

Welcome to the first issue of *fire*.

If that sounds vaguely mythological, it's meant to. Stories and storytelling are the hotlinks between peoples and cultures and times. Conversely—and sadly, perversely—stories as cultural narratives, as ways of perceiving reality, are what often divide us. Just ask Colin Kaepernick. Or Malala Yousafzai. Or Brett Kavanaugh.

Hi, I'm Mark Hoffer, from the English Department at AVC. This year, the FPD program is piloting a set of faculty learning communities, and I'm facilitating one entitled "Story Ark: Using Narrative to Elevate Teaching Practice and Build Academic Community." I am including here the work of two of my FLC colleagues because 1) they were among the first in the FLC to hand in their essays and so I already know they will be the best students, and 2) their responses, as early self-assessments and reflections, speak directly to the acronym of *fire*. I hope they inspire you to reflect on your teaching philosophies, pedagogies, and practices. I also hope they inspire you to join—or start—a faculty learning community in 2019-2020.

Also included is a reflection by me on voice and empowerment. It is designed to frame this opening section, because, after all, in all of our classes, we *are* passing the torch to our students. Of course, we are also lighting the spark, mindful of burnout, and trying not to get fired, but "passing the torch" just sounds so much better. Enjoy the journey ahead.

FLC: Narratives in the Classroom

Jeffrie Ahmad

Since professional writers often present their ideas via reflective narratives, such pieces inevitably form some portion of my course syllabi. For example, in English 101, I break the semester into three themes, each of which spans approximately one month—September's theme is language and composition, October's is Shakespeare (usually *Othello*), and November's is current issues. Since the theme of language and composition comes first, I include Richard Rodriguez' "Lonely Good Company," Frederick Douglass' "How I learned to Read," and Sherman Alexie's "Superman and Me," all of which are first person narratives. I have the students respond to

these pieces by creating persuasive and argumentative responses based on theme and purpose. So the 101 students' essays for the first portion of the semester are not reflective narratives, but their papers are based on first person professionally written narratives.

In the early American literature course, it is impossible to teach the first half of the semester without including first person narratives since that, in addition to the essay, was the primary form of writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For example, we have the captivity narratives, all written in first person and presented from an almost entirely subjective point of view. As we move into the eighteenth century, we read sections of Thoreau's *Walden*, with his strong emphasis on the transcendental "I." As in English 101, my American literature students respond to these works by creating persuasive argumentative papers based on theme, purpose, and content.

English 100A is the only course I teach in which students are required to write a first person narrative. I have been using the same assignment for several semesters: I ask students to write about an object that got lost, broke down, or never worked at all. I want them to include a detailed description of the thing or object and how they got it. They should then devote several paragraphs to the specific moment when they realized that it was gone or broken. After that, I have them explain how they reacted to that event and why. For most students, the hardest part of this assignment is creating a thesis with some kind of message or purpose. At first, students want to make what happened the thesis, so to avoid that, I have them draft their thesis statements in class so that we can have group discussions with a built in audience.

What I'm hoping to gain from the FLC would be new classroom techniques, especially those related to narrative writing. Whenever I evaluate my colleagues, I learn about new approaches to topics and readings that have been in the classroom for years. I'm looking for this same freshness through the FLC meetings and activities. After we have developed a variety of classroom assignments, I can see myself sharing them with the campus at FPD presentations and other relevant venues.

FLC Narratives: The Crossover Appeal

Bill Vaughn

Ron Stallworth is the title character in Spike Lee's new film *BlacKkKlansman*. In one scene Ron is trailing secretly through the backwoods behind a small cadre of KKK members he is investigating. Once their shooting practice is over and they leave, Ron walks out into the open and past their targets, and the camera shifts around to reveal that these targets are not simply human cut-out figures, but cartoonishly exaggerated African profiles, degradingly racist, of course. I would argue that to watch a scene like this—through the mediation of film narrative—is to open yourself to responses that are in fact difficult to achieve in unmediated reality. Because I am physically outside the narrative world of Colorado Springs in the 1970s, I have the chance to engage more deeply in the perceptions of the on-screen characters, like Ron Stallworth here, and in the perceptions of the filmmaker, who manages this narrative on both a plot level and a historical level with remarkable force.

As the film is an adaptation of a non-fiction book, I am likely to add this film/book pairing to an existing reading list for students to use for research. Without a doubt, *BlacKkKlansman* is going to be a hit for my students; not only is the book the shortest one on the list, a saving grace for slow readers, yes, but the film especially opens up new ground in the great "Crossover Debate" between history and fiction. I tell students that these films, even though based on historical events, are in fact fictional because of the recreated elements: actors pretending to be other people (hence "characters"), scripted dialogue written by creative writers, cameras, screens, etc. And yet the crossover appeal is that all these fictional devices, the art of film narration, is precisely what compels us to look more carefully at reality.

So how compelling is it that the last scenes in the film are not from the plotted narrative set in Colorado Springs circa 1973, but rather from personal cell phones documenting the fatal violence that actually happened on the streets in Charlottesville, North Carolina in 2017? I'm usually uneasy about such heavy-handed "scenes from real life" capping off a fictional story. More often than not, these attempts at closure fail as they somehow rupture the story world the film mostly occupies. And perhaps some students will sense the same, but I do look forward to the chance to get students to appreciate the debate, about how narratives, in print or on film, alter our sense of the world. Spike Lee's film, I believe, by connecting us to the interior lives of characters, opens up another way of thinking about racial injustice in America, as much in the present as in the past.

The Voices of the Many

Mark Hoffer

The book that I chose as the grounding text for my FLC on narrative is Colin Dickey's *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*. In this critically rigorous but highly readable study, the author tours haunted houses—like the infamously elaborate Winchester House, the subject of a recent horror film—as well as restaurants, hotels, asylums, historical sites of plantations, and even our own brains, in which, he argues, memories reside like ghosts, as if locked up in rooms, tucked away in drawers. Rather than assessing the ultimate validity of the supernatural—a task, he admits, which is neither his intention nor within the scope of his study—Dickey invites us to consider what ghost stories say about the cultures that tell them.

One of the most fascinating sections for me is his look at the Spiritualism movement that coincided with American suffrage. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were key figures in both. In fact, the essential connection between these two movements is female voice, whether in terms of women as mediums and communicators with and for the dead, or women as participants in a political process that had historically excluded and silenced them. Not surprisingly, because Spiritualism merged a perceived threat to more orthodox forms of belief with female social empowerment, it was increasingly denounced and discredited. Spiritualism, as recounted in *Ghostland*, also throws into sharper relief a storyline, a cultural narrative, that extends back to the Salem witch trials (and before) and up to #MeToo and discussions today about gender, voice, and representation.

As a college instructor in a faculty learning community, I have the opportunity to learn more, and to guide others in that pursuit. I want us all to remember that there is so much to learn from the voices around us—and there is so much at stake when it comes to our own voices, our role in the shaping of stories around us. We need to think of the platforms we can build for ourselves, and for the other learners around us, our students. We need to think of their stories and perspectives. Whether it is their initial email to us or their first person narrative or their comments about courses or programs or what calendar we use, we need to acknowledge them all, let them too shape our story. Why else are we here?

Look for future issues of *fire*. My plan is to have two issues per semester, with each issue contributing to faculty learning and discussion. NEXT ISSUE: An FLC roundtable discussion on talking race in the classroom.