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SPEECH ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES: ANYTHING BUT SAFE

AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Amanda Richey

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” The sentiment behind the popular nursery rhyme animates debates over “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” in higher education, as rivals disagree over the extent to which students should feel protected in their diversity of identities and experiences. Opponents view these speech policies as opportunities for individuals to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own,” and as fundamentally counterproductive to informed debate.¹

These arguments become more interesting when analyzed in media markets. Complex issues of academic freedom, student speech, and respect of difference are condensed and often expurgated through pundit quips about “politically correct (PC) culture.” Until recently, the body of work concerning this cultural moment was largely confined to academic circles; after all campus speech obviously concerns campuses. *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* mention the term “safe space” in featured articles from the mid 2000s forward and the 1990s forward, respectively.² These narrow debates

¹ Ellison, 2016, lines 14 - 15

²<https://www.insidehighered.com/search/site/%22safe%20spaces%22?page=9>

and

http://www.chronicle.com/search?q=safe+space&published_date=3_or_more_years (accessed December 3, 2016).

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gained public traction in November 2015 when volatile race relations at the University of Missouri, stemming from Black Lives Matter advocacy, created scenes for mass media circulation (including Melissa Click's muscular "enforcement" of free speech spaces even against student media coverage).³ Later that year, worries about cultural appropriation and free expression in Halloween costumes at Yale only compounded the concern that universities had become unhinged in their handling of student speech.⁴ These examples provided conservative pundits fodder for news stories that "liberal indoctrination" had convinced most faculty and students that their identity performances were more important than rigorous or thoughtful debate. "The Coddling of the American Mind," published in *The Atlantic* in the fall of 2015, helped frame public concern in one cohesive narrative: college students are hiding from or even actively opposing ideas that make them uncomfortable. This narrative, in addition to contemporary news stories, entered a polarized media landscape demarcated by partisan alliances.

A seemingly innocuous acceptance letter, directed to students in the Class of 2020 from the University of Chicago's Dean of Students in The College, also entered this media environment. The letter gained prominent coverage in mainstream American media in August of 2016 for its firm condemnation of "intellectual safe spaces" and "trigger warnings." The acceptance letter reinvigorated discussion about safe spaces, both within academic circles and within a broader public. While the letter could simply be read as a formal introduction to campus speech norms, or a marketing stunt to spread the University of Chicago's name, it also represents a renewed lay

³ Conor Friedersdorf, "Campus Activists Weaponize 'Safe Space,'" *The Atlantic*, November 10 2015.

⁴ Anemona Hartocollis, "Yale Lecturer Resigns After Email on Halloween Costumes," *The New York Times*, 7 December 2015.

interest in free speech regulation and identity on American college campuses.

This essay will analyze the University of Chicago acceptance letter as the latest text to enter a body of work in the American public addressing campus speech and speech protection. After an overview of the cultural history of American campus speech concerns, the rhetorical situation will be described to better illuminate the Dean's possible intentions under the specific conditions. Next, the essay moves to an analysis of the dominant ideographs and structural elements within the University of Chicago text, followed by a comparison with other college acceptance letters. Finally, the essay will outline the initial response to the University of Chicago letter and indicate the potential significance of the text to the contemporary cultural moment.

***From Movements to Codes to "Coddling:"
The Cultural Context***

The text's condemnation of trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces emerged from a recurring cultural fascination with the regulation of American campus speech that goes back 50 years. The 1960s are renowned for student activism — from the civil rights movement to the anti-war movement. However, one movement in the fall of 1964 specifically addressed students' rights to free speech, and "was the first major campus rebellion" of the decade, according to one scholar.⁵ The Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley united thousands of students, and eventually gained extensive faculty support, against the university's president and deans for restricting political advocacy on campus. After three months of sit-ins and rallies, faculty in the

⁵Robby Cohen, "Berkeley Free Speech Movement: Paving the Way for Campus Activism." *OAH Magazine of History* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1985):16.

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Academic Senate voted to vindicate student leaders facing administrative backlash and endorsed the movement's underlying principle that the "content of speech or advocacy should not be restricted by the university."

In the 1980s and 1990s, national coverage of campus speech shifted to the defense of college's brand reputation, as public funding decreased and pressure to compete nationally increased. Racist incidents gained broad exposure, with the help of recently created 24-hour cable news channels. In response, campuses created policy punishing intentionally derogatory language in "hate speech codes." The necessity of hate speech codes, beyond normal student conduct procedures, worried students and faculty,⁶ and lawyers questioned the constitutionality of these policies.⁷ According to Gould, by the mid- to late-1990s hate speech policies had "actually increased in number following a series of court decisions that ostensibly found many to be unconstitutional."⁸ The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) published a statement cautioning against the use of campus speech codes in the July 1992 issue of *Academe*, the association's peer reviewed journal. The statement warned against speech codes and the slippery slope they might create "to differentiate between high-value and low-value speech, or to choose which groups are to be protected by curbing the speech of others."⁹ Further, the statement reaffirmed the importance of freedom of expression and, at the very least, toleration of ideas that members of academic communi-

⁶ Charles R. Lawrence, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus." *Duke Law Journal*, no. 3 (1990): 434.

⁷ Jon B. Gould, "The Precedent That Wasn't: College Hate Speech Codes and the Two Faces of Legal Compliance." *Law & amp Society Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 345.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ American Association of University Professors. "On Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes." *Academe* 78, no. 4 (July/August 1992): 30-31.

ties may hate. “Free speech is not simply an aspect of the educational enterprise to be weighed against other desirable ends. It is the very precondition of the academic enterprise itself.”¹⁰

The current rendition of American campus speech concerns is one marked by what critics call a “hypersensitivity” among college students and the “return of political correctness” policing speech.¹¹ According to Lukianoff and Haidt in “The Coddling of the American Mind”:

A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense... This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion.¹²

Lukianoff and Haidt backed this claim with evidence of already widely circulated contemporary race and diversity scandals and student demands for safe spaces in these heated exchanges. This narrative took for granted the significant social frictions created by Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and mass incarceration, the worry about Hispanic immigration, and the fear of Islamic extremism. Still, significant buzzwords of “safe space” and “trigger warning” propelled fear that anybody might declare their narrow viewpoint as “safe” and themselves “triggered” by any viewpoints in tension with their own, and media coverage could easily find significant and worrisome examples of both.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015. Peter Beinart, “Political Correctness Is Back,” *The Atlantic*, October 2014.

¹² Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind.”

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Both terms originated before the current culture solidified their usage to refer almost exclusively to speech. According to Catherine Fox, safe spaces first appeared on college campuses in the early 1990s as physical places for LGBTQ+ students to be welcomed.¹³ The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) spearheaded this effort through its safe space training kit and ally network programs, which the group still continues today. The term “trigger warning” has a more ambiguous origin, though it appears to have first emerged as a concept relating to treatment for PTSD. The term later gained prevalence in self-help and feminist forums on the Internet, “where they allowed readers who had suffered from traumatic events like sexual assault to avoid graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks.”¹⁴ The social significance of both terms had, however, shifted from their original meanings when Lukianoff and Haidt documented cases of students exempting themselves from texts, videos, or experiences they found offensive or even just causing strong emotional responses in classroom settings.¹⁵ Exact definitions of both terms remain obscure despite their widespread usage in contemporary culture. The generally polarized understanding of these terms, and their perceived dangers or necessities as policies, is possible because the terms are poorly defined among American news-consuming publics.

Corporatization of education has also led to a shift in focus, onto students’ emotional well-being and built environments that are “conductive” to learning, whatever that means. At the same time, social demands make the expected outcomes of collegiate experience more severe and anxiety producing. In 2015 the number one mental health diagnosis among American

¹³ Catherine Fox, "From Transaction to Transformation: (En)Countering White Heteronormativity in "Safe Spaces" *College English* 69, no. 5 (May 2007): 498.

¹⁴ Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015.

¹⁵ Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015.

college students officially changed from depression to anxiety.¹⁶ According to *The Wall Street Journal*, in 2016 “nation-wide, 17 percent of college students were diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems during the past year, and 13.9 percent were diagnosed with or treated for depression, according to a spring 2016 survey of 95,761 students by the American College Health Association.”¹⁷ The percentage of college students with anxiety rose over five percent since 2011.¹⁸ The conversations surrounding speech on campuses inevitably are attuned to students’ mental health, though institutions disagree on what policies best support their students, and by extension their public images.

Recent policy changes also accompany the current pre-occupation with speech in American higher education, reflecting the corporatization and anxiety. The federal Departments of Justice and Education edited language in a statute defining sexual harassment to broaden the punishable offense from speech that is “objectively offensive” to speech that is “unwelcome” in 2013.¹⁹ According to Lukianoff and Haidt, this legislative shift in sexual harassment law permeates all anti-discrimination statutes. “Everyone is supposed to rely upon his or her subjective feelings to decide whether a comment by a professor or a fellow student is unwelcome, and therefore grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence.”²⁰

While there are multiple sides to the safe space and campus speech discussions, and these debates have an impact

¹⁶ Abby Jackson, "Depression Is No Longer the No. 1 Mental-health Concern among College Students." *Business Insider*, June 2, 2015.

¹⁷ Andrea Peterson, "Students Flood College Mental-Health Centers," *The Wall Street Journal* October 10, 2016.

¹⁸ Peterson, 2016

¹⁹ Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015

²⁰ Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015

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on university policy and even federal legislation, the majority of conversation surrounding this issue within the public sphere has been unsophisticated and polarized by political affiliations. Opponents of the proliferation of safe spaces and trigger warnings claim that their prevalence on college campuses prevent students from growing intellectually because they prevent students from encountering ideas that make them uncomfortable. Proponents of the creation of safe spaces and the use of trigger warnings see them as methods that actually allow for a more diverse and sincere exchange of ideas within classrooms because they respect students' multiple backgrounds. Responding to *The New York Times'* August 2016 article on the University of Chicago acceptance letter, three recent alums of peer Ivy League institutions claim that trigger warnings are a necessity on campuses and that Dean Ellison fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of trigger warnings.²¹ An article by *The Washington Post*, published in May of 2016, asks local college students to discuss "the new language of protest" by explaining what the cultural buzzwords mean to them as individuals. When asked how they respond to the sentiment that millennials are coddled one student retorted: "I don't think that respecting people's existence is coddling, to be very frank."²²

Clearly the contemporary controversy over campus speech and speech regulation is not novel. The University of Chicago class of 2020 acceptance letter is not particularly novel either. The letter is not unique in substance when compared to other texts in the current public debate about campus speech policy, "politically correct culture," or student well-being and activism. When analyzing the content, the text simply condemns trigger warnings and safe spaces. Official statements

²¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?_r=0 (accessed November 21, 2016)

²² Teddy Amenabar, "The New Language of Protest." *Washington Post* May 19, 2016.

from other institutions of higher education have been just as firm in their approval of these policies. Rather, the University of Chicago letter is unique in stylistic structure and in its appeals of authority. The acceptance letter format represents an unprecedented “insider’s view” of campus speech policy. Whereas previous prominent texts have occurred entirely outside of the academy or entirely within, this latest text blurs the lines between university and public audiences, claiming authority in both realms.

The letter serves first and foremost as a traditional acceptance letter to incoming students from the echelons of the university administration. The intended primary audience (the students) first read this text in April or May of 2016, a full two to three months before the letter was widely circulated in media outlets and showcased to a general news-consuming public. Although this text is unique within the current public sphere’s body of work addressing campus speech and safe spaces in the 21st century, it is not novel, historically speaking. The University of Chicago letter is the latest text in over 50 years of discussion concerning free speech and speech regulation in American colleges. This text’s importance lies more in *how* it condemns safe spaces and trigger warnings, more so than the act of condemnation.

***Not Your Average Acceptance Letter:
The Rhetorical Situation of the Text***

In addition to the cultural situation, the University of Chicago acceptance letter resides in a rhetorical situation where constraints of genre, audience, and exigence apply to the text. Various components of the rhetorical situation indicate that the University of Chicago letter differs from the broader body of work in the public sphere surrounding the discussion of safe spaces and speech on college campuses.

As far as timing goes, Dean Ellison, the speaker in the letter and presumed author, is a newcomer to the University of

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Chicago administration. Dean Ellison joined the university's administration in July of 2014, just before the start of a new academic year.²³ His previous work was at Harvard University where he was an Associate Dean and a professor of near eastern languages and cultures.²⁴ Although the letter is not his first act as dean of the college, it is the first to make headlines outside of the University of Chicago and broader higher education circles. The letter might also be Dean Ellison's first letter to incoming students since his arrival at the college.

There are structural constraints to the text. As an acceptance letter, Dean Ellison's message must be formal (mailed in an era of email efficiency), short, and plain-styled. However, other constraints guide the structure of the letter as well. The language is clear in outlining the University of Chicago's goals and firm in disapproving of safe spaces and trigger warnings because the text is intended for more than one audience. *The US News & World Report* Higher Education section ranked the University of Chicago as the third best university in the nation for the 2017 edition of their annual report.²⁵ Additionally, according to the university's student newspaper, *The Chicago Maroon*, the undergraduate college accepted its lowest percentage of applicants for the 2020 class (out of the largest application pool) in its history. The college only admitted 7.9 percent of 31,411 students who had applied.²⁶ The University of Chicago's preeminence means these genre norms will be especially scrutinized by undecided students and a press eager to spotlight nascent trends from university leaders. Dean

²³Alice Xiao, "Dean Ellison Holds Fireside Chat." *The Chicago Maroon* January 30, 2015.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ US News & World Report "Best National Universities": <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities> (accessed December, 3 2016).

²⁶ Payton Alie, "University Admits Record Low 7.9 Percent to Class of 2020." *The Chicago Maroon* May 31, 2016.

Ellison probably understood this when the letters were signed and mailed. While incoming students were intended recipients, the letter was probably penned with the intent of one day circulating broadly in a news cycle.

The two audiences for Dean Ellison's text are both mediated and a disparate collection of individuals rather than a unified group reading the text together; however, the audiences differ in every other respect. The primary audience for the text was the group of graduating high school students who received the acceptance letter. This collection of individuals received their letters in the spring of 2016 and the text appears to serve its genre's purpose as an acceptance letter welcoming students to the university. The second audience is the collection of administrators and faculty at peer institutions who received the text through digital copies that were flanked with news commentary in late August of 2016. The letter distinguishes the University of Chicago from peers that either do not have a firm stance on campus speech and safe spaces or have a stance in the opposite direction. For example, the dean of Yale's undergraduate college expressed the college's commitment to safe spaces in a December 2015 Q&A style interview with *TIME* magazine:

Students calling for a safe space are not saying they want their classroom to be a safe space. They know the class is going to be a place to push and be pushed, where unusual or different ideas are going to be put out there and they have to wrestle with them.²⁷

²⁷ Tessa Berenson and Haley Sweetland Edwards, "Exclusive: Yale's Dean Defends 'Safe Spaces' Amid Campus Protests." *Time*, December 9, 2015.

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The interview followed a widely circulated scandal about cultural appropriation and policing self-expression surrounding an email about Halloween costumes at Yale.²⁸

The first audience for the University of Chicago text appears to be a non-rhetorical one. Accepted students, especially since they are not a unified audience beyond the common thread of their age and academic achievement, cannot respond effectively to the text or the exigence behind it. They can accept the policy of their new academic home or they can reject the policy either by refusing to attend the institution or challenge it once arriving to campus in the fall. The second audience is rhetorical, although it is not addressed directly by the speaker in the text. Peer institutions can respond to the text: they can affirm or condemn the University of Chicago's action and they can change their own policies, given enough time.

Why would there be a secondary rhetorical audience for this text? The University of Chicago has been lauded as a model for free expression and speech policy in higher education in the United States. Shortly after the text of the letter was widely spread among media outlets in August of 2016, the Editorial Board of *The Chicago Tribune* declared the "U. Of Chicago is the University of Common Sense."²⁹ Earlier, in September of 2015, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit educational foundation and advocacy group, announced a partnership with the University of Chicago to encourage other American higher education institutions to adopt free expression policies modeled off of the Chicago institution.³⁰ One goal of circulating this text in

²⁸ Liam Stack, "Yale's Halloween Advice Stokes a Racially Charged Debate." *The New York Times* November 8, 2015.

²⁹ *The Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board, "Why the U. of Chicago Is the University of Common Sense." *Chicagotribune.com* August 26, 2016.

³⁰ "FIRE Launches Campaign in Support of University of Chicago Free Speech Statement." FIRE. September 28, 2015.

mainstream media, a more visible venue than the institution's obscure academic policy webpage or partnering nonprofits' websites, is to encourage the letter's secondary, rhetorical audience to change their behavior. Lastly, an influential group that appears to have been left out of both the rhetorical audience and the role of speaker for the text is the faculty at the University of Chicago. According to a letter from a University of Chicago associate professor of history in response to a *New York Times* article about the text, the faculty was not made aware of Dean Ellison's statement before the letter was mailed. In fact "the first that members of the University of Chicago faculty learned of the letter on speech policy issued by Chicago's dean of students, John Ellison, was from newspapers" in August.³¹ The omission of faculty, from the roles of both speaker and audience, is pertinent because of the dominant theme of unified community within the University of Chicago acceptance letter.

The final component of the rhetorical situation is the strong commitment by the University of Chicago to free expression amid the November 2015 uncertainties for free speech in higher education, an exigence that goaded multiple responses by the university. The University of Chicago's Committee on Freedom of Expression has compiled statements pertaining to academic freedom of faculty and students since 1995 and published them on their website.³² The committee, formed in July of 2014 by the president and provost, was tasked with creating a vision statement "reflecting the University's commitment to and tolerance of multiple forms of free expres-

³¹ Stanley, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?_r=0> (accessed November 21, 2016)

³² University of Chicago, <<https://freexpression.uchicago.edu/page/statements-and-messages>> (accessed November 21, 2016)

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sion.”³³ The committee issued their statement on January 1st of 2015. A portion of it reads:

Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe.³⁴

Given the history of free expression and free speech at the University of Chicago, the recent acceptance letter appears to just build on previous work within the institution. There is one important caveat though: the letter from Dean Ellison is the first text in this body of internal documents to explicitly mention, much less condemn, trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces. Additionally, the letter is directed to a primary audience of incoming members of the University of Chicago community; all other statements on campus speech compiled by the committee are directed to a primary audience of community members who have already been assimilated into the University of Chicago group. The text clearly responds to the broader cultural exigence beyond the University of Chicago by adopting the broader culture’s significant language to share the institution’s message of free expression to new and disparate audiences through the unconventional medium of a college acceptance letter.

³³Robert J. Zimmer and Eric D. Isaacs. "President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Eric D. Isaacs: Letter to Campus." UChicago News. September 25, 2014.

³⁴Geoffrey Stone, Marianne Bertrand, Angela Olinto, Mark Siegler, David Strauss, Kenneth Warren, and Amanda Woodward. Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression. University of Chicago. Accessed November 21, 2016.
<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf> (accessed November 21, 2016)

***Community Freedom is more important than You:
Ideographs and Authority within the Text***

At first glance the University of Chicago acceptance letter does not appear to be a rhetorical text. The language is brusque and the style is low and instructional, even bureaucratic. One could read the text as a crash course in speech policy for an incoming member of the university community. However, there are subtle persuasive appeals working behind the scenes to establish an argument about the validity of the University of Chicago's speech policy. Within the University of Chicago acceptance letter there are dominant ideographs that present separate juxtapositions of individual liberty and group conformity. The ideograph of <freedom> establishes a dichotomy between the University of Chicago's policies and those supporting trigger warnings and safe spaces. The secondary terms of <trigger warnings> and <safe spaces> also serve as ideographs, albeit negative ones. The ideograph of <community> juxtaposes current members of the University of Chicago community ("we") with the intended primary audience, the high school student to whom the letter is addressed ("you"). This final ideograph further guides the structure of the text in terms of pronoun usage, direct address, and active versus passive verbs. When the University of Chicago text is compared with others within the genre of college acceptance letters, elements of choice and agency common to other acceptance letters are absent. All of these components converge into a subtly persuasive text that prevents the primary and secondary audiences from challenging the assumptions about community, speech, and speech policies that the text presents.

The ideographs of <freedom> and <community> are widespread throughout the acceptance letter. <Freedom,> as it is presented in the text, concerns "academic freedom,"³⁵

³⁵ Ellison, 2016, lines 12, 22, and 23

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freedom of “inquiry and expression,”³⁶ and freedom to “espouse ideas”³⁷ or “exchange” ideas.³⁸ The term is presented nine times within the letter and is present in every paragraph except the first and last ones. The emphasis on freedom, a positive ideograph within American culture, is juxtaposed with the discussion of safe spaces and trigger warnings in the third paragraph:

our commitment to *academic freedom* means we do not support so-called ‘*trigger warnings*,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘*safe spaces*’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.³⁹ [italics added]

This is the only time trigger warnings and safe spaces are mentioned. Despite their relative absence compared to <freedom> these terms are no less powerful as ideographs that dominate the text. According to Michael McGee, who first theorized ideographic criticism, “an ideograph is always understood in its relation to another.”⁴⁰ Under the dichotomous relationship established in the text, the University of Chicago’s policy is “good” because it supports “freedom” and the alternative of trigger warnings and safe spaces are “bad” because they do not. However, trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces are not explicitly defined in the text and as such they almost function as empty signifiers, taking on whatever meaning a

³⁶ Ellison, 2016, lines 6, 7, and 8

³⁷ Ellison, 2016, line 18

³⁸ Ellison, 2016, line 16

³⁹ Ellison, 2016, lines 12 - 15

⁴⁰ Michael Calvin McGee, "The “ideograph”: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 14.

reader wishes. The only definition the reader receives about these concepts is that they allow individuals to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.” If this were always the case, then why would comparable American institutions like Yale support safe spaces and trigger warnings? The fact that neither the “bad” trigger warnings or safe spaces are explicitly defined, especially because they are more ambiguous terms than freedom, presents a troubling dichotomy that does not allow for an alternative interpretation of these policies where they are not antithetical to the goals of higher education.

<Community,> as it is presented in the text, concerns the University of Chicago both as a monolithic group and individual “members”⁴¹ within the group. The term “our community” is presented twice while “members of our community” is presented three times. The pronouns “our” and “we” are more frequent, appearing in every paragraph of the text except the last one. The emphasis on community, both through explicit naming of the term and through collective pronouns, is juxtaposed with the direct address towards the primary audience. Throughout the text, “our” and “we” is paired with “you,” the teenaged recipient of the acceptance letter. For example:

*You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.*⁴² [italics added]

This example indicates that the “you” is secondary to the “we” of the <community>. The “you,” an incoming member of the community, is expected to conform to the community norms, even (or especially) when they “cause

⁴¹ Ellison, 2016, lines 7, 8, 10, and 18

⁴² Ellison, 2016, lines 9 - 11

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discomfort.” Whereas the collective pronouns appear in almost every paragraph, “you” is noticeably absent from paragraphs three through five, which discuss trigger warnings, the goal of diversity within the community, and the history of the University of Chicago’s “debate, and even scandal, resulting from our commitment to academic freedom.”⁴³ The non-direct address within this section is understandable, since these paragraphs outline community norms. However, this central section is also the only section of the entire text that uses verbs of stasis rather than active verbs. The fourth paragraph has no human actor. The subjects are concepts, not people such as “we” or “you.” This paragraph features emotional appeals and actions to support community goals that have yet to be fulfilled. “Diversity...*is* a fundamental strength of *our community*,” line 17 reads. But who will ensure that the community is in fact diverse in “opinion and background?”⁴⁴ “The members of our community *must have* the *freedom* to espouse and explore...ideas;” but who will work to guarantee that freedom?⁴⁵ The lack of “you” pronouns represents a shift away from directly addressing the primary audience. The removal of active verbs in this section of the text persuades the reader to enter a type of contract where they fill in the blanks left by the text. In order for the “you” to join the “we,” the reader must become the actor that ensures the community’s goals of diversity and freedom are met, or at the very least does not impede the community from ensuring the goals are met. The sentences in paragraph four also appeal to the reader to act on the virtuous ideographs presented in the text. The accepted student should uphold standards of <freedom> – by rejecting trigger warnings and safe spaces – to support the <community>.

Compared to other university acceptance letters, the University of Chicago text diverges from genre norms in two

⁴³ Ellison, 2016, line 23

⁴⁴ Ellison, 2016, line 17

⁴⁵ Ellison, 2016, line 18-19

significant ways. The University of Chicago letter does not assume that the primary reader, the graduating high school senior, might choose a different college or university to continue their education, nor does it include relevant supplementary information like an “Accepted Students Day” date or final deposit deadline for enrollment. For example, a 2013 *Washington Post* article on American college acceptance letters included 10 examples of elite Eastern Seaboard universities’ acceptance and denial letters for the class of 2017.⁴⁶ Half of the acceptance letters included language that implied that the student’s choice to attend college at the institution they were accepted into was not final. An acceptance letter from MIT explicitly stated, “You’ll likely have offers of admission from many fine schools, but we hope that you’ll choose to enroll at MIT.” Additionally, nine of the 10 acceptance letters included important dates for students, such as final deposit deadlines and days to visit campus with peer accepted students. While these 10 institutions are hardly representative of the letters sent annually by hundreds of universities across the United States, they do represent norms for the genre: a conciliation that the reader has agency in accepting or rejecting the school and some basic guidance in the form of “next steps” to fulfill that agency. The absence of an appeal to students to finalize their decision further emphasizes the dominance of <community> in the text. The language assumes that the student reading the letter is already a neophyte member of the University of Chicago and that he or she will not reject this community by choosing to “continue [their] intellectual journey” somewhere else.⁴⁷ The last line of the University of Chicago letter says it best: “See you in September!”⁴⁸ Additionally, the fact that the University

⁴⁶ Richardson, Linch, and Anderson, March 31, 2013. <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/local/university-acceptance-and-denial-letters/86/> (accessed December, 3 2016).

⁴⁷ Ellison, 2016, line 4

⁴⁸ Ellison, 2016, line 27

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of Chicago letter does not address practical “next steps” for students represents a framing device that reveals the text’s secondary audience of administrators at peer institutions. There is no need to discuss the logistics behind the transition from high school to college because the secondary audience does not need this information. The practicality of choosing a college and the logistical steps that accompany it are eclipsed by the prominence of <freedom> and <community> and their implications for campus speech within the text. The text appears to follow the constraints of the college acceptance letter genre merely in the length of the letter and in language presented in the first and final paragraphs congratulating the recipient for acceptance into the University of Chicago community. In this way, the expected genre of a college acceptance letter “brackets” the actual text concerning <freedom,> <community,> and speech.

The prevalence of culturally “good” ideographs and the juxtapositions between <freedom> and trigger warnings and safe spaces as well as between “we the community” and “you the incoming student” creates a virtuous authoritarian tone. The community within the University of Chicago is upholding the important cultural value of freedom by condemning trigger warnings and safe spaces, even if incoming members of the community want these policies. The work that the reader participates in to “fill in the blanks” left by static verbs in paragraph four reinforces the authority of the community. Further, the lack of agency conceded to the reader in choosing a college, arguably a genre norm for college acceptance letters, completes this work to assert authority. However, all of these components pertain to the primary audience of accepted high school students. The same authoritarian tone applies to the secondary rhetorical audience of administrators at peer institutions. Without considering the “we” versus “you” juxtaposition the authoritarian tone is not as evident, but the prevalence of <freedom,> and its juxtaposition with trigger warnings and safe spaces, is not contingent on a designated audience. The

emphasis on <freedom,> an ideograph with very positive and powerful connotations in American society, and the assertion that “one of the University of Chicago’s defining characteristics is our commitment to *freedom* of inquiry and expression” still aligns the speaker in the text to a culturally entrenched moral superiority and the authority that stems from it.⁴⁹ This authority is conveyed whether the audience is subordinate to the University of Chicago community, as an incoming college student, or on the same level of the hierarchy, as a member of a peer institution of higher education. The prevalence of ideographs and their moral undercurrents, the juxtapositions these ideographs present as well as the structure of pronoun usage, direct address, and active language all establish a text that might prevent audience members from questioning the claims the text presents about speech and community.

***Merging Publics’ Understanding of Campus Speech:
Why This Letter Matters***

It may be too early to tell the effect that the University of Chicago acceptance letter had on the intended audiences or on the broader debate addressing safe spaces and free speech on college campuses. However, media response in the three months since the letter was circulated broadly among a general American public indicate the wider importance of this text to the current cultural moment.

According to Google Trends, both the terms “trigger warnings” and “safe space” saw an increase in popularity on the search engine during the week of August 21st to 28th 2016, the same week that NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other major news outlets released coverage on the University of Chicago acceptance letter.⁵⁰ “Trigger warning”

⁴⁹ Ellison, 2016, lines 5-6

⁵⁰ Google Trends. Accessed November 21, 2016.

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saw peak popularity during this week for the first time in a decade, whereas the popularity for “safe space” was at 53 percent popularity, with peak popularity in the fall of 2015, according to the Google Trends website on November 21st. When comparing the two cultural buzzwords with the term “University of Chicago letter,” there was a correlation in increases in popularity in August of 2016 (Figure 1).

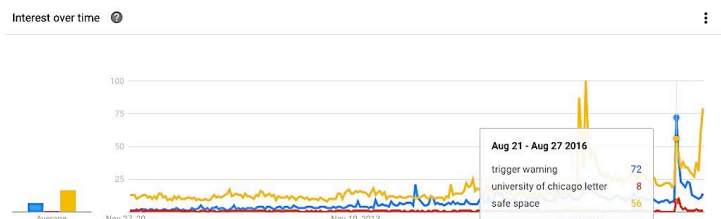


Figure 1. Popularity of terms “trigger warning” (in blue) “university of chicago letter” (in red), and “safe space” (in yellow) from November 27, 2011 to November 21, 2016. Accessed November 21, 2016.

The University of Chicago letter gained this prominence by addressing separate audiences (higher education institution communities and general news-reading publics) through the novel medium of a college acceptance letter and by adopting significant, though relatively abstract, vocabulary. The letter went one step beyond previous literature concerning safe spaces and speech regulation to offer unique perspectives to each audience. Laypeople consuming the text through the news cycle gained an “insider’s view” of the college admissions process while peer institutions and incoming student members of the University of Chicago community saw freedom of expression and campus speech policy defined against intellectual safe spaces and trigger warnings. This dual address to distinct audiences merged the segmented readers into one public unified by the act of reading the letter. Apart from this common ground, however, the readers diverged on their opinions concerning the purpose behind the letter and the University of Chicago’s speech policy itself.

Apart from the merging of audiences into a unified public, the text's structure also presents a persuasive appeal to prevent the reader from questioning the philosophical assumptions made in the text. The adoption of culturally significant ideographs and buzzwords beyond the institution's internal speech policy vocabulary allowed the text to gain prominence in the news cycle. When paired with the virtuous authoritarian tone of the letter, it further entrenches the broader cultural narrative of safe spaces as a dangerous and pervasive threat to higher education that must be stopped. The letter does not allow for any questioning of what is meant by "intellectual safe space" or why this term is in opposition to <freedom>. When this persuasive appeal is pushed beyond an insular university community into a politically polarized cultural situation, it further justifies the staunch opinions on either side of the issue, without fostering informed or sophisticated discussion. By failing to define common, relatively abstract terms in the text, advocates of safe spaces and trigger warnings can assert that Dean Ellison doesn't know what he's talking about in the acceptance letter. By creating a dichotomy between these speech policies and the unquestionable virtue of freedom, opponents of safe spaces and trigger warnings can assert a moral high ground, using the letter to justify their claims. Either way, the text creates a wall of authority that buttresses against engaging the "other side;" it functions to merely reinforce beliefs about the necessity or danger of certain speech policies. While it remains to be seen whether the University of Chicago acceptance letter to the Class of 2020 will have this effect – or any lasting effect, for that matter – on the broader contemporary fascination with speech and its regulation on college campuses, the unique structure of the text, its subtle persuasive appeals, and its emergence in a time marked by social polarization suggest that this is not the last time we will see the merging of the academy and the broader media market. The implications of this merge, particularly on complex topics like academic freedom, speech, and identity, are pertinent. Letters like this

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one seem to not only frame accepted students as fated customers, but also seek out mediated audiences that will polarize the discourse of college around unnecessary, empty buzzwords linked to central political ideographs of freedom and speech. However, there are much better spaces to discuss the words and symbols that will “never hurt us” than a college acceptance letter.

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WILLFUL IGNORANCE, EMBODIMENT, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SYMPATHY: J.M. COETZEE ON ANIMAL CRUELTY THROUGH FICTIONAL INTERLOCUTORS

Erin Mellor

Many animal rights activists agree that pain is universally felt, spanning human-animal barriers to encompass all living, or embodied, things. Elizabeth Costello, the aging female novelist central to J. M. Coetzee's novella, utilizes a series of metaphors in her lecture *The Philosophers and the Animals* to compare animal suffering to human suffering. Coetzee uses the character of Costello as a lens for addressing the ethical boundaries of horror and what it means to not only be cognizant of immense suffering, but to willfully ignore "places of death" as an entire community.¹ I will explore the ethical boundary between human suffering and animal cruelty as seen in the metaphors presented by Coetzee's Costello in her first lecture, *The Philosophers and the Animals*: the comparison of the meat industry to the Third Reich, and mass animal slaughter to the Nazi death camps. It is too reductionist to claim that Costello is a stand-in for Coetzee, yet they share similar life experiences and a pessimistic outlook on the ability of society to progress. The latter distances himself from his own beliefs by utilizing fictional interlocutors, allowing for an expansive examination of the multiplicities inherent in hege-

¹ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 35.

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monic evaluations of suffering, the nonpower inherent in power.²

Is it ethical, from a philosophical standpoint as well as a literary one, to draw upon the horrors of the Holocaust in a metaphor referencing the mass slaughter of animals? Are there specific moments in history that are too appalling and deeply personal to ever appropriately use as a point of comparison in a contemporary argument? Coetzee clearly takes the issue of human mistreatment of animals seriously, as his protagonist's chosen metaphors equate human cruelty towards animals with the calculated murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust. Coetzee presented his pseudo-lecture, the novella itself, at the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, both revealing and veiling his opinions on the way human beings treat animals in our capitalistic society.³ Through Costello's chosen metaphors, we see Coetzee's own moral opprobrium with the meat industry, as well as his understanding of how audiences, representative of society in microcosm, perceive and respond to his arguments. The comparison between the victims of fascism and factory farms is not inherently objectionable when in the form of a literary device, solely because figurative devices in literature do not carry a burden of proof. They are meant to illustrate an idea, not substantiate it. It is too simple to claim that the comparison lessens the tragedy of the Holocaust and the pain felt; in fact, this line of reasoning precludes the

² Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 396. Derrida explores multiple questions with the reader on the ability of animals to feel suffering. He asks, "What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability? What is this nonpower at the heart of power? What is its quality of modality? How should one account for it? What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us? Being able to suffer is no longer a power, it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible." I think it is productive to engage the possibility that Coetzee used his lecture to respond to Derrida's ideas.

³ Amy Gutmann, introduction to *The Lives of Animals*, ed. J. M. Coetzee (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

acknowledgment that animals have souls and can thus suffer. However, what metrics exist for measuring the ethical applicability of figurative language, the level of sensitivity surrounding historically charged words and phrases? In what ways does Coetzee himself escape culpability because he presents the comparison through the words of a fictional lecturer?

Costello's metaphor in her lecture *The Philosophers and Animals*, while controversial, aptly illuminates the tragedy of the meat industry. It helps underline the gravity of how humans oppress nonhuman animals and escape culpability. However, one reason Costello's metaphor is so shocking—and can be argued insensitive—is because she does not assure her audience of the ways in which her comparison *could be* perceived as offensive. She fails to address the ways in which history integrates itself into present discussions, so that the Holocaust is not less important because it happened in the past and cannot be reconciled (as the meat industry of the present day can.) Her fatal flaw is in replacing an equal sign with a greater than sign, claiming that the meat industry is worse than what the Third Reich unrolled. She states that “an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing” exists that “rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it” (21).⁴

However, Costello does not discomfit her audience because this correlation is ungrounded, or because she does not qualify her subject matter enough. Rather, Costello's lecture makes her audience uncomfortable because it “breaks with the expected academic norms” thus provoking “awkward emotional exchanges” as pointed out by Frances Mascia-Lees, an American anthropologist.⁵ We can see this in the decisive letter Abraham Stern, a professor at Appleton College, sends to Costello, calling her out for trading “on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way” and insulting “the memory of the dead”

⁴ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 21.

⁵ Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, “Introduction to Cruelty, Suffering, Imagination: The Lessons of J. M. Coetzee” *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 84.

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(50).⁶ Coetzee presents us with a protagonist who addresses her audience directly, claiming no pretense. She deviates from polite conversation with an apology that sounds much more like an indictment, asking her audience to “pardon the tastelessness of the following” before theorizing about the body fat of Treblinka’s victims being used as an ingredient in soap (21-22).⁷ We are so shocked by her words that we cannot process the greater meaning behind them. The metaphor falls flat.

From a historical point of view, Costello’s metaphor is appropriate. According to Boria Sax, the term “Holocaust” originally denoted “a Hebrew sacrifice in which the entire animal was given to Yahweh to be consumed with fire” (156).⁸ In a weird twist, a form of animal exploitation—animal killed for spiritual offering—became the chosen metaphor for the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazi Germans. The very term “Holocaust” alludes to and denotes animal suffering. And if literature seeks to illuminate the human experience and the ways in which we move through the world, metaphors help elucidate what lies within us. David Sztybel, a philosopher specializing in animal ethics, wrote an intriguing essay defending the metaphor of the Holocaust victims to animals in the meat industry. He claims that in asking if we dare point out “the chilling similarities between how Jews were treated in the Holocaust and how animals are treated in the present day” we are really asking if human beings are of “superior moral significance relative to nonhuman animals” (98).⁹ Sztybel’s selected similarities stand the test: displacement, separation from family, voicelessness, unfathomable amount of deaths, namelessness, transported in confined places, and a disowning of responsibility by the perpetrators, coupled with conditioned

⁶ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁸ Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 156.

⁹ David Sztybel, “Can the Treatment of Animals Be Compared to the Holocaust?” *Ethics and the Environment* 11 (2006): 98.

indifference. This removes the systems of power that we see in differentiating “man” from “animal” and replaces both with the identifier of *sufferer*. And yet, instead of enumerating the horrors of the meat industry and its procedures, Costello discusses facts about the Holocaust and leaves it up to those in attendance to draw the parallels, the very people she earlier notes whom can only “comprehend the deaths of others” by thinking of the victims “one at a time” (19).¹⁰

Audience members at *The Philosophers and the Animals* lecture view Elizabeth Costello as removed from society, entertaining if not completely delusional. She does not really have much power in effecting change or elevating her audience to the state of heightened moral awareness that she herself inhabits because her uncomfortable pauses and alarming analogies alienate her. Thus, we see a correlation between an escalated sensitivity to animal abuse and a fall in social status, as Costello moves from expert to outcast, celebrated to criticized, influential to delusional. An element of attenuated agency exists within each listener, as they can visually see what happens to someone who has such an extreme aversion to the meat industry and its practices—you will be seen as strange, incoherent, and disorganized.

This begs the question, why did Coetzee make Costello his protagonist? Why give her such a weak voice, a voice that lacks gravitas and conviction in making her case against animal cruelty? An art critic, Ward Jones, argues that the main lesson of *The Lives of Animals* is how “the portrait that we have of an ethical informant” can contribute to the way we evaluate the argument at hand (209).¹¹ Costello begins her lecture asking her audience to “concede” to her “the rhetorical power to evoke these horrors and bring them home to you with adequate force” which is ironic as she is relatively powerless in evoking a good

¹⁰ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

¹¹ Ward E. Jones, “Elizabeth Costello and the Biography of the Moral Philosopher,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (2011): 209.

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response (19).¹² Why does Coetzee choose a voice that is elderly, scattered, and alarmist as the instrument for perpetuating his ideas? I agree with the literature arguing that “fictional narratives can possess ethical authority” but think that the choice to make that ethical authority questionable is an ingenious ploy by Coetzee (209).¹³ Costello’s weak authority and flaws as a public speaker reflect the thoughts of an author who knows that his position is trivialized in and disruptive to popular thought. This shows that Coetzee does not believe society can recognize the severity or extent of this kind of mass cruelty and change. He concedes to the moral apathy of humans and the limited potential for an expansion of human empathy for animals, as they are non-human and thus other. Coetzee identifies with the futility of serving as a moral persuader, and turns to the use of interlocutors to stir the pot for him, to present ideas that resonate with both the pedagogue and the participant.

Coetzee develops these interlocutors to start a conversation on the concept of cruelty. If pain is a universal sensation felt, then cruelty inflicted on an animal is just as horrific as cruelty inflicted on a human. What does it mean to be a conduit capable of inflicting suffering and cruelty on other living creatures? It is hard to answer this question because a “uniform or ubiquitous cross-cultural concept of ‘cruelty’ towards animals” does not exist (129).¹⁴ While global watchdogs for human rights operate around commonly accepted ideals of morality and justice, international organizations protecting the rights of animals find it much harder to make universal claims, as there is no cross-cultural acceptance of where animals stand

¹²Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

¹³Jones, “Elizabeth Costello and the Biography of the Moral Philosopher,” 209.

¹⁴Agustin Fuentes, “The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans: A View From Biological Anthropology Inspired by J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Elizabeth Costello’” *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 129.

in relation to humans. But what if we are not in the position of pain-inflictor, but in the position of pain-witness?

Costello makes it clear that the Germans who “lived in the countryside” around the Nazi death camps “could not afford to know” what took place within the camps (19).¹⁵ They rejected a reality that was too painful to accept. But she does not disparage these people as uniquely immoral—rather, their actions were reflective of the average German citizen. Camps covered the Reich like sores. Just as the majority of Americans live in close proximity to places where meat is produced, distributed, or sold, Costello argues “few Germans lived more than a few kilometers from a camp of some kind” (20).¹⁶ Evidence of immense cruelty and horror was in the air, swirled across some pathway of the conscious, even if it could not be fully explicated or clearly labeled. Costello claims that humans utilize ignorance as a survival mechanism when faced with mass-scale suffering. The actions of the Germans behind the camp were so appalling that the average German citizen needed to disassociate in order to keep his or her sanity. They chose to be willfully ignorant.

Costello’s lecture is ultimately an appeal to examine how human beings sympathize, or refuse to sympathize, with those they do not identify with, those that remain in the ambiguous category of *other*—or, more aptly—*nonhuman*. Costello associates willful ignorance with a purposeful refusal to acknowledge embodied-beings. She claims that merely being alive “is to be a living soul” (33).¹⁷ Thus, animals, a domain encompassing human beings, all possess embodied souls. Through her dialogue on embodiment, we see glimpses of Coetzee’s philosophy emerging. He urges the reader to acknowledge that the majority of individuals fail to recognize the capacity of all embodied things to suffer, just as the fictional lecture attendees fail to recognize the magnitude of

¹⁵Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

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Costello's argument. Jacques Derrida explores the idea of an animal's ability to suffer. If humans are the agents in power, and they define what is nonhuman, than asking the question, "Can animals suffer?" is analogous to asking if animals can *not* be able to suffer. He further probes, to what extent should we be concerned with the ability of an animal to suffer, if "being able to suffer is no longer a power" but a "possibility without power" (396).¹⁸ Would not animals gain superiority over man if they were unable to suffer? And yet, this cannot be true. And it is problematic if individuals recognize this capacity to suffer. If an individual recognizes the capacity of all embodied things—creatures with a heart and soul—to suffer, then cruelty gains more weight. Animal cruelty moves from a necessary evil, something you grimace at but continue to ignore, to a grave injustice that *requires* action. Suddenly, the confinement of animals stuffed into boxes, pens, coops, and cages becomes as glaringly offensive as the confinement of humans in cattle cars.

I want to extend Coetzee's thinking and propose that Costello misses something crucial by making this a binary response—sympathizing or refusing to sympathize. A variety of obstacles to human sympathy for suffering exist: not knowing, willfully not knowing (as Costello highlights), compassion fatigue (the inability to invest the tremendous emotional energy that sympathy requires for every injustice), and apathy from the feeling of impotence in the face of overwhelming injustice or cruelty. Therefore, a lack of sympathy is not always a psychological defense on behalf of the person witnessing suffering. I believe people consciously or unconsciously place their psychological suffering on one scale with the ethical behavior they wish they could exhibit on the other scale. The scale tips towards the heavier desire. By ignoring all of these nuances, Costello simplifies the problem of animal cruelty to a point that can be easily dismissed by her audience. They perceive her points as both radical and irrelevant. This failure on Costello's part makes me question Coetzee's viewpoint, as he *created*

¹⁸Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 396.

Costello's failure. Perhaps if we can recognize the earnestness in which Costello believes her moral knowledge to be true, we can also empathize with the frustration of a fruitless mission and the inability to will a group to action. And yet, identifying with Costello proves exceedingly challenging.

Costello's Holocaust metaphor, if it is to be viewed as a vehicle for illuminating commonalities, serves its purpose by highlighting a lack of sympathy for living beings deemed "nonhuman." Psychologists studying anthropomorphism elucidate this idea of nonhuman versus human by putting humanness on a continuum. They claim that through anthropomorphism "individuals can attribute humanlike capacities to nonhuman agents" and through dehumanization they can also "fail to attribute these same capacities to other people" (228).¹⁹ While the former mode leads to more moral concern for the subject, the latter incites moral detachment. This process makes it easier to excuse immoral actions. Costello's lecture discomfits her audience not just because it centers on an analogy to the Holocaust, but because it suggests that human cruelty towards other humans is no worse than human cruelty towards animals. It is easy for us to see "animality in humans," as most people regard Nazi leaders in the Holocaust as morally repugnant and thus bestial, but it is harder for us to see the "humanity in animals" when this means an integral part of our everyday lives—eating meat—is rooted in the suffering of fellow creatures (130).²⁰

Towards the end of her lecture, Costello returns to the death camps to discuss the true horror of the Holocaust—the inability of the German perpetrators to "think themselves into

¹⁹ A. Waytz, J. Cacioppo, and N. Epley, "Who Sees Human?: The Stability and Importance of Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5 (2010): 228.

²⁰ Fuentes, "The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans: A View From Biological Anthropology Inspired by J. M. Coetzee's 'Elizabeth Costello,'" 130.

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the place of their victims” that rattle away in a cattle-car (34).²¹ Just as the majority of Germans “closed their hearts” to the faculty of sympathy, so does Costello’s audience fail to imagine themselves in the body of Costello (34).²² Her own son, whose thoughts Coetzee brings us into, thinks her lecture was a “strange talk” both “ill gauged” and “ill argued” (36).²³ He believes she should not be there. Norma, his wife, wants to publicly humiliate Costello by asking a malevolent question. Costello calls for sympathy, yet we see Coetzee’s two main characters deny her compassion. Her appeal is fruitless.

Just as the audience fails to sympathize with the speaker, so I believe that Coetzee satirizes the proclivity of humans to cling to ignorance rather than move to action. Costello claims that “there are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else” but the overwhelming majority of people “have the capacity but choose not to exercise it” (35).²⁴ Humans will choose being accepted over being ostracized, even if the choice compromises moral norms. History, as seen through the Holocaust analogy, continues to prove that those who challenge the status quo face ostracism while the ignorant remain safe in their country homes. Nazi rhetoric encouraged people to reject identifying with Jews. We are similarly conditioned to be entirely indifferent to animal suffering as it has become an integral part of our society, and those who reject it are cast out as pariahs.

Coetzee proffers an indictment on Elizabeth Costello to the reader as well. She alienates herself from her audience through her morally superior attitude, seen in moments when she claims that she can think her way “into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster” because they “share the substrate of life” with her (35).²⁵ She posits herself as a witness to a

²¹ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁵ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 35.

holocaust who refuses to remain silent, rendering her audience members the German people of the countryside who witness horror and choose willful ignorance. She claims that “each day is a new holocaust” and yet “our moral being [remains] untouched” and we do not “feel tainted” (35).²⁶ Costello makes each new day a harbinger of horrific tragedy. Each day is a new holocaust. And each day, we shield our morality from affront, to the point where we are inoculated against the brutality. She suggests that her audience members are tainted—an affront to each member’s moral code that she herself evades.

In Costello’s voice and actions, we see Coetzee the author posing the question: Does individual awareness bring about any real change, especially if she or he takes an extremely isolating stance? There is power in his subtlety of narrative authority, and Coetzee’s prose reflects an acute awareness of the inherent animal suffering in the meat industry. His vision for audience response, both the fictional audience receiving Costello and the real audience of readers, is bleak—he packages a story in a lecture in which the majority of characters cannot change their mindsets or expand their perspectives. Beyond that, the individual is relatively weak in her power to effect change, especially because Costello’s main arguments remain rooted in a metaphor that links the meat industry to a dark, indisputably incomprehensible moment in human history. We think we have already been morally aroused after the horrors of the Holocaust, and that suffering of that magnitude cannot possibly be repeated. But just as incidents of genocide took place before World War II with the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently persisted throughout the twentieth century in Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda, so do grave injustices against living creatures exist in the present day.

The lecture ends abruptly: “We can do anything and get away with it... there is no punishment” (25).²⁷ But is not the calculated cruelty of a few at the top of the meat industry worse

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

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than the willful ignorance assumed by the majority of human beings towards animal cruelty? Coetzee's fictional scaffolding around the subject of animal cruelty in the meat industry allows for an inward turn; which character acts in a way I would? The reader is privy to the scene but not participating in it. You are not tasked with gauging your reaction because you are not acting—you are watching. It is almost as if Coetzee presents you with the choice between kindness and cruelty itself, knowing you will guiltily choose the latter, but from afar. You have the privilege of choosing from a private locale, away from the fictional group of people in attendance. He knows you will not change your perspective, even if a tinge of guilt leaks into your conscious. While we do not hold the knives that slit the throats of chickens nor press the buttons that systematically asphyxiate cattle, we do not question how our meat reaches our plates as perfectly symmetrical patties. When activism presses up against alienation, humans usually choose the status quo, if for nothing more than self-preservation. We willfully ignore the suffering of those whom we cannot identify with, feeling morally exempt from a murder we did not commit. For being the animals in power, humans are quite powerless in effecting change.

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THE CONCEPT OF ART AND INTERACTIVE COMPUTER ART

Anhang Ning

In this digital era, computers have become an essential component of our lives: we connect with each other via social media, get real time news updates via the Internet, and share music and ideas in the cloud. In the art world, interactive computer art has emerged in response to this unique time period. This new art form raises some interesting discussions concerning interactivity, audience participation, and the very medium of the computer. In the first section of this paper, I will lay the groundwork through the aesthetic theories proposed by Morris Weitz, George Dickie, and Immanuel Kant. Art is an open concept, and, the audience is an important component of an artwork. In addition, a good work of art evokes a universal sense of delight or wonder, which is subjective in nature.

In the second section, through two major examples, “Crossings” (2009) by Nina Yankowitz and “Boundary Functions” (1998) by Scott Snibbe, I argue that interactive computer art eliminates the distance between the audience and the artwork since it demands audience participation. It outperforms traditional art forms in terms of artistic techniques, displaying effect, and the incorporation of other disciplines. In the end, by connecting the two sections, I argue that because the core concepts of interactive computer art (i.e. its artistic values, the importance of the audience, and the universal delightfulness it evokes) are closely related to larger discussions of art, it fits in the category of art.

With the rapid development of technology and Internet, this era with tremendous amount of information has already surrounded us, no matter if we are ready or not. Understanding

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interactive computer art is an initial step toward making sense of this technological era. Although the “interactivity” concept is radically new, we ought to treat it with careful analysis instead of careless rejection. Given that technology changes rapidly, perhaps more radical art forms are approaching us in the near future; we might be left behind without a sufficient understanding of the contemporary innovations of interactive computer art.

What is Essential for the Concept of Art?

Art, given its adventurous character, is an open concept that allows continuous modifications. Furthermore, the audience plays an essential role for the artwork, and one of the many components of a successful artwork is that it generates universal subjective judgments.

Unlike rigid scientific theories, the definition of art is subject to change. Numerous efforts have been made at an all-encompassing definition of art; however, the theorists ignore the fallacy behind its logic.¹ A good definition is composed of both necessary and sufficient conditions, meaning that a theory is true if and only if the conditions are true. However, given the “very expansive, adventurous character of art,”—or, to put it more simply, the examples of what count as art change continually in unpredictable ways—the definition of art lacks sufficient and necessary conditions; thus it is logically impossible to generate a definition of art.²

All existing definitions of art have limitations, for example, formalism and expressionism. Formalists believe that the essential property of an artwork is the combination of “plastic

¹ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.” In *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden: Blackwell, 2004): 13.

² *Ibid.* 13, 16.

forms” (i.e. lines, colors, shapes and volumes)³; anything without significant forms is repudiated from the category of art.⁴ The inadequacy of formalism is obvious: it leaves out other essential properties that constitute an artwork, such as its historical context, emotions that it evokes, etc. The expressionist theory developed by Leo Tolstoy, is also problematic. Emotional expression and feelings, expressionists believe, are fundamental properties of art.⁵ Granted, expressionism is applicable to many abstract paintings⁶, but realistic paintings focusing on historical events or portraits do not necessarily invoke emotional response. Because these paintings are considered as art, the expressionist theory is thus insufficient.⁷ Similarly, other theories of art, such as organicist theory, intuitionist theory, and voluntarist theory are inadequate in that “each purports to be a complete statement about the defining features of all works of art and yet each of them leaves out something which the others take to be central.”⁸ Different theories resemble myriad facets of a diamond; each is merely one reflection of the whole.

Given that the existing definitions are inevitably limited, the role of the concept of art is to describe similarities and connections of all artworks. Attention should be shifted from definitive theories to a descriptive account: “aestheticians,” Weitz argues, “may lay down similarity conditions but never necessary and sufficient ones for correct application of the

³ An example of formalism is James McNeil Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket* (1875), which underscores two formal elements: color and form (“Formalism in Modern Art”).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Wassily Kandinsky’s *Composition VI* (1913) is an expressionist painting. The artist invites his audience to sense the orchestral harmony inherent in this work. Other expressionist paintings can be found in works created by artists from *the Blue Rider* and *the Bridge*.

⁷ Ibid., 13, 14.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

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concept.”⁹ Furthermore, when new circumstances arise in the art world, theorists discuss whether or not the concept could be broadened. As Weitz writes,

“Art,” itself, is an open concept. New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge, which will demand decisions on the part of those interested, usually professional critics, as to whether the concept should be extended or not.¹⁰

For example, John Cage’s famous piece *4’33’’* emerged as a radical new form of art. During his performance, Cage sat in front of the piano, without playing a single note. To determine whether or not this is art, theorists can look at the similarities it shares with other musical works: a three-movement composition performed in a recital. However, different from previous works, there was complete silence throughout the performance. Many audience members were angry about this because they expected to hear sound during a piano performance. Cage nevertheless believes that all sounds are equal: “not-sounds” are not inferior to sounds.¹¹ This piece aimed to “remind the listener that s/he can have a satisfying musical experience only by using his/her own ears and listening to the sounds and noises of the environment.”¹² To decide whether or not this piece is fit for the category of art, theorists can look at its relationship with other musical works and examining both the audience’s and Cage’s views.

Of a profusion of attributes of art, I believe the two crucial properties are: the audience and the universality of the

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹¹ Marta Blažanović, "Echtzeitmusik: The social and discursive contexts of a contemporary music scene." (diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2012), 27.

¹² Ibid.

work. First, an artwork is seen and apprehended by viewers or auditors; thus, the audience plays a prominent part in art. George Dickie defines art as “an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.”¹³ An artwork is made to be shown to members of the artworld. If Dickie were right, the artworld public is exclusively those who have enough artistic education, such that “the members...know how to fulfill a role which requires knowledge and understanding similar in many respects to that required of an artist.”¹⁴ To qualify as a member, the individual must have an artistic background similar to the artist’s; the common professions of the artworld public include “critic, art teacher, director, curator, (and) conductor.”¹⁵ Although I agree with Dickie that the role of the audience is important, I think his position on “artworld public” favors elitism. I believe that this group can be broadened.

Many artworks have been created for mainstream audiences, not excluding those with minimal education on art. For example, cooperating with art museums, contemporary artists aim to present their works and values to the public. The education of these artists’ work to the general public is precisely the reason that contemporary art museums exist. One important step involved in museum education is creating an explanatory label for artworks. After curators finish writing labels, museum educators make sure that the language is precise and simple, so that it is accessible to different audiences, including non-native speakers, children, advanced readers, etc. In addition, a variety of tours are often organized to ensure different groups receive suitable educational experiences, ranging from toddler tours, school tours, to adult tours and Spanish tours. During the opening of an exhibition, it is not uncommon to see the artist delivering a talk to the public in

¹³ George Dickie, “The New Institutional Theory of Art.” In *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden: Blackwell, 2004): 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

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many museums. From these examples, we discern that artists and museums work hard to present the knowledge and background of the artworks to all sorts of audiences; thus Dickie's account on the artworld public is insufficiently inclusive.

Artistic masterpieces evoke subjective emotions in the mind of each audience member. In his famous theory of *sublimity*, Immanuel Kant emphasizes the aesthetic experience in our mind.¹⁶ The *sublime* does not exist in objects; one can only find it in the mind.¹⁷ As Steve Odin points out, Kant's perspective on *aesthetic attitude* "shift(s) from a position of realism, which understands beauty as something only inherent in the object, to an idealist (or, as it were, transcendental idealist) position that underscores the contribution of the mind in aesthetic experience."¹⁸ In other words, far from analyzing external features of an artwork, say, in a painting, its lines, shapes, and colors, one assesses a work of art based on one's subjective judgment. As Odin writes, "human consciousness is not simply a passive recipient: to some extent it actively constitutes an object of beauty through various noetic operations of the mind."¹⁹ Beauty arouses intellectual engagement. "The beautiful," for Kant, "is that which, apart from concepts, is represented as the Object of a UNIVERSAL delight."²⁰ The object evokes "similar delight" from all humans.²¹ Importantly, an aesthetic judgment is subjective; therefore, it is "liberated from all constraint by concepts" and it "cannot claim the 'objective universal validity' of a logical judgment."²² The concept of *subjective universality* may seem ambivalent at first

¹⁶ Steve Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*

glance; however, it simply means that the *beautiful*, or an exquisite work of art, can cause a similar subjective feeling for everyone. From my understanding, what Kant means by “similar delight” is not merely the feeling of pleasure—it rather lies on a broader spectrum of emotions. Standing in front of a masterful painting, for example, diverse people experience analogous emotions, such as awe, pleasure, or even melancholy.

Interactive Computer Art

Interactive computer art offers a new mode of apprehending art. By eliminating the distance from the artwork, the installation is more action-oriented. Visitors explore the work through generated display. The interaction is of a relaxing kind, since previous knowledge on the work is not required. The medium of the computer is advantageous because: 1) it creates the most precise shapes or the most realistic three dimensional models, and 2) it allows modification of the work by altering digital codes. In addition, interactive installations usually incorporate different art forms as well as knowledge from multiple disciplines.

Before we unpack the theories of interactive computer art, let us first consider some examples. Displayed in Greece and Poland in 2009, “Crossings”²³ is an interactive installation that advocates religious toleration. By incorporating sacred texts of different religions, such as the Old Testament and the Quran, the installation encourages the audience to explore connections between the scriptures²⁴ Inside the gallery, the floor is a projection of mosaic patterns of various churches, cathedrals, and temples around the world.²⁵ As participants hear religious texts in different dialects, they are invited, using the

²³ See Appendix.

²⁴ Project description, 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

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infrared wand, to drag words from religious texts appeared on an interactive wall to an adjacent text wall. The program allows participants to save their selection and review them on the program's website.

Another interactive art installation is Scott Snibbe's "Boundary Functions"²⁶ (1998). "Boundary Functions" examines the concept of personal space, over which we do not have autonomy because of the interrelation between us and other people.²⁷ The artwork requires at least two participants. An overhead projector draws lines between people: one line between two participants, three lines between three participants. More lines will be generated as more participants join, resulting in the creation of cellular areas. As people move, the lines move as well; however, a participant cannot walk outside of his/her cellular area, or his/her "personal space." The installation vividly shows the conflicted concepts of personal space and society: although there is always a line, a "boundary," between us and other individuals, the space is impossible without the presence of other people because, presented in the model, the involvement of one person is not sufficient for the creation of a "personal space." The mathematical construction *Voronoi diagram* is also used in astronomy to illustrate the relationship between gravity and stars, and, in chemistry to represent collections of atoms in crystals.²⁸

Interactive computer artworks, such as "Crossings" and "Boundary Functions," differ from traditional art forms in that the participant generates different displays. Dominic Lopes writes, "a work of art is interactive to the degree that the actions of its users help generate its display (in prescribed ways)."²⁹ In

²⁶ See Appendix.

²⁷ Scott Snibbe, "Boundary Functions." *Scott Snibbe Website*. 1998, 1 March, 2016.

<<http://www.snibbe.com/projects/interactive/boundaryfunctions/>>

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Dominic M. McIver Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 37.

“Crossings,” participants help generate display by choosing words from the sacred texts, which simultaneously appear on the adjacent wall. The displays vary because different participants create different combinations of words. Furthermore, in order to better “interact” with users, interactive computer artworks include sensor systems, which records the participants’ gestures and change them into data that the computer can process.³⁰ Then, the data is “translated back into real-world phenomena that people can perceive.”³¹ For example, “Boundary Functions” includes a sensor which detects people’s movement and then transforms the movement into languages that the computer can process. Next the system produces data, which are then translated to perceivable phenomena, i.e. lines and cellular shapes projected on the floor.

Interactivity may appear nebulous at first glance. Because the concept plays such a pivotal role in understanding the nature of interactive computer art, it is thus important to understand the meaning of interactivity involved in this art form. First, interactivity is different from active appreciation. Traditional art forms, such as a painting, may evoke active reflections by the viewer, whereas interactive computer art allows viewers to generate the display. For instance, the Romantic painting *Monk by the Sea* (1810) by the German painter Caspar David Friedrich may elicit emotional effects of its viewers, such as loneliness, generating further intellectual engagement with the work. Although the piece leads to active thinking by the viewer, it is not considered interactive. Lopes defines this sort of engagement as “active appreciation,” and he writes, “whereas art of all kinds invites active appreciation,

³⁰ Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, “Interaction in Art and Technology,” *Crossings: Electronic Journal of Art & Technology* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5, 7. David Z. Saltz, “The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 2 (1997): 118.

³¹ Saltz, “The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,” 118.

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only some art is interactive.”³² Active appreciation does not alter the display of the work, which excludes it from the concept of interactivity.

Second, another clarification regarding the concept *interactivity* regards its level. Only works that involve strong interactivity are interactive computer art. The sort of interactivity involved in interactive computer art is different from weak interactivity in that strongly interactive computer art do not have pre-determined structures. For example, computer games are strongly interactive media; the players determine how the narrative develops when they make different choices.³³ Lopes writes, when “the structure itself is shaped in part by the interactor’s choices,” the artwork is interactive.³⁴ On the contrary, the interaction involved in Michael Joyce’s hypertext novel *Afternoon* is weak. The novel allows the readers to explore different versions of the narrative each time by clicking on different words.³⁵ The role of the reader resembles that of a tourist, without actively participating in the work; therefore, the interaction is considered weak.³⁶ Unlike strongly interactive media video games, the structure of *Afternoon* is pre-determined.

To participate in interactive art installations, audiences are not required to have previous knowledge. Unlike performers, who have professional knowledge on the work and devote efforts practicing the work prior to a performance, the audience of the interactive artwork does not necessarily have knowledge concerning the work prior to the interaction. For example, prior to his performance of Beethoven’s No. 5 Concerto, Lang Lang has thoroughly learned and practiced the piece. On the contrary,

³² Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 41-42.

³³ Dominic M. McIver Lopes, “The Ontology of Interactive Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35, no. 5 (2001): 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Saltz, “The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,” 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

a participant of “Boundary Functions” does not have to know about Voronoi diagrams and yet can still participate. The computer, functioning as an interpreter, automatically generates displays through computational processes when input is given.³⁷ The computer allows the user to learn and explore the work by generating displays.

The medium of computer has several advantages over the media of traditional art forms. First, the use of computers brings a new light on the possibility of the medium. Paul Crowther argues for the advantages of digital imagery, since digital art and interactive computer art share the same medium, and interactive computer art sometimes uses digital images. Digital images simply mean computer graphics, which are non-interactive artworks displayed on a computer. In digital artworks, the computer plays a similar role to the canvas of a painting. The computer nevertheless radicalizes the contour and mass features of traditional art.³⁸ Crowther explains the meaning of contour and mass:

When creating a picture, an artist operates, *necessarily*, along an axis defined by two logical extremes...the *contours* of a three-dimensional object *or* by assembling and blending marks so as to represent its *mass*, or, of course, by combining elements of both.³⁹

The French painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ work *The Virgin Adoring the Host* (1852) exemplifies an extreme degree of *contours*, as it has clear and precise outline.⁴⁰ The British painter Frank Auerbach’s piece *Portrait of Julia* (1960) shows *mass* to an extreme degree—its physicality is so obvious that

³⁷ Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 80.

³⁸ Paul Crowther, “Ontology and Aesthetics of Digital Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66, no. 2 (2008): 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161, 163.

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the work looks like “relief modeling.”⁴¹ Although it is according to the painter’s will on where in the contour-mass axis they want to display in the work, and despite the fact that some artists are capable of extraordinarily precise outlines and realistic physicality, the computer outperforms humans.⁴² The computer extends the capability of what humans can achieve in that it allows the creation of images with the maximum mass and contour features. Another difference between the computer and other media, such as a canvas or a piece of paper, is that the computer screen is flatter. Surprisingly, this does not diminish the quality of displaying and even enhances the quality of three-dimensional effect.⁴³

Using its special language, the unique medium of the computer also enables modification of the artwork and the collaboration between artists. Similar to the software that generates digital image, the program of interactive computer art includes computer codes based on mathematic models.⁴⁴ The digital code can be altered through the manipulation of its mathematic operations.⁴⁵ Similar to digital images, the program of interactive computer art is not permanent, since it allows modifications from either the artist himself or other artists. This revolutionary aspect shifts our understanding of the traditional art-making process—once the work is done, it remains unchanged. The computer, in contrast, allows and encourages ongoing collaborations and exchanges between artists, disciplines, and approaches.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 163.

⁴³ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁴ Holle Humphries, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature of Computer Art.” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no.1 (2003): 22.

⁴⁵ Crowther, “Ontology and Aesthetics of Digital Art,” 165.

Interactive Computer Art as a Radical New Art Form

Information and technology dominate contemporary society in myriad ways: on a daily basis, we use cell phones for communication, computers for work, and the Internet for knowledge. Interactive computer art emerges organically from this environment, and leads naturally to consideration of how interactivity fits into the larger category of “art.”

As Weitz suggests, the development of art resembles an ongoing adventure. The nature of the concept of art is open and allows modification. As new art forms emerge, theorists decide whether or not they share similarities with existing ones. It is thus unwise to exclude new art forms, even radical ones, from the category of art without thorough consideration. It is true that interactive computer art exploits a new medium, the computer, but a judicious theorist should not deny its status on that basis. Similarities between interactive computer art and traditional art forms are obvious; for example, interactive installations include visual art, sound, and etc, and they are usually shown in a museum. Not only does interactive computer art share similarities with traditional art, as discussed in the second section, it even perfects certain aspects of existing art forms. Interactive computer art works outperform human artists in what they can achieve in the mass-contour axis and create more realistic three dimensional effects. Furthermore, computers make possible combination of different art forms, such that sounds, texts, and images could all be present in one setting. Given that interactive computer art possesses a plentitude of artistic values, it belongs to the open concept of art.

The core concept of interactive computer art, interactivity, also aligns with Dickie’s views on the important role of the audience. Without an interactor, the work is incomplete. However, unlike Dickie’s “artworld” concept that inherently inclines to elitism, interactive installations welcome each visitor, who often doesn’t have prior knowledge, to engage in interaction. In this respect, interactive installations are approachable to a wide range of people as they require minimal

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artistic education. Since interactive computer art demands audience participation, it highlights the audience, who play an indispensable part of an artwork.

Furthermore, the interaction is advantageous to generating subjective universality as proposed by Kant. When an audience member apprehends a painting, a sculpture, or other traditional forms of art, there is always a distance between them. Interactive installations eliminate such distance through active participation. Whereas people are inclined to find formal features of a painting, subjective feelings and emotions are created when they interact with interactive works. Therefore, instead of a passive mode of appreciation, interactive installations elicit active engagement. Interactive computer art exemplifies the concept of subjective universality.

What changes would maximize the development of interactive computer art? First, to give the artist more flexibility, more computer software that “[allows] the artist access to deeper levels of the computer’s programming system” should be developed.⁴⁶ Whereas many software programs that target “specific tasks such as image manipulation” limit the artist’s use of the computer to achieve their goals, programs that integrate deep features of computing system allow more control and creativity.⁴⁷ Second, the computer artist could be equipped with more technological knowledge of programming. Lacking such knowledge, as observed by Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, the artist usually rely on technology experts, and they are less certain about how much power they have during the art-making process.⁴⁸

Interactive computer art, which involves active audience engagement, represents a remarkable moment in the development of art. The new art form alters the traditional mode of encountering art by allowing the audience to generate the

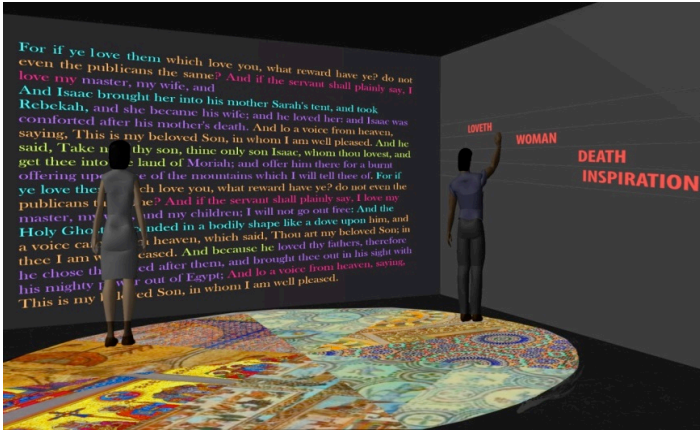
⁴⁶ Candy and Edmonds, “Interaction in Art and Technology,” 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

artistic display itself, and the medium enables great improvement in terms of artistic techniques and audience experience. In this digital era, everything changes rapidly—we will undoubtedly encounter many radical changes, not only in the art world, but in society more broadly. Although we should cherish traditions, an open mind is essential in the contemporary world. If we always live within our predetermined meanings and values, we will soon be overwhelmed by the multitude of changes. Therefore, it is crucial to embrace valuable new changes such as interactive art in order to function within our rapidly developing society.

Appendix



Nina Yankowitz, *Crossings* (2009)

http://www2.media.uoa.gr/~charitos/emobilart/exhibition_gr/img/crossings_2.jp



Scott Snibbe, "Boundary Functions" (1998)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ax4pgtHQDg

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AESTHETIC OBJECTIVISM’S “JOYOUS POSSESSION OF THE (NATURAL) WORLD,” TOWARDS A RELIGIOUSLY USEFUL APPRECIATION OF SUBLIMITY IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Maia Wellborn

Kant tells us that two things awe him most: the starry skies above and the moral law within. But, we might ask, is Kant mistaken in grounding the experience of sublimity in his moral philosophy as an “attempt to unify art and ethics?”¹ Appreciating the natural sublime in a way that seeks to understand the experience in an all-encompassing manner seems quite sensible in some approaches to environmental aesthetics. Understandably, then, scholars such as Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll seem to defend versions of aesthetic objectivism such that these connections are maintained. However, experiences in the natural world that are termed “sublime,” can be better understood through a specific kind of religious-aesthetic appreciation. In what follows, I argue that the natural sublime (sublimity as experienced in the natural world) is an experience that is closer to what Merold Westphal might call “religiously useful,” in that it inspires the sort of awe and celebration that connects us to the divine. Building on a view of the sublime which mirrors Emmanuel Levinas’s view of the ethical encounter with the Other, I contend that the natural sublime frustrates

¹ Julian Young, “Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime,” *Inquiry: an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy and the social sciences* Vol. 48, no. 2 (2005): 136.

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an aesthetic objectivist approach that requires truth values for our judgments of what is beautiful and sublime. I will suggest that since such objectivist accounts do not accurately capture the phenomenological subjectivity experienced in the natural sublime, postmodern religious thought can helpfully supplement the field of environmental aesthetics.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will describe what I take to be the aesthetic objectivist theories of Carlson and Carroll, showing why they are inadequate in describing our experience of the natural sublime. Next, I will show how a comparison of Levinas's ethical encounter and the natural sublime is relevant to the discussion in environmental aesthetics because it grounds the content of this experience. Moreover, it does so in a way that is "religiously useful" in ways similar to Westphal's description of the God of postmodern religious thought. I conclude that an aesthetic appreciation of the natural sublime should not reduce the subjective experience to the phenomenal object's properties and our judgments of it to true or false propositions. That problematic approach falsely delineates the sublime as merely an object in nature, thus erasing the existential essence of such experiences.

The debate regarding how we ought to appreciate nature is a much-discussed issue in contemporary environmental aesthetics. Allen Carlson notices the issues that arise in our attempts either to treat nature as art objects *or* reduce nature to picturesque landscapes. When we treat nature as an art object we take it out of its environmental context and when we reduce nature to picturesque landscapes we selectively and inappropriately choose from the whole of nature limited portions of it. As Ronald Rees points out, this latter view of reducing nature to the picturesque has "confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us. . . . It is an unfortunate lapse which allows us to abuse our local environments and venerate the Alps and the Rockies."² Finding

² Ronald Rees, "Mountain Scenery," *History Today* 25 (1975): 312. Quoted in Allen Carlson, "Aesthetic Appreciation of the Natural

both approaches problematic, Carlson attempts to understand nature in terms of its appropriate context, similar to how we make aesthetic judgments of works of art. He writes, writes:

If to appropriately aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of art forms, classifications of works, and artistic traditions, then to appropriately aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different systems and elements within those environments... Thus, the natural and environmental sciences are central to appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.³

In the same way in which knowledge of painting in the early twentieth century is necessary for appreciating the works of the Cubists, some knowledge of flora and fauna are necessary to appreciate a natural environment rich in flowers and plants.

Noël Carroll does not reject Carlson's account, but offers an alternative view in which he claims that some aesthetic judgments are emotional responses to nature, and that these are just as valid as judgments based upon an understanding of the natural sciences. What validates them is the appropriateness of the emotional response to the natural environment a person experiences. Carroll understands that a central question concerning the aesthetic appreciation of nature subsists in the overarching dichotomy between aesthetic relativism and aesthetic objectivism. The aesthetic relativist asserts that the aesthetic judgments about nature are absolutely subjective because they are entirely relative to those who make them. The aesthetic objectivist, alternatively, claims that judgments about nature are objectively true or false. In Carlson's view aesthetic

Environment," in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 161.

³ *Ibid.*, 166.

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judgments can be true if they are based on correct knowledge of the natural environment that one experiences. In Carroll's model, aesthetic judgments are true if the emotional response they convey is appropriate to the natural environment one is responding to.⁴ Both Carlson's and Carroll's models involve judgments that are true or false based on matters of fact concerning the aesthetic properties of some natural phenomena. They both presuppose aesthetic objectivism when it comes to the appreciation of nature. Specifically, they depend upon the existence of universal, aesthetic properties inherent in natural phenomena, while disagreeing about the location of such properties and how to access them.

Both Carlson and Carroll have insightful reasons for contending that aesthetic objectivism is preferable to aesthetic relativism regarding our judgments about the natural world. If it were not, it would seem impossible to characterize certain phenomena as beautiful, striking, visually appealing, and so on. Everything in the natural world would appear to us as a "blooming buzzing confusion,"⁵ as William James writes. In order to make sense of the world we make truth claims about the aesthetic properties of some perceptual object. In doing this, we pragmatically dissolve any epistemic limits to our cognition in an effort to communicate what is "appropriate, correct, or true."⁶ By comparing nature to art, Carlson thinks we achieve the method for making qualified judgments about nature. Because "the objectivity of aesthetic judgments of art depends upon identifying the correct category for the artwork in question,"⁷ by applying the comparable paradigm or standard to

⁴ Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 177-78.

⁵ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 462. Quoted by Carlson, 164.

⁶ Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature," 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

natural phenomena we are able to make judgments which are either true or false about such phenomena—with the natural sciences serving as the standard for such judgments. Likewise, Carroll thinks that because we can objectively judge our emotional responses to what is experiences in nature as appropriate or not, they can give us accurate aesthetic judgments of nature.

The aesthetic objectivist views that Carlson and Carroll champion are problematic because they assume that objectively true judgments about phenomena in the natural environment are what we are looking for in our appreciation of it. However, I would argue that there are experiences in nature that are awe-inspiring in such a way that they problematize these types of objective judgments. They are grounded in an essentially subjective appreciation that is internal to a subject's unique relation to it. These are experiences of the natural sublime which in some way exceed our appreciation of nature as something beautiful.

The natural sublime is an experience in the natural world that overwhelms us. It might involve a feeling whereby the object of our perception throws us back on ourselves so that we feel our total insignificance in comparison with to nature. In some experiences with the natural world we ride the fine line between appreciating the imperial grandeur of a phenomenon and the displeasing anxiety that it can arouse in our relation to it. Sublimity in nature only makes sense when *I* attempt to make sense of myself in comparison to it. I notice the difference between what is out there in the world, and what I possess as someone who experiences the *out-there-ness*. Sandra Shapshay identifies this difference when she observes that, “what is sublime for Kant is not something in the world—some portion of the ‘real’ that we directly experience—but a feeling we have that is occasioned by certain sensory experiences.”⁸ In

⁸ Sandra Shapshay, “Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Neglect of the Sublime.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no.2 (2013).

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all of our attempts to describe the sublime we run into an epistemic limit that allows us to communicate such experiences only by appealing to subjective sentiments—*overwhelming, stunning, heart-palpitating*. How should we approach making judgments of an experience that necessarily involves a subject who is at stake in the experience?

Emmanuel Levinas's encounter with what he calls the 'Other' is a compelling place to start in thinking through the answer to this question. The natural sublime may occasion a kind of experience like the encounter with the Other, which is initially the interruption to my "unchecked desire," and my "unbridled self-interest."⁹ When I meet someone on the street who asks me for spare change, for example, I am suddenly interrupted by the Other who presents me with an ethical responsibility. Even if I don't think I should give them spare change, I am still confronted with the ethical question: should I or not? This ethical responsibility is brought about by an asymmetrical relationship with an Other that I cannot fully understand. For Levinas, this encounter is pre-ontological because it inaugurates selfhood as a response to the infinite demand upon us from each and every Other. This encounter with the Other is not a spacio-temporal phenomenon because it occurs in the realm of the ethical rather than in the domain of being. For this reason Levinas answers in the negative to the question "is ontology fundamental?" Instead, on his model, the ethical encounter itself cannot be totalized in either concept or being. This totality for Levinas, as Michael Morgan describes it, is "the domain circumscribed, encompassed, and to a degree constructed by the self of the agent, ... the domain of reason or mind or culture or theory."¹⁰ The infinity of such an encounter speaks to the inability of my understanding to completely grasp the Other, and my inability ever to fully eradicate my responsibility to the Other. In this ethical encounter, I concede my

⁹ Michael L. Morgan. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

ability totally to grasp the world—my very identity becomes a response to the enigma that calls me into question and to selfhood. My subjectivity, therefore, is a response *to* a question—one that is entirely foreign to me. In this sense, Levinas asserts that subjectivity is not rooted in autonomy; it is ontologically conditioned by something exterior to it—a preceding alterity. I gain myself because of the Other—as such, I am never fully transparent to myself.

It follows that the experiences whereby my very selfhood is at stake are of a different sort than the experiences that I understand through reason alone. Being able to grasp the beauty of a landscape in terms of an objective metric concerns the aesthetic properties of the landscape (Carlson and Carroll). However, an experience in nature that inaugurates my being at stake in it is of another kind—it is the stuff of sublimity.

I imagine I am perceiving a landscape through a detailed knowledge of the natural environment, or from behind a camera lens at an overlook. Emotionally or cognitively, I respond to the objects of perception as they appear—aesthetically beautiful or complex. In doing so, I am totalizing these objects according to my conceptual judgment of them, as Levinas would say. I circumscribe, encompass, and construct the view. I view it in a way in which I can rationally comprehend it. I intend an aesthetic object whereby judgments of beauty, grandeur, etc. are of an objective quality because the judgments are made about the object alone. What changes, though, when I am 2000 ft. above ground on the side of a rock-face, where I hang from a solitary anchor while rock-climbing? The aesthetic appreciation we are likely to feel here (should we dare to be there) is an altogether a different appreciation—one that may make me aware of my finitude, shudder at the incalculable perspective, or attempt to tell myself that anxiety is useless and I am not in danger. Any judgment I make will necessarily be relevant to or informed by my own subjectivity—my own inability to remove the feeling from *my* experiencing of the sublime object. My experience with the natural sublime is one I cannot appreciate on a basis that removes my

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subjectivity from the judgments—making them objectively the case.

François Marty says that “totality is a matter for *reason* and its satisfaction. Seeking the point at which differences rest upon a ‘same,’ where the quest for unity is appeased, whereas infinity is a matter for *imagination*.”¹¹ Similarly, Matthew Sanderson explains how in Kant’s view reason fits into his view of the dynamical sublime. For Kant, the dynamical sublime “consists in the mental relationship between sensibility and reason that is excited by experiences of extremely powerful natural objects...”¹² In experiencing the dynamical sublime, first we are fearful of being overwhelmed by the natural event so that we become aware of our finitude. The event is something that very well could crush us with absolute indifference. However, the pleasure that we feel at the very next instant supersedes the fear because our intellect has the ability to reason. According to Julian Young, then, we stand in a sort of imaginative distance with the object of sublimity in nature and, thereby, feel this “*expansion* of the self, a flowing out of the ego and into totality of things,” which Freud calls an “oceanic feeling.”¹³

Because the sublime involves a subjective feeling which synthesizes pleasure and displeasure towards a phenomenon, it does not warrant that a common aesthetic appreciation for both the naturally beautiful and naturally sublime. Young argues that “for a proper interpretation of the sublime, we need a different metaphysics,”¹⁴ but must we embrace a blooming buzzing confusion as a result? I think not. Jane Forsey de-

¹¹ François Marty, “Height and the Sublime,” trans. by Jeffrey Bloechl, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20 no. 2, (1998), 357.

¹² Matthew Sanderson, “Kant and Schopenhauer on Death and the Religious Sublime.” *Contemporary Philosophy* 28 no.3, (2008), 35.

¹³ Julian Young, “Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime,” 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

scribes the epistemic issue with treating the sublime like an object whose value is in its aesthetic properties when she says,

The heart of the problem, then, is this: if we focus on the metaphysical status of the sublime object, our epistemology becomes problematic, but if we address instead the epistemological transcendence of a certain experience, we still seem forced to make *some* metaphysical claim about the object of that experience.¹⁵

In order even to cognize the natural sublime we must first have some idea about how to describe the phenomenon. Here we are not totally without words. There is in fact a horizon of meaning involved here just as there is in recognizing the Other in her alterity. If there were not any horizon by which we could account for such alterity, then the phenomena which “interrupt[s] our joyous possession of the world” would not interrupt because it could not be apprehended at all. Crucially, Levinas says that the Other “overflows” comprehension, not that the other is *incomprehensible*. In the same way, we can say that the natural sublime overflows our comprehension, not that it is incomprehensible. What is required, then, is an appreciation based on the tension between *totality*, because we *do* make judgments about the natural sublime, and *infinity*, because these judgments are always epistemically limited by subjectivity’s inability to grasp transcendence in absoluton.

What would it look like to engage with the excess of the natural sublime without totalizing the phenomenon? In *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, Merold Westphal considers a similar question but in relation to religious existence. For Westphal, this problem of expressing excess, while not eliminating the excess in the expression, occurs in the case of the metaphysical God which we have fully subsumed under our

¹⁵ Jane Forsey, “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” *JAC* 65 no.4, (2007), 383.

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own philosophical categories: “When we assume the adequacy of our concepts to the divine reality, we make ourselves the measure and master of that reality and convert it into the invisible mirror of our intellectual capacities.”¹⁶ Westphal warns, “when theology buys into this philosophical project, it renders the God of whom it speaks *religiously useless*.”¹⁷ In Martin Heidegger’s words, this is the God of philosophy and “man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”¹⁸ This reductionist tendency about which Westphal and Heidegger are both worried, is strikingly similar, I think, to an aesthetic objectivist appreciation of the natural sublime.

Westphal suggests that Levinas answers the question as to what God could come after postmodernism, saying, “We must think of God as the voice that exceeds vision so as to establish a relation irreducible to comprehension.” God construed this way is quite appropriately another name for the Other. Might we be more accurate in our judgments if we apprehend the sublime object in nature similarly? Though totalization is necessary, it is the burden of infinity imposed through subjectivity that gives it real value. In the same fashion, to totalize the experience of the sublime is to reduce the object of our gaze to its aesthetic properties—to value such experiences through a reductionism—characteristic of aesthetic objectivism. What if the natural sublime were rethought, then, in such a way as to allow for a suspension of objectivist epistemologies in order to more appropriately gauge the object of the natural sublime? What would this object be if not a phenomenon available in full presence to my totalizing schemes? Appropriating Westphal, I think the answer is that the natural sublime

¹⁶ Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: toward a postmodern Christian faith*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001): 269, my emphasis.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 72. Quoted by Westphal, 261.

becomes better understood as an invitation to existential reflection.

I do not mean to suggest that the natural sublime *is* the God of postmodernism, nor do I wish to equate the sublime experience or feeling to the Other or the infinity from which the Other calls forth. Rather, the paradigm is relevant because there are numerous examples in relation to which Kant, Schopenhauer, Burke, and others have struggled to communicate the essence of sublime experiences. How does one conceptualize transcendence, as such? The natural sublime is uniquely suitable to a phenomenologically religious discourse by means of a Levinasian frame because it highlights the existential traction of such an experience. It calls into question and at the same time reaffirms the existence of the self in relation to what is Other.

If, “the sublime is the experience of the excess of infinity over totality,”¹⁹ then the natural sublime takes on a new role—one that allows for an appreciation that judges such experiences not on their aesthetic properties, but their existential relevance. The natural sublime is not valuable because it is the activity of making life into an object of appreciation. Rather, it is *invaluable* as the activity of appreciating life as a subject living it. While the Other interrupts our “joyous possession of the world,” the sublime interrupts our joyous totalization of nature in the aesthetic objectivist attitude. The natural sublime understood as such may not lead us to God or replace our encounter with the Other, but it can provide us with an experience that inspires the awe and celebration that has traditionally been the province of the divine. The postmodern approach can help us better to understand and appreciate this existential dimension of the natural sublime—whether we are hanging off of the cliff or taking a picture of it from a distance.

¹⁹ Marty, “Height and the Sublime,” 362.

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