professor Kibbe

CNX206

### Honorable Mention

“From Generation to Generation”

By Ryan Ulrich for Professor Brady

CNX214

## Foundations

### Whitesell Prize Winner

“Drunk on Poetry: The Intoxicating Effects of the Wine Song”

By Sierra Blazer for Professor Kalleeny

FND133
Honorable Mention
“Standardized Testing Does Not Adequately Test Student Learning”
By Emily Okikawa for Professor Aronowicz
FND148

Honorable Mention
“Fried Rice”
By Yunan Xie for Professor Brady
FND134
Connections I Category

Whitesell Prize Winner


Thomas Fogel-Burlan

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Thomas Fogel Burlan
Professor Frick
America in the Age of Nixon
12 December 2014

The Premier’s Microcosm: the Heroism and Fatalism of Chou En-Lai in *Nixon in China*

Few people have been the object of fascination quite like President Richard Nixon. In the years since he left office, he’s been the subject of numerous documentaries, books, and even an opera. In fact, *Nixon in China* by John Adams and Alice Goodman has become an integral part of the American operatic canon since its debut in Houston in 1987. As opera is a medium prone to dramatization and exaggeration of its characters, it should come as no surprise that *Nixon* stakes out a fairly defined position on heroism and applies it to its main characters. However, all of its main characters were based on real people. When the audience is familiar with the actual humans that inspired these creations, it’s necessary that some degree of reality seep into their characterizations. One of these humans was Chou En-Lai, China’s foreign minister at the time.

The character of Chou En-Lai certainly has some heroic tendencies illuminated by the opera, demonstrating nobility and tenacity to illustrate the humanity present even in the most demonized of people. However, there is a flipside to this heroism, as he leaves some personal goals unfulfilled, dwells on former glory, and is plagued by self-doubt and guilt. Through the
character of Chou En-Lai, *Nixon in China* is trying to show that personal glory and valor may come at the expense of other goals – indeed, heroism may even be driven by these kinds of limitations and shortcomings.

One way that Chou’s heroism is defined is through his noble presence and words. Few other characters in the opera receive as much time and heroic phrases and melodies as Chou En-Lai. Where Richard Nixon might have some awkward phrases and seemingly forced melodies, Chou’s are very pretty and well put-together. Their first lines and interaction are actually meant to demonstrate this and contrast the two characters’ approaches. Describing how “all travel is a penance now” (Goodman 31) is noticeably more elegant than Nixon’s uncomfortably prolonged “smooth” (Goodman 30). Chou is in his element, seemingly ready to take on anything. Even when describing his self-doubts in the closing aria, Chou’s lines soar melodically and flow beautifully. Even though “everything seems to move beyond our remedy” (Goodman 57), Chou’s melodies make the audience sympathize with him against forces beyond his control rather than pity him for his whining. This kind of nobility is also evident in the staging of the 2012 production during the end of Madame Mao’s ballet. Inspired by the Nixons’ strong reactions to the onstage action, the Chinese audience decides to “re-evaluate” Madame Mao’s role in their history. Meanwhile, Madame Mao declares her own piety, and that she “speak[s] according to the book” (Goodman 51), and the staging makes clear that she is really only interested in saving her own skin. Chou is the only person to stand up in defiance. While the world around him is seemingly going to hell and devolving into anarchy, Chou will stand for security. He represents a beacon of order in a world of chaos. By keeping his words and actions elegant in the face of the other characters’ inelegance, and his melodies soaring in the face of sad phrases, *Nixon* makes sure that the audience understands Chou’s noble front.
Two reasons why the creators make this choice are the intention to diverge from the widely-held perception that Chou was a communist villain, and to explicitly show how Chou can be a hero. Throughout the Cold War, people in the west held a negative view of the Communists in charge of China, like Chou En-Lai and Mao Zedong, especially after the atrocities of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Even though he was famously gentle with children, Chou “did not intervene when his own adopted daughter was carried off by Red Guards” (MacMillan 41). By showing these men in a positive light, the creators of the opera wanted to offer a different portrayal, a more sympathetic portrait of a person who has received his fair share of bad publicity. The other reason that Chou’s lines are melodic is to explicitly show that he has noble qualities. While American-style musicals may have certain lines that are not sung, one of opera’s unique advantages is that it’s entirely sung. Every word that comes out of anyone’s mouth is melodic, not spoken. As such, the tune and tone of a certain section may have resounding implications for the ultimate meaning of not just what the actor is trying to say, but for the work as a whole. It’s actually one of the most interesting ways that media can convey its message for its intended audience. By featuring Chou with prominently melodic lines, Adams and Goodman are spelling it out for the audience that he is a man capable of innate complexity and even beauty.

Chou is a very tenacious individual, and the opera makes sure to note that this kind of bravery is important and rewarded. Much is made of his devotion to causes and ultimate ability to triumph over obstacles. Over the years, he had to work at many things in order to get them to stick, including his overarching transformation of China with Mao and Nixon’s own trip to China. He describes leading the Communists to “occupy from hour to hour Holding in perpetuity The ground our people won today From vision to inheritance” (Goodman 40) during the opening
banquet to toast Nixon and the Americans, implying that this trip was simply the culmination of decades of determination. Chou hasn’t just been sitting around waiting for Nixon to call, he’s been waiting and performing a long and difficult task. He’s managed to see all of it through from vision to inheritance in spite of external and internal pressure and conflict. It takes a lot of courage and persistence to face long odds for such a long time, but if he is little else, Chou is at least tenacious. His recap of his uphill battle comes at a particularly important time during the banquet to toast Nixon. The banquet is, more or less, an opportunity to hype each side up, and while Nixon toasts newfound cooperation and new frontiers, Chou wants to show that this banquet and event are the culmination of many plans. His main priority was to leave China in a better condition than he found it, to ensure that their “children race Downhill unflustered into peace” (Goodman 40). Their long strife for control is paying off, because they kept “the outlined cities of the plain” (Goodman 39) within their sight. And though these words come during a banquet to honor the Americans, he doesn’t even mind. Chou knows that together, both the United States and China will succeed. He believes that “The virtuous American And the Chinese make manifest Their destinies in time” (Goodman 40). It might take a while, but he’s confident that his plans will pay off for the country he’s fought so long and hard for. Chou will keep at whatever he’s doing and play the long game for ultimate success.

However, despite Chou’s heroism, he faces certain roadblocks related to this heroism and the opera takes great care to ensure that the audience understands what Chou has had to sacrifice in order to receive their personal gains. One of these sacrifices is that he has left some personal goals and desires unfulfilled at the expense of his career. While this sacrifice could be could be viewed as noble in a sense, the opera presents it as very sad. In Act 3, Scene 3, all of the characters are preparing to go to sleep and the audience gets an opportunity to glimpse some of
their most private and emotionally intimate moments. While the other 4 principal characters are with each other, Chou is alone. He muses that he has “no offspring” (Goodman 54), and that he must “ride eastwards to Peking Preoccupied with [his] last long Triumphal march” (Goodman 54). This march has led him on to revolutionize a continent, but he’s left his personal life in the dust along the path. He has no family to speak of and no personal activities or joy. Rather than tour the world and help spread the Communist gospel, Chou has “come home for good to China” (Goodman 31), and for him, “All travel is a penance now” (Goodman 31).

Chou also dwells on the past, in the forms of his own former glory, but the ancestral past of China as well, which is potentially cause for conflict for a man whose primary job is to lead China through an uncertain future. Of all the characters in the play, no character seems quite as deferential or referential to the past than Chou En-Lai. This deference to the past is at once totally in character and expected for a character like Chou, but it is also rather unexpected. Traditional Chinese and Confucian teachings exhibit a true deference and reverence of elders, which makes up part of his opening toast at the banquet. When Nixon and the Americans express hope for their partnership, all Chou can think about is looking down from their summit “and think[ing] what [they] have undergone. Future and past lie far below half-visible” (Goodman 39). The present moment for Chou is merely a link to other times, and rather than being controlled by the whims of the present moment, he has worked very hard to gain the option of carving his own path. However, much of his life’s work has been to circumvent the Confucian kind of deference and propel China into a new era of prosperity and success. He, Mao, and Madame Mao “survived those battles, took those shifting paths” and “blasted that rock to lay those rails” (Goodman 39). In many traditional operas, the hero has a clear journey and a clear mission and set of morals to work off of. By portraying Chou’s morals as in conflict with his
quest, Adams and Goodman want to show that there is more than one facet to even the most controversial of individuals.

The remorse of the Cultural Revolution and its consequences on the country haunt Chou, and the play strongly implies that this is crucial to understanding his character. He is persistently haunted by guilt and plagued by self-doubt, which are not qualities that a traditional hero possesses. If heroes can do no wrong, then Chou has done much wrong over the course of his long life. He has affected and changed China irrevocably, and it is unclear whether this is ultimately for the better. He knows that people have died because of his actions and orders, and he never forgets that. He never lets it get away from him that people are not going to be able to live the same way. As the audience peeks into his psyche in Act 3, Scene 3, Chou ruminates the fallout from the revolution, noting that “A bankrupt people repossessed the ciphers of its history and not one character could say whether the war was over yet or if they’d written off the debt” (Goodman 53). Though the communists overcame years of tradition to bring China to the forefront of the world, they’re not always entirely sure where to go from there. Though adhering to tradition may have its problems, it provides some semblance of direction, and these private thoughts show that Chou lacks this sense of purpose for his nation. He won the war, but at a terrible cost of millions of his fellow men and women. His closing aria makes clear that his thoughts are pervaded by the spirits and memories of those he has had to hurt in order to achieve what he has. Just before going to sleep, he describes how in his dreams, “The peasants with their hundred names, Unnamed children and nameless wives Deaden my footsteps like dead leaves” (Goodman 54). Though the audience is also presumably familiar with the history of the Cultural Revolution, where Chou helped lead the charge in the deaths of millions of Chinese (Macmillan
To conceptualize the incredible guilt that Chou might feel is to radically challenge the audience’s perception of the man as a monster.

Chou’s own character struggles and development hint at a larger meaning for *Nixon in China*: there are two sides to every coin, and success comes at a price. In fact, success may even be driven by this dichotomy. Chou has had some monumental achievements in his life, but ultimately must face up to the fact that his actions have had tremendous consequences. Duality is a prominent theme in *Nixon in China*, whether it’s the duality of characters themselves, the differing themes in the music, or the different aspects of life that different characters are said to represent. Chou En-Lai helps to personify this theme, because he’s beset with an incredible amount of conflicting issues in his life, and the audience is privy to these internal conflicts. In fact, he’s probably the best vessel to convey these perceptions and conflicts, because the audience presumably has little familiarity with Chou other than his role as one of the leaders of Communist China. But Chou illustrates how a person can strive to escape their past and define their successes on their own terms, even if it does play a very prominent role in their life. In the final lines of the opera, Chou notes that while “everything seems to move beyond Our remedy” (Goodman 57), he still sympathizes with “The warblers who prefer the dark, the cage-birds answering” (Goodman 57). Ultimately, he resolves that he must carry on, and declares “To work!” (Goodman 57), though it is not a particularly upbeat declaration in the 2012 staging of the opera. Nevertheless, Chou demonstrates that people can have this kind of dichotomy and emerge fully formed.

Opera is a medium that can, at times, seem very inaccessible for many people. Performances tend to be particularly long, there is no dialogue, and the voices sound very strange to the average viewer. However, opera is so much more than just a more pretentious musical. It
is one of the few mediums in which the art itself can directly speak to the audience with little filter. Where traditional musicals have asides of straight dialogue, everything is sung in opera, which heightens the importance of every line. It is a wonderful medium to communicate details about characters, both subtle and overt, and that is what makes *Nixon in China* particularly substantial. It communicates a myriad of details and themes about its characters, and Chou En-Lai is one of the most interesting characters in the musical. He is able to convey a sense of heroism as well as a sense of the morose and of wasted potential. Like everything about great opera and the man himself, he is multifaceted and complex, with meaning that reveals itself further with more examination.
Works Cited


Dumpling Days

I slowly opened my eyes and saw that we had finally reached Meemaw’s driveway. We walked inside and I immediately ran up to the towering redwood clock in the musky living room. Turning my head from side to side along with the pendulum, I heard Meemaw’s slippers sliding across the hardwood floor. She glided towards me and immediately embraced me in a fragrance of lavender and sweet milk. Leading me by the hand, Meemaw brought me into the kitchen and set me onto the chair in front of the island. A pot large enough for me to climb inside was sitting on the stovetop with steam billowing out into fluffy puffs, reminding me of the clouds Pawpaw used to make with his pipe. We didn’t talk much before he died, but one thing we had in common was our love for Meemaw’s Chicken and Dumplings. The meal has a long history in our family, going back to the 1860’s during the War Between the States. As the generations have passed, the meal has been altered to suit the needs of each. Meemaw claims her version to be the best one yet. She grew up during the period of the Great Depression, so they did anything they could do to stretch a meal, and the only spices they used for flavor were salt and pepper. For her, simplicity was key to any meal, mainly because not many ingredients were available. This

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kind of living instilled in Meemaw an insecurity about food; whenever we visited, she would badger us about if we were eating enough. Our family was not as large as the one she grew up in, but tradition held fast in Meemaw’s kitchen. She made as much soup as she could from that one whole chicken, leaving us with a gallon of leftovers to take home.

The buttery air was warm and my nostrils were soothed by the aroma of yeasty dough. The oaken cabinets displayed ornate crystal bowls and her finest porcelain plates, decorated around the rim with blue lilacs. Windows of sunshine brightly lit the small room. Meemaw folded the dough on the counter, the flour settled into the wrinkles of her hands, accentuating the paleness of her aged skin. Her hair had fallen out of her usually-conservative bun into messy streams around her face. Sweat beaded on her forehead and mixed with the flour from the back of her hand as she wiped it away, expelling the heat from her body. When my Pawpaw died, money for Meemaw was tight. Food security became a fear for her once again, but this time she was living alone. I remember one Sunday afternoon that Meemaw wasn’t home when we arrived. When she had finally pulled in the driveway, she had me help her unload posters before she prepared our dinner. Around this time in the 1980’s, women became involved in political protests, my Meemaw included. She marched alongside other women and publicly vocalized about the struggle women faced in providing for themselves, hoping to keep the lower limit on rent and electric bills. She made sure that the women in the community were treated fairly in regards to their living costs.

“Thud! Thud! Thud!” When she was done with her brutal pounding of the dough, she gave me a small portion and showed me how to shape the dumplings properly. I rolled a thin

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amount in my hands trying to make a ball. The dough stuck to my palms and became stringy as I struggled to pull it apart. Frustrated, I huffed, stifling my tears, and smacked my hands onto the counter in forfeit. Meemaw came to me and whisked away the disobedient tear that fell from the cage of my lashes. “Now, now, be patient, tears won’t help you learn. Let’s try again, just add more flour.”

After we made a neat mountain of perfectly shaped, Meemaw-approved dumplings, Meemaw told me to play outside in the garden. Once outside, I relished the warm summer air. Meemaw’s garden was in full bloom; fragrant aromas from her colorful blossoms mixed with the pungent smell of the fresh compost that fertilized them. I spun around in the garden until all the flowers were a Van Gogh of color smeared across my vision. Meemaw had been gardening ever since she was a young girl. She felt that a garden is essential for providing your own vegetables and herbs so you do not rely on a grocery store.

One time when Meemaw caught me watching her work in her garden she beckoned me to her and said, “Listen up, child. When you get older, you make your own garden like your Meemaw, alright?” I nodded looking at the carrots she had been pulling from the dark earth. “In my time, before the awful, awful war, the stores were coming out with all kinds of crazy canned goods. By Jesus’ name they even put wholesome carrots like these,” she held up the carrots and shook them, which had sprinkled dirt onto my bare feet, “into cans! It just ain’t natural. Then the war started and BAM, the country went back to good old gardening and the soldiers got the preserved goods…” Meemaw had trailed on about the importance of fresh food and the danger of trusting canned goods, but I had lost interest in the words and instead traced the flight of a butterfly near her sunflowers.
Patriotic gardening was ingrained in her throughout World War II. During that time, propaganda to support the war efforts meant that families provided for themselves so that the farmers could provide for the soldiers, and in doing so, save the country.\(^4\) Meemaw’s stance on gardening was a step back from the earlier period of industrialization that came out of the Great Depression before the war. Technological advancements allowed for women to complete their domestic duties much faster than before. Women who took up work in factories and still had enough time to cook at home because of new processed foods that expedited meal preparations.\(^5\) Meemaw had always detested preserved foods but was fascinated by the factory work. As soon as she was old enough, she took one of the factory jobs to help support her family. Her job wasn’t the domestic women’s work she had grown up performing, but men’s work. This newfound independence fueled Meemaw to be successful, while also maintaining her domestic position in the household. She once showed me a large worn-out poster of a smiling woman wearing overalls in a garden. The woman’s hands and face were covered in dirt. In one hand she held up a bunch of turnips and in the other she proudly raised an American flag that seemed to ripple in the nonexistent wind.

Watching the blades of grass ripple in the warm summer wind, it wasn’t long until, lying in a patch of the untrimmed grass, I smelled the buttery dumplings from the cracked kitchen window. Not a second later, Meemaw rang the old dinner bell that was more of a \textit{CLANK!} than the ideal \textit{DING!} you would expect a lovely silver bell to make. I leapt to my feet and hurried inside, headed straight for the bathroom. Meemaw sure knew how to get her hands dirty in the garden but under no circumstances tolerated filthy fingers to be set on the dinner table. I had

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\(^5\) Ibid, 152
learned this in my last visit, in which Meemaw snatched my grimy hand off of the pristine white table cloth and dragged me to the bathroom sink. She had used a coarse brush, with thick white hairs that felt like the quills of a porcupine. Back and forth, under my fingernails, she scrubbed my little hands clean until I felt a raw burning, as if I had fallen hands-first onto a playground’s unforgiving asphalt. Shaking off the bad memory, I washed my hands twice, making sure to clean under my fingernails. I then rushed to the table, waiting for everyone else to arrive. Even in the midst of scarcity, Meemaw and her family valued presentation, or ‘Southern pride,’ as they called it.

Dad came in with a thick wrinkle across the whole of his forehead, a shadow cast from his brow over his eyes. My mom followed. Her cheeks were stained with a faint trail of grey, her eyes still bloodshot. My mom was raised under the tough hand of Meemaw and was taught never to cry in front of anyone. Meemaw saw it as a woman’s weakness. Ever since her first job, Meemaw was obsessed with gaining the same station as a man. In her time, a woman’s work was the unpaid upkeep of the household while men were exempt from domestic contribution. This outraged her and she did everything she could to respect her family’s values of keeping a presentable and nourished home. She hide certain aspects of her femininity to make up for the pressure she felt to conform to what a woman should be. Crying, in her household, was a feminine act and therefore a violation of a woman’s independence.

Quickly after my parents sat, my grandma swung through the kitchen door holding a pot of her Chicken and Dumpling soup. Steam rose from the pot and chicken broth flooded our nostrils. Meemaw grew up before the economic boom of the 1980’s and was not accustomed to the new variety of cuisines and spices popularized at the time; for her, a large dash of salt and

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pepper were the only remedy to a bland dish. At the time, America had been overwhelmed with celebrity-chef cookbooks and expensive, exotic restaurants. Meemaw never partook in gourmet magazine subscriptions and never had a nice word about restaurants above three stars. “In my day, going to a restaurant was an annual occasion celebrating a birthday or a graduation. Now young people dine out as if they don’t have functioning kitchens in their homes. Does no one teach them how to cook? There is nothing wrong with plain and simple meals,” Meemaw had developed and eye twitch from her heated irritation, “Sure, there are those fancy shows on the black box, but where would someone find escargot or flounder in our small town? I don’t have the means to buy an ingredient I’ll never use again…” She would ramble for a while until her anger subsided. Meemaw, of course, had even seen this shift in the advertising in her monthly issue of Home Cooking but not once bought into the unnecessary frivolity of such unique dishes. Meemaw finally sat and quickly distributed the soup and dumplings with her grandmother’s ladle.

Occasionally she let me use the ladle. It was carved by my great-grandfather out of a dark wood, with veins of burgundy throughout. The ladle was a symbol of the Great Depression for my family. Because food was scarce and there were more mouths for my great-grandparents to feed, they mainly relied on soups and stews, much like the Chicken and Dumplings; anything the family used anything they could scrounge up from rationed ingredients to stretch a meal. The handle had been worn smooth and molded into a comfortable grip that had only become more prominent as the years passed. My mom passed my bowl to me and warned me of the boiling heat within. I always liked to hold my hands above the steam so that I could smell the meal later.

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7 Sylvia Lovegreen, "The Eighties." in Fashionable Food Seven Decades of Food Fads, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 357

when I went to bed. Chicken and Dumplings was the only meal she ever made for me; I wanted to savor the delicious smell as long as possible.

We all held hands for our Sunday grace and both my parents were dismayed to find that mine were clammy. Unwilling to disrupt grace, they both gave me a sharp glance of disapproval before joining Meemaw in praise. Because we lived a few hours away from Meemaw, we visited her rarely. When we did, it was always on a Sunday to uphold the southern tradition of sharing a family meal. Every Sunday we did manage to visit, without a doubt, we ate her dumplings. Eager to devour my first dumpling, I scooped one up and packed the whole thing into my mouth. The fatty dough melted around the juicy chicken and the sides of my mouth drew taut towards my ears. I rolled the dumpling around my tongue trying to taste every aspect of it, identifying each ingredient: pepper, salt, butter, chicken, carrots, peas, dough.

We ate in silence, which appeased me and my voracious appetite. I slurped the rest of my second helping and openly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, an impolite act that would surely upset Meemaw. For some reason, even though I saw the spark in her eyes as she caught me doing it, she said nothing. I sat there and held my breath ready to pay for my improper behavior. Meemaw only looked away and focused on my mother’s face. It was as if she was scrutinizing every wrinkle until she noticed the light streaks down her cheeks.

Abruptly she stood. She softly ordered my mom to follow her to the kitchen. My mother, always the one to argue with grandma, obeyed her without resistance. My dad, when they were out of the room, grumbled and rubbed his face as if he were trying to iron out the wrinkles. We sat in silence and listened, neither one of us daring to let out a breath. We shortly heard weeping. Gurgled coughs and sobs were muffled by the door so that we could not tell who was actually the

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one crying. I hoped it wasn’t Meemaw; she was the strongest woman I knew and I had never known her to cry. After a while of sitting, the sobs subsided and my dad began to pace the dining room. By this time, steam no longer floated up from the pot of soup.

My mom and Meemaw slowly reentered the room and sat in their seats as if weights had been placed on their shoulders which caused them to sink into themselves. My mother had a peculiar glint in her eyes that comforted me but also made a lump come to my throat. I glanced over at Meemaw and saw that she was staring at my dad with a steel cold gaze. Meemaw’s cheeks were stained the same way my mother’s had been earlier and more so now. My mouth slightly dropped in surprise. Meemaw didn’t cry; we weren’t supposed to cry. My body grew heavy and I sensed that something dreadful had happened. I covered my face with my hands and squeezed my eyes shut as tightly as I could to keep the tears away. My mother came over, pulled my hands down from my face and said, “Your father and I love you very much….” New tears pooled up in her saddened eyes and dripped down her face as she paused to take a few shallow breaths. Squeezing my hands in hers she continued, “I don’t expect you to understand this now, but we no longer love each other…. Daddy is going to move into his own house.” Her voice faltered in this last part, but my mind had already wandered elsewhere, searching for an escape. My eyes darted around the room looking for anything to distract me from the strangers before me. My face became heavy and my mouth sagged into a trembling frown. In forfeit, I sat there staring at them, blinking only when my eyes screamed with dehydration. Without a word, I covered my face with my hands, smelling the dumplings and praying to God I could go back to our last meal together as a family.
Works Cited


A Comparative Paris

Adam Gopnik’s anthology, *Americans in Paris: A Literary Anthology*, accurately illustrates many American accounts of Paris. By demonstrating how these Americans naturally contrast Paris with either their home country or other experiences they have undergone, he characterizes this notion as a “‘habit of comparison’ so dear to American writers in Paris” (Gopnik, 128). In “Occasional Paris,” Henry James romanticizes his description of Paris through a series of contrasts between London and Paris, while Mark Twain employs a satirical perspective when depicting his experiences in his novel, *The Innocents Abroad*. Even though their personal Parisian adventures differ, both authors possess similar “‘habit[s] of comparison.’” Henry James and Mark Twain support Gopnik’s claim through the different comparisons they generate in their work. While James focuses on the differences in people and his return to Paris, Twain juxtaposes his fictitious expectations with Parisian reality.

In Henry James’s piece, “Occasional Paris,” the American writer describes his return to Paris from London, contrasting the visit with his experiences during his maiden voyage to the city of lights. Upon his arrival, James states, “I will only pretend that a good many old impressions have recovered their freshness, and that there is a sort of renovated entertainment in
looking at the most brilliant city in the world with eyes attuned to a different pitch” (130). While James chooses to “pretend” that there is a “freshness” and “renovated entertainment” to Paris after his return, he recognizes the stark contrast Paris presents in comparison to London. James’s first adventure in Paris clearly left a lasting impression on him, for it drove him to revisit, leading him to examine the differences between his primary and secondary experiences. During his return, his fascination with the city increases, as he claims to “have never seen Paris more Parisian” (130). This newfound interest, the difference between his two Parisian visits, stems from the contrast James notices between London and Paris.

Following James’s journey across the English Channel, he begins to juxtapose the types of people he encounters in France with those in England. Encouraging the use of comparisons, James finds these subconscious contrasts to be enlightening and amusing. Along the lines of this claim, James observes the French to be “physically and personally a poorer one than that great family of largely-modelled, fresh-coloured people you have left upon the other side of the channel” (135). This comparison represents a subjective generalization of the French people and therefore cannot be trusted as entirely informative. By pointing out the physical differences between French and Englishmen, James does, however, prove Gopnik’s claim of the American writer’s “habit of comparison.” Other observations James makes between London and Parisian lifestyle are the differences in the attitudes of French waiters. He writes, “…that incorruptible dumbness of the British domestic…it is reminded of that most classic quality of the French nature—its sociability; a sociability which operates here as it never does in England, from below upward” (138). Struck by the amicability of French waiters in comparison to the “incorruptible dumbness” of the British, James encounters a laudable quality of French society. James believes
that the power of comparing one group of people to another lies in the influence it instills in the observer, raising their awareness of two different cultures and how they differ or intertwine.

While Henry James compares the appearances of French and English people, Mark Twain, in *The Innocents Abroad*, satirically juxtaposes his experience in Paris with his preconceived notions of what he formerly believed the city of lights would be like. Twain’s use of a sarcastic voice mirrors James’s assertion that comparisons are “entertaining,” thus employing Gopnik’s claim as a way to produce a humorous reaction through the use of exaggeration and parody. At first Twain states that one of his dreams has always been to get a shave at a Parisian “palatial barbershop,” but his high expectations crash down as the barbers transform his royal dream into a nightmare of blood and fear. Twain summarizes, “The imposter who does duty as a barber, brings his pan and napkins and implements of torture to your residence and deliberately skins you in your private apartments. Ah, I have suffered, suffered, suffered, here in Paris…” (113). Comparing this horrific experience with that of his predetermined vision of a Parisian shave, Twain exaggerates the differences between them in order to provoke a humorous effect.

The continuous satirical comparisons in Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* illustrates Gopnik’s claim, for it proves how these juxtapositions are “so dear to American writers in Paris.” Not only does Twain compare the differences between his hopes for Paris and the reality he encounters, but he also contrasts the first impressions he experiences with the later knowledge he acquires. When Twain first arrives in Paris, he applauds the French “extravagance of honesty” upon noticing that the jewelry stores purposefully separate the real and fake gold. At this observation, Twain exclaims, “Verily, a wonderful land is France!” (112). This impression of honesty, however, proves to be untrue, as Twain discerns many other falsities throughout a tour
of this seemingly “wonderful land.” Commenting on a store sign claiming that the store clerks speak English, Twain states, “We always invaded these places at once—and invariably received the information, framed in faultless French, that the clerk who did the English for the establishment had just gone to dinner and would be back in an hour—would Monsieur buy something?” (117-118). Twain interprets this situation as the French method of luring in naïve customers, revealing the use of deception as a way to make a profit. Discrediting his earlier impression of French honesty, Twain creates another contrast between his impressions and expectations.

Throughout the centuries, Paris has served as a creative haven for countless artists. Both Henry James and Mark Twain utilize this expressive freedom to make comparisons between French and their own culture, contrasting physical appearances, altered expectations, and former impressions. Not only do these two authors’ ideas directly correlate with each other, they also validate Gopnik’s assertion that American writers in Paris posses a “‘habit of comparison.’” Mirroring James’s belief that comparisons are “entertaining,” Twain’s use of satire, parody, and exaggeration create an amusing effect in his writing. Both writers compare former impressions of Paris to reality, with James describing the stark contrast between London and Paris and Twain illustrating French deceit. James and Twain’s string of similar comparisons, portrayed through different perspectives, confirms Gopnik’s claim and leaves the reader with a more holistic view of Paris.

Bibliography

High Water reverses depth and motion in its canvas structure. Visual perspective cues painted on the canvas aid this illusion between the perceived depth and the veridical depth produced by the canvas. High Water (Figure 1) is a three-dimensional painting created by the British artist Patrick Hughes in 2010 [A]. Originally crafted in London, England in Hughes’ Reverspective Studio, this famous painting has traveled the world; until April 2014, the painting was on display at the Nagoya City Art Museum in Nagoya, Japan, and is currently starring in an Op-Art exhibition at the Würth Museum in Germany [A]. High Water, a massive and brightly colored blue and gold oil painting of Venetian canal ducts, spans 23” x 61.25” x 8.5 inches. The inventor of the artistic optical illusion genre “reverspective”, Hughes intentionally misuses visual perspective cues innate to the viewer, such as line convergence and vanishing point, to convey a special illusion of depth where the opposite exists in his paintings. High Water, a reverspective painting, utilizes these elements.

**Figure 1**: Hughes’ High Water reverspective (2010) seen from the front. Painting was made with oil on board [A].
The surface of the painting depicts canals in Venice, Italy using evocative imagery and colors. Hughes exhibits meticulous detail in *High Water*; the smooth textured surface of his painting presents itself like a photograph, thoroughly displaying a multifaceted view of the city. The pale golden buildings contrast with the blue water, allowing the separate entities to contradict with, yet complement, each other; the man-made buildings inhabit a realm controlled by nature, depicted in this work to show that not even man can control the blue waters which dominate the city. Ironically, Hughes captures the boundless strength of the water in a man-made painting.

Despite the contrasts among the buildings and water, the cloudless blue sky and the sun shining on the architecture, which reflects in the water’s steady surface, add to the painting’s smooth texture to depict a calm and serene scene. The pattern of columns, windows, shadows, and arches on the buildings repeat along the depth of the painting congruously with the pattern of motion in the small, glistening waves repeating in the water. The buildings are symmetrical along the central vertical line running down each one, giving order to the painting to contrast with the syncopated rhythm of the water and the architectural patterns on the buildings. We can almost imagine being tourists, sailing through the canals of Venice in a gondola, observing the vibrant visual rhythm apparent in the patterns of the scene, and snapping this postcard-worthy depiction of a city living harmoniously with nature.

However, despite the beauty of the image, the scene of the painting is not nearly as important as the structure of the canvas in creating the illusion. Reverspectives are sculpture-paintings unique in their design. The canvas structure itself is distinct; *High Water* consists of three truncated pyramids with the smallest face projecting as the closest part of the painting to us. *High Water* also harbors a paradox, waging war between the true depth, the veridical depth, of the piece and the perceived depth, which appears to have the opposite depth to that of the canvas. Figure 2 displays the structure of *High Water*’s canvas where we can see the smallest face of each truncated pyramid projects toward us. However, this area appears the most distant in the painting. The canvas design and decoration serve as a visual paradox of space: we experience depth in areas that are relief, and “the parts that are physically close to the observer are pictorially distant” [WH]. The buildings, which recede on the canvas, create a perceived image that appears to stick out at us. The illusion of depth is aided by rich perspective cues in the painting. Hughes intentionally misuses our innate visual perspective cues that indicate depth,
such as converging lines and objects becoming smaller as they appear to recede, to trick us into a paradoxical and disorienting experience of reverse depth. Figure 3 shows how the perceived depth of the object is the opposite of its depth in reality on the canvas.

**Figure 2:** The canvas structure of High Water displaying the veridical depth of the canvas as contradictory to the perceived depth of the images [A]. The small, solid blue squares are the faces nearest to us, which depict the end of the canal in the painting.

**Figure 3:** As we stare at the canvas of Patrick Hughes' High Water from the center, we perceive the object’s depth (in purple) as opposite to that of the actual depth of the canvas (in blue). The reverspective illusion convinces us to misconstrue the perceived depth and the actual depth of the buildings’ images into appearing that they are projecting towards us when they actually recede on the canvas.
Science and art are two subjects that are not often discussed together. However, the biology that underlies human perception is of integral importance when observing *High Water* and other reverspectives. Reverspectives trick the human visual system to fall for the illusion of opposite depth. When we see anything, including Patrick Hughes’ works, our brains comprehend the visual information to make sense of the image. The lenses of our eyes focus the image of the object on our retinas, a part of the brain located at the back of our eyes. The retinas transmit information about the image through impulses of light to the specialized visual cortex in the occipital lobe at the back of the brain [LC]. The prestriate cortex, also known as the V2, is an area within this region specialized to analyze illusion in figure versus ground disparities. This area uses stereoscopic (rotation and movement) cues and visual depth cues within the images to automatically infer depth in the object [QH]. The ventral portion of the V2 recently developed in mammals and uses visual depth cues to identify objects and their context [Wa]. While the reverspectives “never trick the eye […] they can fool the mind” [Sl]. Because of the illusory depth qualities present in Patrick Hughes’ reverspectives, *High Water* and other reverspectives activate the V2 area, which incorrectly concludes the relative depths of the perceived objects.

Artistic devices, such as shadows and converging lines, aid the illusion of opposite depth, which makes distinguishing between the figure and background very difficult. The converging lines along the tops and bottoms of the buildings convey this reverse depth. The lines along the buildings converge to vanishing points on a horizon in the center of the physically nearest pyramidal faces. Due to vanishing point cues, the viewer perceives the ends of the canals, painted on the nearest faces where the vanishing points are located, as the background. However, “the lines that would converge on a flat picture plane to allude to distant objects are physically closer in [reverspectives]”, while the buildings, which appear to project towards us, are physically farthest from us. The buildings are on the sides of the pyramids, slanting opposite the relief surface. Our visual system interprets converging lines as indicating depth, and in reality this is true. However, in Patrick Hughes’ works, reality is a paradox.

Our minds interpret converging lines that meet at a vanishing point as being physically distant from us. Patrick Hughes manipulates our biological interpretation of this phenomenon by positioning the vanishing points physically nearer to us than the rest of the canvas. The repeating columns on the buildings, which get closer and closer together until the columns appear to vanish, enhance this illusion. They, too, converge at the vanishing points. Hughes utilizes this
“fence-post construction” technique, whereby the columns get smaller and closer together as they converge at the vanishing point, to add to the perceived depth of the image. This makes the ends of the canals appear to recede even though they project toward the viewer on the canvas in reality. This technique, depicted on sections of the actual piece in Figure 4 and Figure 5, amplifies the perceived depth in our minds, tricking our visual systems into observing depth opposite to that of the canvas structure. In reality, this visual cue would indicate that the buildings recede to a vanishing point located in the background; in Patrick Hughes’ world, we observe the buildings receding to a vanishing point projecting out at us.

Psychologists and biologists have specifically studied human perceptions to reverspectives. Dr. Michael Wagner conducted experiments on Hughes’ reverspectives to determine how our brains process the contradictory depth cues between the veridical depth and the perceived depth of the canvas and the images. His research showed that our brains stimulate eye movements that perceive depth through motion in response to the illusory depth presented in reverspectives. This work explains why we are fooled into perceiving the illusory depth opposite to the canvas structure [Wa]. Hughes agrees with Wagner about the power his reverspectives exert over our minds and stated, “[reverspectives exhibit] the strongest spatial illusions. They are much stronger than if [the canvas] were flat, and that is because the power of our minds sends them back. My saw and glue send them out, but your eyes and your mind send them back” [Sl].
Figure 4: *This component of High Water displays the correctly spaced columns and arches on the buildings in perspective with the vanishing points (V). This technique conveys the illusion that the buildings recede into the canvas.*

Figure 5: *Even though this portion of High Water converges to different vanishing points (V) than the portion in Figure 4, the arches and windows are equally spaced as well, reinforcing the illusory depth in the canvas.*

Likewise, the painted shadows and reflections of the buildings in the water enhance the paradoxical depth illusion by reinforcing that the buildings are the main figures and that the water and canals are background. In *High Water*, “the painted cues compete against the veridical percept [the actual canvas depth], hence they enhance the illusion” [P]. Shadows and converging lines that meet at vanishing points naturally draw our attention as indicating depth. *High Water* “[has] shadows that are consistent with the illusory percept, and hence inconsistent with the veridical percept”, which reinforce the illusion [P]. Also, we as viewers are familiar with the canal scenery and we know from prior experiences or photographs that the perceived image accurately displays the physical depiction of Venetian canal ducts. The illusion confuses our
minds; we observe the ends of the canals as concave because our brains cannot make sense of the real-world image if they were convex [SI]. As a result, we are less likely to regard the veridical depth of the canvas with any scrutiny. The interplay of recognizable objects and visual cues that allude to depth reinforce the perceived image.

Not only does High Water convey an illusory paradox of depth, the reverspective also imparts an illusion of opposite movement. As we move right, the painting and canvas appear to move left; as we move left, the painting and canvas appear to shift to the right. Figure 6 and Figure 7 display the mechanics of the illusion. The main vanishing points are located at the centers of the pyramid faces closest to us hovering in the air. The vanishing points are not on the canvas; instead they are closer to us, hanging in front of the center of the closest pyramid faces. It is necessary that the front two edges of the building are parallel with the extended lines of the vanishing points (lines that are colored green are parallel to each other and lines that are colored pink are parallel to each other in Figure 1). These lines will remain parallel regardless of our position in relation to the canvas as we see in Figure 6 and Figure 7. Psychologist Nicolas J. Wade describes how reverspectives appear to move as we walk around one: “The pictorially distant (but physically closer) parts move in the direction opposite head movement, whether this is left and right or upwards and downwards; the pictorially near (but physically more distant) parts move in the same direction as the head” [WH]. The images on the stationary canvas appear to rotate in the direction opposite to the direction we move, creating this illusion of contradictory movement.
**Figure 6:** As we shift to our right in relation to the stationary canvas, the perceived images appear to move to the left because the sides of the perceived image are parallel to the vertical vanishing points (parallel lines are marked in the same color).

![Diagram of vanishing points and perceived object](image)

**Figure 7:** As we shift to our left relative to the canvas, the perceived images appear to move to the right as the edges of the buildings remain parallel to the vertical vanishing points.

Hughes has accentuated the importance of *wandering* through his reverspectives [SI]. This is an odd idea, considering that the paintings are mounted on a wall. Nevertheless, what Hughes emphasizes is the importance of human interaction with the painting; instead of simply staring at it, we should move around it in order to experience the magic of the painting entirely. Hughes confirms the vital role of the “seer” in his pieces, stating, “The seer is the director and author who controls the action […] My pictures are life theatre sets […] creating a place for an actor to move around […] [a]nimated by the seer’s movement and imagination” [SI]. We control the magic of the illusion and only we can experience the paradoxes by choosing to view the reverspective from an infinite number of points. The magic is in movement. “My motor is the viewer,” Hughes explains [Ma]. The artistic design and the engaging visual perspective illusions allow us as viewers to feel immersed in the perceived objects as we become a part of the picture:
the human component that, through movement, will convince the painting to share its perspectival secrets and endless viewing possibilities.

Because of the integral role motion plays in enhancing the reverspective illusion, there is no set critical distance away from the painting that we must stand in order to observe the illusion. The “‘reversed’ depth seen […] is extremely powerful”, allowing us to perceive the illusion from many distances and angles [RG]. Nevertheless, this illusion “breaks down [only] when the observer is very close to the artwork” such as standing in between the protruding pyramids [RG]. From distances slightly beyond the ends of the pyramids, the brain is fooled by the illusion and is convinced that the perceived depth is accurate instead of the veridical depth. When we stand very close, our brains interpret the veridical depth of the canvas and we cannot observe the intended illusion.

Hughes’ paradoxical artistic creations did not appear to the artist randomly. Patrick Hughes’ art was born from his disturbing experiences during World War II. Had war not devastated the world in the early 1940s, Hughes, a young boy at the time, never may have discovered an interest in paradoxes that have shaped his signature reverspectives and artistic style. Patrick Hughes was born in England in 1939, and as a child World War II violence became well known to him when Nazi forces regularly bombed his hometown. Air-raid sirens would alert citizens to hide, forcing Hughes’ family to hide in a cupboard beneath their basement stairs, “The Glory Hole”, to escape German bombers [Sp]. Listening to bomb explosions, young Patrick Hughes pondered the paradoxical pattern of the stairs as observed from the underside, “We were looking at the stairs the wrong way round – up and down” [B]. He has acknowledged the impact the bombings have had on his life, stating, “It must have made an impression: being bombed and in the dark and […] seeing everything the wrong way round” [B]. He even credits the war for inspiring his works, thanking “the German war effort [for teaching me] to be imaginative” [Ma]. Nevertheless, it is no surprise that such a frightening experience would leave an impression on Hughes, not only in his memory, but on his canvas as well.

This reversal of perspective in the cupboard stairs, originally a frightening experience for Hughes, is now the basis of the illusion he employs in his artwork. *High Water* applies a visual perspective illusion, making all objects and traditional perspective cues “the wrong way round”, Hughes described of his work [Wi]. Reverspectives are not the only thing to end up “the wrong way round”; originally dreaming of becoming a teacher, nineteen year-old Patrick Hughes was
removed from the English department of his university, and was forced to study art instead, because his eclectic and modern taste in literature was unacceptable to his professors [Mc]. Little did young Patrick Hughes realize at the time that his biggest disappointment would ultimately evolve into his great success as an artist, whose works are famous for their unique takes on traditional perspective.

Hughes also received inspiration for his paradox pieces from fellow artists. A self-described “surrealist sympathizer”, Patrick Hughes cites European surrealist artists Paul Klee and René Magritte his influences [Hu]. Hughes admires Klee’s “organisation, humor, and invention” and “what [Magritte’s paintings] think” [Mc]. He designs his reverspectives “in a Paul Klee-like way with the geometric design of art and in a Magritte-like way in getting to the bottom of representation and reproduction” [Hu] and is a disciple of Klee’s geometrical designs [Wi] and transformation of forms [B]. Not ironically, all three artists engage viewers with visually immersive paradoxes, which elicit amazement and wonder from viewers [Sl]. Similarly, his use, and misuse, of depth harkens to many genres of art, making Hughes’ work “the heir to Magritte […] the heir to Renaissance masters of spatial depth and to Giorgio del Chirico [a surrealist] and the Cubists” [Sp] as well as an extension to Pop Art [Wi]. Nevertheless, Hughes refuses to categorize his art with any artistic movement, stating, “My work is so good that it does not need an umbrella; it can stand in the full light of the sun” [Wi]. Despite his rejections, his use of paradoxical images relates his work to that of surrealist and trompe l’oeil artists (the latter of which consists of pieces that seek to create “a surface that has a different three-dimensional structure to the work” [WH]). This precious and distinctive visual paradox is invaluable to Hughes as his transformations engross viewers’ minds and force them to second-guess their own perceptions and perspectives.

Like the surrealists Magritte and Klee, Hughes purposefully inverts perspective to deceive and disorient us. The inverted perception deceives our senses akin to seasickness, echoing the disorientation Hughes experienced as a victim of wartime violence, reflecting on his unusual view of his stairs, and the confusion Hughes felt entering the art field after his failure with teaching. Patrick Hughes’ reverspectives are unique; they are the first of their kind to purposefully misuse perspective cues, such as vanishing point and converging lines, to create a contradictory three-dimensional image.
Critics are quick to notice the puzzling paradoxes that lurk in his masterpiece sculpture-paintings. Many are delighted and amused by Hughes’ reverspective illusions. Author Tayfun Belgin compares Hughes’ work with perspective to that of the early artistic legend Filippo Brunelleschi as a refreshing “abandonment of the traditional central perspective that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance […] discovered by Filippo Brunelleschi” [B]. Hughes manipulates traditional perspective “rules” and visual cues to create a reversal of perceptual perspective. Author John Slyce agrees: “Hughes strips perspective bare of its conventions and creates a new set of rules […] Hughes’ perspective is a paradoxical perspective – it allows us to see reality from different angles at once and from multiple points-of-view while keeping all the conflicting options open” [Sl]. Slyce praises Hughes’ ingenious break with traditional perspective, stating, “Rather than fixed and frozen [like traditional Renaissance perspective work], the seer is free to move, to wander and wonder through the surrealist space of his pictures” [Sl]. Hughes breaks the “rules” of Renaissance perspective and builds new ones through his new genre of reverspectives. Traditional perspective work was created on flat canvases to create a perception of depth; Hughes’ pieces are created on three-dimensional canvases to create a reversal of perceived depth. Slyce adds a playful caution to viewing Hughes’ work: “one must expect the unexpected” [Sl].

However, not all viewers are so stunned in marvel at the paradoxical qualities in reverspectives. Art critic Rhonda Koenig experienced the disorienting effects from viewing Hughes’ reverspectives at an art gallery, explaining their effects aggressively and dismissively as “violence […] done to conventional perceptions of space and symbol” [K]. She further continues to describe the “aggressive hues and vertigo-inducing protrusions” and the nausea she experienced while viewing them [K].

This confusing feeling is intentional. Hughes explains, “People experience the reverspective as a disorientation. As they move to the left, the picture seems to move to the right. As they move down the picture moves up […] With their own eyes and feet giving them contradictory information the see-er decides that the picture they see must be moving, even though they know it is not” [Hu]. In our minds, we experience paradoxes between what we know to be true, and what our eyes tell us is true. Hughes argues that viewers feel the disorientation “in their legs’ as they move about the picture” while they absorb the full effects of the illusion which requires them to actively participate in the art [Hy].
Hughes describes his works perfectly in only one word: paradoxical [Wi]. Hughes explained, “I embrace and celebrate the paradoxical. A paradox to me is like a pearl” [Mc]. The paradoxical paintings also incite a paradox within us. Hughes hopes that his paintings change the way we think about the world and ourselves [Sl]. “I believe [viewers] have an experience, unlike any other, in which they see the impossible happen […] If lookers and seers experience the paradoxical and reciprocal relation between parts of the world and themselves, they get a sense of the flow of life” [Mc]. Most importantly, he wants us to have an opportunity for “[r]eflection on our perceptions” [B] through art that comes alive [Hu]. Hughes grants us the privilege of experiencing the impossible in everyday life through his alluring paintings.

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Connections II Category

Honorable Mention

“Terror in the Name of God: the Special Case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)”

Indira Rahman

Terror in the Name of God: the Special Case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Indira Rahman

CNX 206: Understanding Terrorism
Prof. Jennifer Kibbe
April 30, 2015
**Introduction**

Much has been said and written about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on either side of the Atlantic in recent times, including detailed reports on the terrorist-group-turned-proto-state’s stranglehold on Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. The group’s geopolitical aims seem obvious, given its rapid acquisition of territory and its active resistance against the governments of Iraq and Syria, which it views as illegitimate. There seems to be a marked hesitance, however, to take other factors, like ISIS’ ideological objectives, at face value—especially when they purport that their claims are justified by passages in the Koran, the holy book of Islam. We refuse to consider the uncomfortable proposition that there exist religious, specifically Koranic, justifications which can lend moral authority to ISIS’ violent acts. Given the extreme lengths ISIS has gone to use religion as justification for its terrorism, it would be intellectually dishonest to dismiss religion as a factor prematurely. In this paper, I will posit that ISIS is indeed, to some extent, driven by religion, although other socioeconomic and geopolitical motivations may exist. This paper is not intended to encapsulate the motivations of individual jihadi fighters that support ISIS’ cause, but to consider the motivation of the organization as a whole. For the purposes of this paper, ISIS will be treated as a terrorist group, as defined by the United States Bureau of Counterterrorism. The paper will be divided into three parts: religious ideology, textual evidence for religious violence, and religious sectarianism in Iraq. I will examine religion on two levels: First, I will outline the ideology of the Islamic State and cross-examine its version of Islam with the Koran’s definition (and justification) of two Islamic principles, *jihad* and *takfir*. Second, I will analyze the conflict of religious identification between the Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East.

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10 [http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm)
The Ideology

Before determining to what extent religion motivates the terrorism of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), it is important to consider ISIS’ ideology. Cole Bunzel points out: “in a 2007 audio address, then-Islamic State leader Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi appealed “to all Sunnis, and to the young men of Jihadi-Salafism (al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya) in particular, across the entire world.” What exactly is Jihadi-Salafism? Jihadi-Salafism, or jihadism for short, is the version of Islam championed by both ISIS and al-Qaeda (though to different degrees of strictness, as will become evident in the next section). It is embedded in the Sunni tradition and offers “an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture…rooted in a pre-modern tradition.”

Two strains of thought form the foundation of ISIS’ jihadism. The first is related to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, it advocated for the restoration of the Islamic caliphate. Founder Hasan al-Banna said: “Islam requires that the Muslim community unite around…the head of the Islamic State, and it forbids the Muslim community from being divided among states…” The ideological similarities end there. For the Brotherhood, the caliphate was a distant long-term goal, whereas

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for ISIS it is of immediate importance. The Brotherhood, a Sunni movement, was also not openly hostile to other sects of Islam, unlike ISIS.

The second strain of ISIS’ ideology is Salafism, a strain of Muslim thought aimed at cleansing the faith of idolatry (shirk), excessive worship of symbols or inanimate objects, and reconfirming the oneness of Allah. Salafists view Shi’a as “guilty of shirk on account of their excessive reverence of the Prophet Mohammed’s family.”\(^\text{14}\) Salafism rejects Shi’a as a valid sect of Islam and has grown to eclipse the Brotherhood strain. This Salafist focus on purifying the religion is absolutist, implying that there is only one way to practice Islam correctly. ISIS’ ideology, taken to its logical conclusion, would imply that al-Qaeda, Hamas, non-Sunni Muslim denominations, and even the rulers of the Middle East, whom they view as insufficiently pious be they Sunni or Shi’a, are apostates deserving of the death penalty, because they do not subscribe to ISIS’ strict interpretation of Islam. Although al-Qaeda and ISIS hold similar beliefs (in fact, ISIS was once a branch of Al Qaeda in Iraq), the former believes that Shi’a Muslims may be absolved of the death penalty (the punishment for apostasy) by virtue of their ignorance, but the latter would disagree. Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which would eventually transform into the Islamic State, had every reason to stoke the fires of sectarian tension between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq and used takfir, the Islamic concept of Muslims declaring fellow Muslims apostate, to conduct war on the “near enemy,” the impious Middle Eastern governments and non-Sunni Muslims. It is this uncompromising hardline stance that caused the organization to split from al-Qaeda and rechristen itself from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to what we know today to be the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS’ ideology is violent—I hesitate to use the word “extremist,” because that would imply that the Koranic verses, the absolute literal word of Allah, can be interpreted on a scale of benign to ruthless. This in turn would imply that interpretation at one end of the spectrum is as valid as interpretation at the other—which is simply not true, as some interpretations, while they purport to be literalist, are deeply *ahistorical,* as Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel would say. Such readings of the Koran are pre-modern, dismissing over a thousand years of Islamic history, and often ignore context.

**The Koranic Stance: Jihad and Takfir**

The central question, then, is: Is ISIS’ ideology, summarized above, consistent with the tenets outlined in the Koran? This is a particularly salient issue, because ISIS attributes moral justification for its violence to the Koran; some believe Koranic justifications for ISIS’ extremism exist, while others, including a large segment of the global Muslim population, condemn their acts as “un-Islamic.” To answer this question, we will cross-examine ISIS’ ideology with two Koranic principles, *jihad* and *takfir.*

Common knowledge would have us believe that *jihad,* the concept of “holy war” in the Koran, calls Muslims to arms to “kill them wherever you find them,” where “they” implies infidels or unbelievers. But as Sherman Jackson points out in his essay *Jihad and the Modern World,* fighting was a way of life in early 7th century tribal Arabia and indeed the only way to

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16 Note: “jihad” is often translated as “holy war”, but the literal translation is “struggle.” For a more comprehensive treatment of jihad (internal and external), see
17 Koran 2:191-193
ensure the “physical integrity” and survival of the nascent Muslim ummah. Given such hostile conditions, the Koran imposed the obligation on the reluctant Muslims to wage jihad, even criticizing them for their “unwillingness to fight.” To further paraphrase Jackson’s piece, in that time period, a “state of war” was assumed to exist between neighboring tribes Waging jihad was a survival mechanism, a conflict of tribe vs. tribe, not necessarily Muslims vs. non-Muslims.

ISIS advocates for defensive jihad against the Crusaders and offensive jihad against internal foes, those it deems to be apostates of traitors to Islam. But its claim to jihad cannot be justified, on two grounds. As aforementioned, the concept of jihad is only valid when a state of war is assumed to exist between two rival entities. Since the signing of the United Nations Charter after WWII, Jackson observes, “the territorial integrity of every nation on earth has been rendered inviolable. In effect, this dismantled the general “state of war” and established peace as the assumed and normal relationship between all nations.”

Given this new prevalent state of peace, the necessity for jihad falls away. Ibn Rushd concludes: “So, whenever we are placed beyond the reach of the enemy and the outlying districts of Muslim lands are secured and the gaps in their fortifications are filled, the obligation to wage jihad falls from all the rest of the Muslims.”

Secondly, and more interestingly, ISIS’ main target is not the West, the invading Crusaders or the “far enemy,” but the leaders of the Middle East themselves, whom ISIS’ deems too decadent to adhere to strict Islamic principles. One of ISIS’ main goals, besides establishing a caliphate, is to cleanse the Muslim community of those who are, according to its standards,

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18 Translation: Arabic word for “community.”
insufficiently Muslim. The method employed is *takfir*, “the act of accusing an individual or group that self-identifies as *mu'mins*/believers of in fact being *kafirs*/unbelievers because of their beliefs and/or acts.”22 ISIS’ indiscriminate use of *takfir*, especially against Shi’a Muslims in Iraq, would have us believe that it is one of the five central tenets of Islam. However, as will soon become evident, the historical application of *takfir* shows that not only is there no widespread agreement on standards for declaring apostasy, but that it is a fringe issue:

The Khajiris were the first to use *takfir* in the 7th century. They initially supported Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali’s leadership of the Muslim ummah, but later declared Ali and his followers apostates.23 In recent history, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose descendants would eventually establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, founded the purist Wahhabi doctrine, which uses *takfir* extensively in order to eliminate *shirk* (idolatry). Specifically, al-Wahhab used *takfir* as a political tool to quickly de-legitimize anyone who refused to follow him.24 Medina and Meccas scholars of the time rejected al-Wahhab’s use of *takfir* widely.25 Thus, *takfir* was used a political tool to secure or delegitimize Muslim leadership. Given that precedent, ISIS’ use of *takfir* is not unprecedented. Generally, however, Muslim scholars heavily caution against accusing another of apostasy, because the act carries serious theological consequences for both parties. In the Hadith, al-Bukahri, Prophet Muhammad said, “When a man says to his companion, ‘O you Kaafr’, then this would necessarily be binding upon one of the two. If the

man who was called a *kaafir* is actually one, then he would be a *kaafir*; otherwise whatever the caller said would return upon him.”\(^{26}\) This means that if a Muslim falsely accuses another of being a *murtad* (apostate) without concrete evidence, then he himself could be considered guilty of being an apostate and has to face the consequences. The punishment for apostasy can include anything from communal exclusion to execution, thus setting the bar for these sorts of accusations immensely high.

Moreover, the only religious body with the authority to declare *takfir* (apostasy) in the 21st century is the *ulema*, Islamic scholars trained in all of Islamic law;\(^ {27}\) even then, it is used sparingly due to the lack of any centralized Islamic authority. Some might contest that ISIS, by declaring itself a caliphate, has challenged the *ulema’s* authority – but in order for a caliphate to be legitimate, *all* Muslims must acknowledge it, which is not the case.\(^ {28}\) ISIS cannot use such a minor, widely contested, and obscure concept to justify mass-scale general violence. Indeed, the *takfiri* bent of ISIS has garnered much criticism and is what caused the split between Al Qaeda and its “branch” in Iraq, despite their shared vision of an universal caliphate. This *takfiri* stance, especially against Shi’a Muslims, will be discussed in detail in the next section. Given that *takfir* is a practice widely disregarded in the Muslim community, Daniel Byman suggests, “the predominance of *takfiri* elements within the Salafi-jihadist movement…can be leveraged against [Salafi-jihadist insurgencies like ISIS] by parties seeking to undermine their popular support.”\(^ {29}\)

Nevertheless, the exegesis of ancient texts is a complicated task, and I will acknowledge that Islam is definitely not, to use the old rhetoric, “a religion of peace,” let alone a pacifistic

\(^{26}\) Ahmad Ibn Hanbal narrative 5824


\(^{28}\) http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis REALLY wants/384980/

religion. As Mark Juergensmeyer points out, religion is the only non-state entity that can provide “moral sanction for violence…and provides the image of cosmic war.”30 Certainly in the Koran, there are countless instances of “great battles of the legendary past…metaphysical conflicts between good and evil,”31 which might inspire individual ISIS soldiers to believe they are fighting a just war in the name of Allah, for Allah. Despite that, the fact that authorization of those violent acts is predicated on the presumed existence of wider conditions, such as a state of war, provides a check on employing punishments prescribed for infidels and apostates liberally. Since a state of war does not exist between the Muslim world and the non-Muslim war right now, the Islamic State cannot justify waging offensive or defensive jihad or using takfir against anyone who opposes it, on Koranic grounds. Whether ISIS itself perceives that a state of war exists is another matter, and only tangentially related to our discussion.

The Shi’a-Sunni Dimension

What of the situation on the ground, especially in Iraq, the birthplace of ISIS? Why is there such deep-rooted animosity between the Shi’a and Sunni sects of Islam in that region and how did ISIS capitalize on this divide? In addition to Shi’a, ISIS views other Islamic sects such as the Alawites and Kurds—as well as the ‘inadequately Muslim’ Sunni governments such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia—as illegitimate. However, for the sake of simplicity, we will focus only on the two major denominations of Islam in Iraq: Sunni and Shi’a. In this section, by outlining the nature of the Shi’a-Sunni conflict in Iraq, I will advocate that the conflict is more religious than political—and the political dimension is predicated on the religious.

The following chart shows that Shi’a Muslims are the majority in Iraq, Iran and Bahrain, but usually a minority in most Muslim countries. The situation in Iraq is unique, because its Shi’a-Sunni demographic has transformed over the decades. Cole Bunzel points out, “According to the Islamic State, Iraq’s recent historical transition from a Sunni to a Shi’ite majority is evidence of a creeping “Shi’itization.” As Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi once asserted, it was only in the last 50 to 70 years that Sunni conversion to Shi’ism began. Before then, Iraq was a Sunni country.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Shia population</th>
<th>Shia of total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>68.7 million</td>
<td>61.8 million</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>26.8 million</td>
<td>17.4 million</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>27.0 million</td>
<td>2.7 million</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>3.9 million</td>
<td>1.7 million</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>2.4 million</td>
<td>730,000</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>520,000</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>18.9 million</td>
<td>190,000 (+2.8 million)²</td>
<td>1% (+15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>2.6 million</td>
<td>160,000</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>890,000</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1. Demographic breakdown of Shi’a Muslims by nation

Shia, literally “party of Ali,” believe “religious leadership (imama, anglicized to imamate) rightly belonged to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and thereafter to his

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descendants,” while the rest (and overwhelming majority of 84%) are Sunni or “orthodox” who believe otherwise. The Shia-Suni sectarian struggle is a struggle of personal identification, amplified by the fact that it takes place in the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam. As L. Carl Brown rightly points out in his book *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, “When groups of people (whether religious communities, political parties, or nation-states) share a common origin but split away from each other to form organizationally separate entities, the more normal human result is acute antipathy if not downright enmity.”

That being said, Ches Thurber notes through the eyes of Riverbend, a middle-class Iraqi Sunni blogger, the “high levels of tolerance and coexistence in Baghdad before 2003: ‘We get along with each other—Sunnis and Shi’a, Muslims and Christians and Jews…. We intermarry, we mix and mingle, we live… it was never an issue.” He also reports that pre-US invasion, it was “socially taboo to ask someone if they were Sunni or Shia,” as well as common to live in mixed sect families. However, despite tolerance on an individual level, for many Sunni and Shi’a, there was less open-mindedness about political matters, specifically the country’s governance. Riverbend describes the Shi’a Dawa party “as an extremist organization engaged in terrorist acts” while Salam, another Iraqi blogger with a similar background to Riverbend’s, compares Shi’a politicians to the dictator Saddam Hussein and worries that Iraq “might become

an Iran clone.” The contrast between the personal tolerance exhibited by the bloggers and their
distrust of a potential Shi’a ruling party is striking.

This distrust is caused by the climate of fear after the collapse of the Baathist regime,
leaving a power vacuum, which either group could seize. This led to “otherization” of Shi’a by
Sunni and vice versa. Both groups now had competing political interests, and Abu Mus’ab-al
Zarqawi, the founder of what would eventually become ISIS, exacerbated these tensions of
religious identification between Shi’a and Sunni, escalating the conflict to the point of violence.
Zarqawi’s anti-Shiite stance is a product of increasing marginalization of the Sunni minority and
lay the groundwork for the ISIS’ takfiri bent against Iraqi Shi’as. By the mid-2000s, the struggle
had turned into one of religious sectarianism, Shi’a vs. Sunni, us vs. them.

In Iraq, the problem is not that there is a Muslim majority but that one particular sect of
Islam constitutes a majority. Given this, esa democratic system would always favor the majority;
the government that is then voted in institutes discriminatory or negligent policies against the
minority, causing them to feel socially marginalized or politically underrepresented, which in
turn creates sectarian strife. ISIS, born out of this marginalization, capitalized on sectarian
religious divides to consolidate power. My main argument is that if Iraqis did not self-identify
based on differing religious sects (for example, if Iraq were all Sunni/Shi’a), ISIS would have
had a harder time stoking the fires of sectarian revolution. The national conversation may have
shifted to secular vs. Islamic state (and other extremist groups may have risen) but that is
preferable to the current infighting.

Conclusion

The Islamic State is a complicated beast. It is attempting to cultivate legitimacy through
the Koran is futile, but its hardline extremist exclusionary policies makes it difficult for it to get
on-the-ground support from the mainstream Muslim community or acknowledgement, which is needed if it is to function as a sovereign regime.

A rigorous cross-examination of ISIS’ ideology with Koranic tenets reveals that its actions cannot be justified without the existence of wider conditions such as a state of war. It matters little, however, what the holy book actually says. Whether we like it or not, the conflict in Iraq and Syria, has devolved rapidly into one of Shi’a vs. Sunni. Until sectarianism within Islam can be sorted out, instead of saying religion directly motivates ISIS’ violence, it would be more accurate to say that religious differences drive the Islamic State’s violence.
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http://alnakhlah.org/.
Connections II Category

Honorable Mention

“From Generation to Generation“

Ryan Ulrich

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From Generation to Generation

L’dor vador: From generation to generation. Nothing is more important to a Jew than keeping traditions alive by passing them down through the years, from father and mother to son and daughter. When I was a little boy, my Grandpa Mitch used to sit with me on the sofa and tell me stories about our ancestors. I remember him telling me that our family was descended from Aaron, the biblical brother of Moses, and that they had served as kohanim, or priests of the temple. I didn’t understand what that meant, but I knew that my grandfather was proud of being a kohan, and he was especially proud that I, as his grandson, would one day assume that role in our temple congregation as well.

One of the symbols of my grandfather’s role was his tallit, or prayer shawl, which he had inherited from his father. Made of soft ivory silk, it was a long, simple rectangle with nine faded blue stripes at each end. At each corner were the twined and knotted fringes known as tzitzit, which were there to remind him of his religious obligations. At the neck was the most elaborate part of the tallit — the embroidered atarah, or neckpiece, with the prayer for wearing a tallit spelled out in golden thread.

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to wrap ourselves in the tzitzit.
Every Friday evening at Shabbat services, my grandfather draped the tallit over his shoulders like a caped superhero and chanted the prayers in a bold, clear tenor. I often stood next to him and was proud of this tall, distinguished man with a voice like a bell. I watched how other congregants smiled approvingly as he sang. I wanted to be like him — handsome, wise, kind, respected — and one day wear a tallit as an outward sign of my devotion to God. When he was not looking, sometimes I reached over the armrest to finger the tzitzit, rolling the fine, soft cords between my fingers and let myself get lost in the music of Shabbat. Sometimes he caught me doing this, and grabbed my hand in his big bear paw to give it a gentle squeeze.

I was eight when my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Over the next four years, I watched as this man, once a towering presence in both his community and his family, slipped away bit by bit. At first, it wasn’t that noticeable. He would forget that he had told me a story just the other day, or get lost (just a little) on our walks together, but soon, it became apparent that larger pieces of his life were fading into darkness. But one thing never changed — his clear and beautiful voice. He would still sing the old prayers with me at Friday night services, even though he had lost the ability to read the Hebrew prayer book. He still stood tall when we stood to welcome the Sabbath bride, even though his eyes could not belie his confusion about the identities of the people in the surrounding sanctuary. He still wrapped himself in his silken tallit, as if to shield himself from the encroaching disease.

It was during the last throes of his Alzheimer’s that I began to study in earnest for my bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage when a thirteen-year old becomes accountable for his own actions. I practiced my prayers in private and agonized that I had not inherited my grandfather’s beautiful voice. I grew angry at God and wondered why he would rob me of my best teacher at a time when I needed him most. And I lashed out at my mother, who insisted that I continue my
studies even after my grandfather passed away a few weeks after my twelfth birthday. “Why,” I asked her, “do I have to do this when YOU didn’t have to do this? What’s the point? Grandpa isn’t here anymore.”

My mother, who had never become a bat mitzvah, explained that when she was a girl, it was not deemed important or appropriate for girls to perform this ceremony. But she said something surprising — she told me that if I continued with my studies, she would also study to become a bat mitzvah herself. L’dor vador — “from generation to generation,” she told me. “We will continue this tradition together.”

For the next 10 months, we studied as a team. With my help, she learned to read Hebrew. With her help, I learned to sing the prayers, mostly on key, and five weeks apart in 2009, we became b’nai mitzvah. My mother’s ceremony was first. When she walked up to the bimah, I noticed my grandfather’s tallit fastened over her shoulders. She stood tall and proud and chanted her Torah portion in a high, clear voice. She sang with the assuredness and clarity that I remembered hearing from my grandfather. When she finished, she smiled and winked at me. And at the end of the service, she whispered in my ear, “You’re next!”

I spent the next month fretting about the details of the big day and questioning whether I would be able to sing and pray in a way that would have made my grandfather proud. I thought about his tallit and wondered if my mother planned on keeping it for herself now that she was a bat mitzvah. That tallit represented everything about Judaism that was important to me — history, tradition, strength, family, and spirituality. I pondered how a scrap of cloth could hold so much meaning and weight when, after all, it is just a piece of fabric.
Five weeks later, I was on the bimah for my bar mitzvah. Before the service began, the Rabbi and my mother pulled me aside and asked me to recite the prayer for the wearing of the tallit. I dutifully chanted,

“Baruch atah Adoinai, Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam, asher kidishanu b’mitz’votav v’tzivanu l’hit’ateif ba’atzizit.”

My mother reached into a velvet bag and pulled out my grandfather’s tallit. She lovingly draped the soft garment over my shoulders. I know it isn’t possible, but as my mother straightened the atarah over my chest, I felt my grandfather’s strong arms fastening the tallit in the front. As I approached the Torah to sing my portion, I reached down and rolled the tzitzit between my fingers. I swear I felt my grandfather’s hand squeeze back.
Drunk on Poetry: The Intoxicating Effects of the Wine Song

If read only once, Abu Nuwas’s poem “You with the Magic Gaze” may seem like a traditional wine song. Emerging in the 7th century, around the same time as Islam and the Qur’an, the genre of the wine song became a means to engage many things forbidden by the Islamic religion, such as drinking. It is argued that, with the new world view provided by Islamic beliefs, two types of poets emerged: the Umarites, who wrote chaste poems about being a good Muslim and loving one woman, and the Udhrites, who wrote more raunchy poems about loving more than one woman. However, Abu Nuwas does not quite fit into either of these categories, as the wine songs, or “khamiyya” that he is most famous for, existed in a genre of their own. Upon closer scrutiny of language and metaphor, it becomes clear that “You with the Magic Gaze” is not just about wine, or “khamr”. This poem becomes wine, with all of its intoxicating and alluring effects; thus, the act of reading poetry becomes drinking like wine.

“You with the Magic Gaze” is neither about worshipping Allah like a good Muslim, nor skirting around the Islamic faith and worshipping women. It is a poem of three parts through which the speaker not only worships wine, but also seduces a young boy. Thus, while entertaining the taboo of alcohol and drunkenness, Abu Nuwas simultaneously dares to entertain
the taboo of homosexuality, as this, too, was forbidden by the Islamic faith. We see these controversial themes emerge as, in structure, the poem takes the form of a six-line introduction that acts as the beginning of the seduction, an eleven-line center that praises and personifies wine, and a jarring five-line conclusion that is the result of both the seduction and the intoxication. Furthermore, beyond its literary structure, we see how the poem itself is the embodiment of wine, as we become intoxicated by its language and metaphor.

From the first mysterious, enticing line of the poem: “You with the magic gaze, eternally languid, secrets held close in the heart are drawn out with your eyes”, we are beckoned in. We take the first sip of the wine. We, too, feel “eternally languid” as we begin to feel the calming effect of being absorbed into the reading of poetry. We feel the poem come over us as a wave that we dive into at its core. Just as the part of our subconscious that poetry arouses becomes submerged in the swirling tide of the poem, we are inundated with the intoxicating effects of wine as Abu Nuwas’s subtle alliteration of “eternally” and “languid” rolls to the backs of our tongues like sips of wine.

As the boy, too, sips wine, the speaker’s intentions to seduce him become clear with romantic lines such as “When you examine a hidden feeling of mine with your look, candour whispers the secret.” The words “hidden” and “secret” evoke a sense of the forbidden, and when paired with “your look” and “whispers”, a sense of flirtation and lust. The speaker continues, “Your eyes stare and secrets come clean, as if you have power over fancies,” and we imagine that the young boy must be swooning to hear such a compliment, to be called powerful by an older man. The poem then departs from the framework of the introduction, and the poet’s voice as a lover becomes drowned out and the imagery of the wine floats, bubbling and fermenting, to the top.
With the shift in tone from line 6: “So drink the wine though it is forbidden for God forgives even grave sins” to line 7: “A white wine forging bubbles when mixed – pearls set in gold,” readers experience a shift in our level of drunkenness. The tone of line 6 is almost nostalgic as the profoundness of the aphorism “God forgives even grave sins” sets in. However, the tone of line 7 has a more wistful tone as we picture the “bubbles” of the wine swirling around as it is “mixed.” This abrupt shift marks the transition into the heart of the poem. We continue to drink in the words of the poem, becoming more and more intoxicated on the bubbling imagery of the poem and less aware of the seduction that is coming over us.

The metaphor found in line 7, which likens the bubbles of the wine to “pearls set in gold,” points to a deeper meaning when its Arabic connotations become known. In Arabic, the word for pearls can also translate, literally, to written words. Thus, as one strings pearls on to a strand to make a necklace, one strings words together to make a poem: each a work of art. If the bubbles of the wine become pearls become words, doesn’t, then, the wine become words? The metaphor likening bubbles to pearls is, by extension, likening wine to poetry. Wine, then, is a metaphor for poetry, and Abu Nuwas uses this metaphor to get us drunk.

Just as we are becoming more drunk on the words of Abu Nuwas, so, too, is the object of the speaker’s seduction. With his lengthy praise of wine in the heart of the poem, the poet entices us to keep reading the poem, and the young boy being seduced by the speaker of the poem is enticed to keep drinking the wine. How could the boy resist? With the personification “She [the wine] was on the Ark in Noah’s time – most noble of his shipment whilst the Earth was awash”, we, the readers and the boy, picture a beautiful, “noble” woman. With such an alluring description, the wine becomes more appealing. Just as this holy imagery describes a literal flood
washing over the world, a figurative flood overcomes us as we become more submerged in the undulating tides of the poem, similar, too, to our bellies becoming full of sloshing wine.

As the intoxicating effects of both the speaker’s words and the wine take effect, the poem’s conclusion returns to its original seductive narrative, which has prompted a sexual assault. The speaker, the assailant, claims that the wine made possible his “iniquitous” act: “when the drunkard assaulted the drunkard”. With the departure and return to the seduction narrative, the poet creates space for his praise of wine to act as a veil to his seduction, as well as time for the boy to drink the wine and become vulnerable. The speaker’s words and the wine both act as a distraction to the speaker’s intentions.

Abu Nuwas’s depiction of sexual assault causes a boiling of emotions such as disgust and anger to come over readers. We feel pity for the boy as we read “’O Woe!’ as tears overcame him, ‘You have torn away from me the dignity I had preserved” and thus feel anger toward the speaker for doing such a thing. However, our anger cannot really be directed toward the speaker, but it can be directed at the poem. This is Abu Nuwas’s intention; he has shown that poetry can be so powerful as to instill these strong emotions in readers, while simultaneously showing that wine can be so powerful as to prompt erotic passion, vulnerability and thus sexual assault. He has used the boy as a device, a pretext to praise the wine and its effects, as well as poetry and its effects.

Just as wine can cause our emotions to be heightened and our inhibitions to be lowered, thus prompting us to act, poetry can have the same effect. If we allow ourselves to be overcome by a poem, we allow ourselves to become drunk on its words. Thus, it is not surprising that poetry, unless religious, and wine were condemned by the Islamic faith, as both can prompt emotions and actions, if readers and drinkers allow themselves to succumb to the passionate
feelings aroused by poetry and wine. However, rather than condemning wine and poetry, we should admire both for their power over us. Poetry and wine allow us to depart from the constraints of reality for a while; of how many other things can this be said?
Foundations Category

Honorable Mention

“Standardized Testing Does Not Adequately Test Student Learning”

Emily Okikawa

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Standardized Testing Does Not Adequately Test Student Learning

My parents prized education above all else and worked tirelessly to allow my brother and me to attend private schools. As a result, I never paid any attention to the No Child Left Behind Act. It did not concern me, and so I did not delve any further into the topic. However, after reading, Diane Ravitch’s *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, I wanted to learn more. In an effort to promote accountability, and understand whether taxpayer dollars were being invested into education with any tangible positive outcomes, the government implemented standardized testing. The idea was that test scores reflected learning. But, that is not true. I have looked at a multitude of articles. Some articles examine standardized testing in elementary and middle schools, one examines the 2014 Common Core test results, one explains the significance of these scores, and one covers the cheating that results as a product of “high-stakes” testing. It is clear that these standardized tests not only fail to adequately gauge student learning and teacher effectiveness, but they also sacrifice the core of education in the process.

On October 13, 2013, Valerie Strauss, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, published an article titled, “A ridiculous Common Core test for first graders.” In the article she introduces Carol Burris, “New York’s 2013 High School Principal of the Year” and shares her experiences with Common Core in regards to elementary students. Burris explains how the speech teacher at her school came to her, visibly upset at her 6-year-old’s math test. It was a multiple choice test and was given a percent-based grade.

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Burris was horrified. Not only that, but after scanning the test, she found the questions to be unnecessarily complex, and awkwardly worded. She gives one such example:

“Take a look at question No. 1, which shows students five pennies, under which it says “part I know,” and then a full coffee cup labeled with a “6” and, under it, the word, “Whole.” Students are asked to find “the missing part” from a list of four numbers. My assistant principal for mathematics was not sure what the question was asking. How could pennies be a part of a cup?”

Burris posted a link to the scanned test and when I looked through the questions, I found that some of the answers were not immediately apparent to me, as well. This begs the question: Why are these questions so misaligned with the child’s developmental stage?

Early primary standards were “backmapped” from what the Common Core standards deemed 12th grade “college-ready skills.” According to the *The Washington Post* article, no early childhood experts were consulted in order to ensure that these standards were appropriate for that age group. This is evident in the unsuitable standards set for elementary school students. As parents, and all those who work with young children know, development cannot be rushed. Children learn by a “complex interaction of biology and experience that is unique to the child,” and this process cannot be expected to adhere to rigid guidelines of “standards” that do not even properly represent the correct age group. In the U.S., students begin First Grade at the age of 5 or 6. In Singapore, students begin First Grade at age 7, following two years of kindergarten. This is important to note because the Common Core was based on Singapore’s standards. It is not that we are “falling behind,” but that our children are being asked to perform intellectual tasks before they are developmentally ready. From such a young age, children in America are subjected to standardized testing. This reliance on standardized testing carries well into adolescence, gaining momentum and importance until their worth as students is determined primarily by their test scores.

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A fairly recent article published by the New York Times stated, “Student Face Tougher Tests that Outpace Lesson Plans,” denoting that it isn’t just elementary-level tests that are misaligned with intellectual standards.43 The article covered public schools in New York where parents were begging the principle to postpone the lower school science fair because it added too much pressure to their children, already inundated with preparations for the coming state tests. One parent recounted how his son had woken up from a bad dream, horrified that he had forgotten to fill in a bubble on his testing sheet. He was right to be worried. All grades from third to eight are required to take these new tests that are aligned with Common Core standards. However, these tests were new, improved, and “unlike any exams the students have seen. They [had] been redesigned and are tougher. And they [were] likely to cover at least some material that has yet to make its way into the curriculum.”44 How can that be right? How can a test that is supposed to promote teacher accountability and accurately rate student learning contain material that they haven’t even learned yet? The lesson plans simply cannot keep up with this drastic change in Common Core standards.

“[The] standards are so new that many New York schools have yet to fully adopt new curriculums — including reading material, lesson plans and exercises — to match. And the textbook industry has not completely caught up either. [State and city officials] acknowledge that scores will most likely fall from last year’s levels.”45

Merry H. Tisch, the chancellor of the state Board of Regents said that the state needed to know where its students were succeeding and pinpoint their weaknesses in order to progress in the right direction. She said, “We can’t wait. We have to just jump into the deep end.”46 However, this blatantly disregards how important these tests are for the students taking them. For these students, their test results determines where they go to middle or high school. It is clear that this official sees students as data, and is sacrificing

them to promote her own agenda without actually taking the steps to help these students get the education they need.

I have looked over the Common Core test results from 2014, and at first thought that the percentages meant “percentile,” as in the SAT. I was wrong. Where I thought it meant that these students were in the “33.1st percentile,” it actually meant that in the third grade, only 33.1% of students were deemed “proficient.” I also looked at the NYC’s Department of Education breakdown of the “2014 New York State Test Results: New York City Grades 3–8” and was surprised to see an increase in test scores—a marginal increase. However, Carol Burris shed some light on the situation. She says that despite this “increase” in test scores, there are some important takeaways: the test was too hard (particularly for English Language learners and those with disabilities), the achievement gaps of the students scoring at the bottom grew (the gap between white and black students scoring at Level 1 increased, and increased by 266% in fourth grade math and 271% in eight grade ELA), and just like previous articles stated, the questions were misaligned with intellectual development (3rd grade students read passages scored for grades 5-7 by a reviewer).

So why did test scores increase? In the article, “NY ‘fixed’ Common Core tests—and scores surged,” explains that while state officials paraded the increase in scores of Common Core testing this year, they failed to mention it is because they lowered the number of right answers needed to pass half the exams.

“Last year, fourth-graders needed 38 raw points out of 55 on the English test to hit Level 3. This year’s fourth-graders needed only 36. The number of points needed to pass also dropped on five other tests: third-grade English and math, fifth-grade math, sixth-grade math and seventh-grade English.”

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It is clear that this style of testing cannot be accurately used to show student learning or teacher effectiveness because the tests themselves are not even scored accurately. Numbers can be manipulated to represent what the public wants to see. If the public wants to see that their taxes aren’t being used to pay for ridiculous tests, and in turn take away from valuable time and effort that could be used to actually educate our children, then that’s what the numbers will show them.

Standardized tests must be used in conjunction with human judgment. Standardized tests cannot be used to measure anything but their intended purpose, and cannot be extrapolated to accurately judge anyone’s worth as a teacher or a student. Diane Ravitch, the author of “The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education” reports,

“Testing experts frequently remind school officials that standardized test scores should be used not in isolation to make consequential decisions about students, but only in conjunction with other measures of student performance, such as grades, class participation, homework, and teacher’s recommendation.”

It is unfair to judge a student’s worth based on a single test score. As a student who took the SAT, I understand the enormous amount of pressure one must undergo in preparing for this test that essentially represents your worth to colleges. This is an incredibly unfair practice because “standardized tests are not precise instruments.” A student’s test score can vary from day to day based on their emotional standings and their experiences that day. Granted, it is not enough to create huge fluctuations, but it may be the difference between a “proficient” grade and a “not proficient” grade. It is also important to note that tests can only be used for the purpose it was designed for. Ravitch explains that, for example, a fifth-grade reading test can only measure fifth grade reading skills, and cannot be used to measure a teacher’s effectiveness.

Originally, standardized testing gained momentum based on the need to prove that tax dollars that were being invested in public education, were making a difference. Although, the idea behind

51 Ravitch, 152.
standardized testing makes logical sense, that is not the problem with our educational system today.

Ravitch explains,

“The problem [is] the misuse of testing for high-stakes purposes, the belief that tests could identify with certainty which students should be held back, which teachers and principals should be fired or rewarded, and which schools should be closed—and the idea that these changes would inevitably produce better education.”

Essentially, tests are being used to measure things beyond their original purpose, or credible scope. These “high-stakes” purposes put more weight on testing than should be allowed. If a test suddenly has the power to decide the fates of students, teachers, principals, and whole schools, it increases the pressure to merely pass these tests, and the learning aspect of education is lost.

Putting so much weight on standardized testing also forces teachers and school officials to seek methods to “[game] the system.” On November 25, 2014, the Wall Street Journal published an article titled: “New York Unit Focuses on Cheating by Teachers.” The article followed the progress of the New York Test Security Unit that was launched in 2012 in order to “investigate the allegations of cheating by educators handling statewide student tests.” After clearing hundreds of test-fraud allegations, the unit received 916 new allegations in its first two years of operation. According to files obtained under the Freedom of Information Law, there are 32 teachers and administrators who have settled cases of alleged test-fraud in the past two years. Among these include, Richard M. Brzeski, who had his teaching license suspended for two years after he admitted to helping fifth-graders on a state math test, James L. Basham, who had his license suspended for a year after he admitted to giving students help on a Regents (Common Core) exam in his U.S. history class, Osman A. Abugana, who was fined $3,000 after changing five

52 Ravitch, 150.
53 Ravitch, 154.
student’s scores on a Regents physics exam to keep them from failing. He was suspended without pay for a semester. 59

“The unit found a range of alleged transgressions, including tipping students off to the wrong answers, giving cheat sheets of math formulas, correcting student’s responses, and completing essays for a disabled child.” 60

The teachers union associates the increasing counts of testing-fraud to the use of student test scores to judge teaching ability and even dole out both benefits and punishment. Carl Korn, a spokesman for the New York State Unite Teachers said, “The state’s over reliance on testing and data has created intense pressure around standardized testing and unfortunately it appears that a few teachers have succumbed to that pressure.” 61

It has become increasingly obvious that standardized testing cannot be used to gauge student learning and teacher effectiveness. Although learning is greatly influenced by teachers, teachers are not the sole resource for learning and cannot be help completely accountable for a student’s shortcomings. When student learning is reduced to a quantifiable test score that affects not only their future, but the job security of teachers, the temptation to cheat is huge. We have come to believe that “numbers don’t lie,” and that quantifiable data is law. But, numbers only show one side of the story and cannot possibly encapsulate a student’s or teacher’s potential. Numbers merely reduce us to how we performed on that one day, on that one test.

The modern educational system focuses on standardized tests. Teachers teach to the test and students study the test, eliminating the very basis of education—learning. As we focus on education reform away from this reliance on standardized testing, I am reminded of Chu Hsi, and his fight for moral intelligence and the internal transformation that comes with learning for oneself. Chu Hsi spoke extensively about the education crisis of his time, studying only to pass the civil service exams. It is parallel to the educational crisis we face now.

60 The Wall Street Journal, November 25, 2014..
61 The Wall Street Journal, November 25, 2014..
“Students simply do not do it for their own sake. Thus in the course of a day their minds fix on moral principle very little and on trivial matters a great deal—they remain unacquainted with moral principle and become thoroughly familiar with trivial matters.”\(^{62}\)

Students are taught that standardized testing determines their worth as students and as individuals because test scores are directly linked to their potential, whether it be getting into middle school, high school, or college. Teachers are forced to sacrifice valuable classroom time to prepare these students for tests that do not even align with their intellectual development. These tests are often too difficult, either too advanced for the age group, or simply covering material that the students haven’t covered yet. It promotes nothing but anxiety and frustration. Just as the students in Chu Hsi’s time only studied to pass the civil service exams, students of this modern age study to pass these standardized tests and do not focus on the real reason why they are in school—to learn! Often, the creativity and freedom to explore what interests you is taken away in this context. Anything that does not pertain to the test is seen as excess material and a waste of class time. If the Common Core seeks to prepare students for college and the work force, it is accomplishing the very opposite. All these students will be able to do, is at best, regurgitate the information they needed to pass these tests, but will have no idea about what truly interest them. They will have no passion.

However, I believe that standardized tests, as long as they do not replace learning or constitute as a student’s worth, can be helpful. One has to find balance between studying for the test and learning simply to find self transformation. Chu Hsi gives an example of a man whose family is impoverished and he must compete in the examinations to support his elderly parents, “It’s best to let him prepare for them. Preparing for the examinations does no harm. It’s only if one first fills one’s mind with thoughts of success and failure that injury is done to the way.”\(^{63}\) This is a difficult situation because passing the civil service exam is important to this man—he needs to support his family. However, if he sacrifices

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\(^{63}\) Chu Hsi, 195.
everything in the pursuit of this test, he will not learn anything, and that cannot possibly prepare him for the job he is seeking.

Chu Hsi said, “Intimate familiarity naturally will lead to complete mastery.” You need to study to learn and understand what is being taught because then you won’t have to worry about passing the exam, you will have internalized your knowledge, not simply memorized it. The officials of today must realize this. Students will be prepared for the work force when they find the passion of learning because that will teach them discipline, grit, and hard-work in the pursuit of their goals. That cannot be scored on a standardized test.

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64 Chu Hsi, 134.
Bibliography


Foundations Category

Honorable Mention

“Standardized Testing Does Not Adequately Test Student Learning”

Emily Okikawa

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FND134
Professor Brady
04/23/14

Fried Rice

Your stomach knows about love more than you do.

My high school life was very busy and stressful. Every morning I got up at 6:30, and it took me at least fifteen minutes to cycle to school. My mom asked me to have breakfast at home, because the dining hall was always full of students waiting in line; she wanted to save my time so I could sleep more. That means she had to get up earlier than I. Every day at dawn, I was awakened by distinct noises from the kitchen -- chopping vegetables, stirring food, pouring water … I could never figure out when she got up; all I knew is that after I had brushed my teeth and dressed up, there was always a bowl of hot fried rice sitting on the table.

Nothing could be more refreshing than a breakfast like this, especially during the sleep-deprived final exam weeks. The rice grains were long and thin – Mom always bought the best Thai jasmine rice. Sometimes she added homemade sausage slices, sometimes shrimp, but I could definitely find peas, diced carrots and corn kernels every
time – in this way, the fried rice would not only look colorful but also possess varied textures. I hated eating vegetables; it must have been her trick to urge me to have a balanced diet. I still don’t know how much effort she put into this dish, or how much time she spent on the recipe; all I knew was that Mom’s fried rice was the best in the world. With a bite of soft, oily rice mixed with diced meat and crispy vegetables, I could feel myself filling with energy. The rest of the day did not seem that long and exhausting, and I obtained the motivation to ride my bike in the chill and darkness.

I finished high school in two years, so Mom made me fried rice for sixteen months. At the end I found it weird – why did I never get tired of it? Is it because she modified the recipe every week? Is it because she cooked it so many times that her skills became incredibly exquisite? Is it because a bowl of fried rice was just what I desperately needed during those tough school days? Maybe all of the above. No one gets tired of a mom’s love.

Last year I flew to the United States. Her fried rice could not follow me here. Every morning I eat an omelet or pancakes; that is basically all they have in D-hall. I never complain about it, but only I know how much I miss fried rice while dining with my American friends, talking and laughing. At lunchtime, you can fill a bowl with rice and vegetables and have the chef fry it for you. But I can hardly call it fried rice; the grains are stiff and dry, and I always pour too much sauce on the top. Every time I watch the chef cooking, I cannot help wondering: how could mom control the amount of seasoning so precisely that it always tasted just right? How many times did she experiment with
the recipe to present me the best version? The chef is still moving his spatula; sweat drips from his face. Mom must be like this in our kitchen, I think. A sweaty woman in a dirty apron surrounded by smokes and sizzles— that is she.

It has been almost a year since I landed in Philadelphia. I can feel the imprint of “Chinese” is slowly eroding away. I hang around with American friends, follow their dress styles, learn their accents, and accept most of their values. From the outside, people cannot tell if I am an international student or an Asian American. But the only part of my body that refuses to assimilate, not surprisingly, is my stomach. It distinguishes me from people born and raised on this continent, in the most predictable way – I still cannot accustom myself to the food. Even though my American friends said it would be like heaven if they can have authentic kongpo chicken every day, they would quickly tire of it and yearn for American food. Similarly, my stomach remembers where exactly I come from. Canton, a pearl set in Southern China, yields all the ingredients required for high-quality fried rice. Silky white rice grows from fertile paddy fields; hot, humid weather breeds juicy tropical fruits like pineapple; boats full of fresh seafood sway near the coastline. This is my hometown. I miss it not because of the food, but instead, because of the people who grow the food on this beautiful land, as well as the person who prepares the food for me in that narrow, muggy kitchen.

I think I just answered an important yet simple question -- what makes me the person I am? When I slowly make a cup of green tea with a fine china teapot in my room, when I record unforgettable events in my diary with neat Chinese characters, or, when I spend an hour waiting for a bus to Park City Mall just for a bite of fried rice, I know who I am
inside. Fried rice, as well as the tea ceremony, calligraphy and many other things, has become a mark left on me, a mark that will never be wiped out. It weaves with my memory of a past across the ocean half a world away, just like a full moon reminds me of mooncakes made by grandma, and cured meat reminds me of the Cantonese deli across from my house. When I sit in a Chinese restaurant with a plate of savory fried rice (its awkward English name is “chow fun”), every bite brings out mixed flavors – sourness like the homesickness I suffered for the past twelve months, bitterness like the pain of being independent, sweetness like the warmth sealed in the package mailed form Mom, and spiciness like sharp nostalgia that bumps into my mind unexpectedly. This is how “home” can be defined – you belong where your stomach belongs. The stomach is sometimes smarter than your brain; no matter how far you travel, it directs you the way back home, flawlessly.

Fried rice accompanies me walking on the path of youth. It has witnessed two most important moments I have experienced so far: growing up and moving away. The wheel of time never stops spinning, and I must keep moving forward. But memory, memory connected to family and to my homeland, will always be stored in my stomach, which can clearly identify the smell of love, whenever it encounters that familiar cuisine. No matter how far I travel in space and time, it will point in the direction of home, and guides me back to the one I love.