Pedagogical Description as Method:
A Non-Linear Approach

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"Poor Robert. Even with the sampler in his hands, he couldn't help
it. He felt there should be a whole story"
Louisa Hall *Trinity* (2018: 183).

People prefer to have the full story, a sense of completeness that inspires confidence in our understanding. This is often true for the person presenting information, whether in written or oral format, as well. The challenge that I interrogate in this paper is the ways critical theory, from a whole range of fields and perspectives, highlights how the whole story is never possible. And so, what methods help us align our presentation of knowledge, our pedagogy, with our critical theory, knowing that we and our audience often prefer having a feeling of mastering the whole story?

Conveying knowledge, whether through written materials or oral presentation, is an important component of pedagogy. Admittedly, this is an expansive conception of pedagogy, as any effort to convey knowledge, whether the audience is students or experts in a specific subfield, can be seen as pedagogical. Of course, the different contexts and audiences influence our approach to that task. How we convey that knowledge, and the implications embedded in that presentation, is my focus here.

Critical theory in multiple disciplines have enhanced our understanding of the world and the process of constructing knowledge. Theoretical approaches such as postcolonial theory,

literary criticism, and new historicism inform this project, work that many of us interested in critical scholarship engage regularly. The entire process of the construction of knowledge is contingent. As philosophical phenomenologists argued a century ago (and others have argued since from different positions), the process of converting sensory and affective stimuli into words and evidence is not a direct, straightforward process but generates an incomplete approximation of a portion of the stimuli, no matter how thickly someone writes a description (see, for example, Scott 1991; Penner 1989). Ethnographies involve such a translation of observations and experiences into a simplified description, a process that involves the choices (and power) of the ethnographer (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Research in archival and textual materials adds another layer to that incompleteness, as the assertions of some, but not others, have been preserved in texts and archives (Farge 1989; Pandey 2006; Trouillot 2015).

Whatever material that we engage, our presentation and analysis redescribes those materials in terms of our own construction of the world. In our analysis, we frame that material in terms of particular categories of our choosing, such as religion, world religions, or the Orient (see for example Said 1978; Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005). We commonly also organize narrative descriptions in familiar tropes, such as tragedy or irony (White 1978). The influence of our background on our descriptions and analyses, though, goes deeper than our ethnic or religious identification, as the larger structures of our discipline, institutions, and society inform how we value one datum over another (Chakrabarty 2008; Bourdieu 1996).

These critiques of the incompleteness of descriptions, narratives, and analyses provide only a sampling of the ways scholarship cannot be separated from the intersection of power and knowledge. We as scholars are part of those power structures, even when our scholarship

resists or undermines (aspects of) those structures. But in that resistance, we might succeed on a specific element, while also reinforcing a view of history and the world that conforms to a singular view of history and undermines the recognition of the incompleteness and contingent nature of all knowledge.

In pedagogical efforts, it is easy to slip into the simplified narrative that hides the contingent nature of knowledge construction. The late Jonathan Z. Smith referred to this common simplification in the classroom, asserting that we are dishonest "when we consistently disguise, in our introductory courses, what is problematic about our work" (2019: 124). My goal is to experiment with approaches to description and narrative that better reflect the critical theory that we emphasize. How can we present information that avoids some of the problems of definitive descriptions and linear narratives, the problems of presenting ourselves as the omniscient narrator who knows the whole story? Therefore, I have worked with various methods of description and presentation that help the reader or student understand not only the information but also the incompleteness or constructed nature of that information, letting them into the process of constructing that knowledge.

Of course, scholars can readily object that my construction of academic scholarship is overgeneralized and that I have here employed the strategy that I am critiquing in others, presenting a contestable and contingent description as an authoritative assertion about a group / practice (even as an insider). For this context and presumed audience, I have employed a simplified account to focus on experimental methods. A more significant objection, of course, is that this critique feeds into anti-intellectualism and a diminution of expertise. From my perspective, scholars have expertise and a knowledge base that differs from knowledge of

others, one that I do not want to diminish. The perspective, expertise, and analysis of scholars is vital for increasing recognition of the dynamics and complexities of the world, but that does not make the scholar into an omniscient narrator. We all recognize our limitations and the necessity of the selections that we make, and we frequently incorporate some elements of that humility and self-reflexivity into our work. My goal is to move beyond an initial acknowledgement of the limits of our knowledge to present material to our students and our readers in ways that better remind them of the dynamics influencing the construction of knowledge, that nobody can give them the "whole story."

Literary Suggestions

The challenge of presenting a more complex representation of reality that avoids the implication of an omniscient narrator or a simplified description is not an insurmountable task. For more than a century, various authors have developed a range of strategies to present through their writing the intricacies and multiplicity within the observable world. Various strands of postmodern literature exemplify this effort, but it extends well before the development of postmodernism (as debated as that label is). Figures as diverse as Wilkie Collins (1868) and Virginia Woolf (1929; 1925) have incorporated multiple voices or a stream-of-consciousness approach that challenge a linear, omniscient narrative.

My approach to this challenge draws on New Historicism as detailed by Hayden White, though somewhat reverse engineered. White argues that the standard writing of history employs various common literary tropes and can be analyzed using literary tools (see, for example, 1978: 91-112). I have started with literary works that present non-linear narratives (broadly conceived) to identify more complex strategies of description. In other words, brilliant

thinkers and writers for generations have worked on these issues of describing life and particular events in ways that avoid presumptions of omniscience and the singularity of description. Learning from them is my starting point, but the scholarly account cannot simply recreate a non-linear fictional narrative.

A particularly central distinction between academic writing and literary fiction is the end goal. One vision of scholarship is contributing to the construction and dissemination of knowledge through applying scholarly expertise to particular data. While literary artists do not always agree on their approach or goal, the meaning of a piece is often less explicit than the goal that most scholars have for a particular class or book, which often create explicit arguments. Applying a variety of non-linear narrative techniques to scholarship requires a revision to present a clear argument. Often, explicitly acknowledging the nonlinear techniques and their purposes is as necessary as acknowledging the scholar's positionality. The common adage (though not universal) of "art for art's sake" that avoids concerns about meaning do not apply in the pedagogical tasks that we are considering. It is vital, therefore, to provide direction to the reader, as good academic writing does, that aids them in following the thesis and interpreting the choices that the scholar makes. Moreover, the application of these approaches and the philosophy about the contingent and incomplete nature of our observations and sources should influence the form of our arguments.

Working strategically with these literary approaches can produce additional benefits in an academic setting. Nonlinear approaches often provide a broader view of the context for the information and argument, while also acknowledging its incomplete nature. Such a broader context, in some examples, generate new insights that advance our construction of knowledge.

From a pedagogical perspective, the unexpected form of nonlinear narratives, with sufficient explanation and preparation, has potential to aid engagement and retention (based on my anecdotal experience). The atypical formats may have an effect on some readers who remember them better for being different. Conversely, some readers may find the format surprising or confusing initially, which makes the work to prepare the reader for the atypical form especially important.

Applying these literary strategies can enhance our ability to construct and support arguments while also acknowledging the contingent nature of the construction of knowledge. These approaches help us to avoid the often unintentional slippage into an omniscient voice and remind the reader, and ourselves, that our own conclusions are not the final word or the only answer to the particular issue that we address. In what follows, I introduce and illustrate two examples that can help clarify the general assertions that I have made.

Multimodal Forms

One strategy that illustrates these non-linear pedagogical approaches is the use of multimodal forms. A multimodal approach to narratives and descriptions employs various textual or nontextual forms beyond traditional prose descriptions, often in combination with other modes, to convey the information. The use of different modes disrupts the singularity of the description and highlights different forms of information that can influence the reader's perception of the narrative's authority and its construction. The typical academic work is already multimodal, with footnotes, reference lists, and sometimes images distinguished from the main text, and academic textbooks often employ images and textboxes to organize the material and maintain

reader engagement. This strategy has a significant range of options, though, that pushes the presentation of information further.

In literary studies, mode has a variety of definitions that extend beyond my use in this context. The differences between mode, media, and genre also overlap in some discussions. An expansive notion of mode includes manipulation through typography as well as the inclusion of images and diagrams within the text, all of which requires the reader to engage with a variety of semiotic forms (Hallet 2014). My use of mode in this discussion focuses on a narrower sense of the term, where different forms of presentation (a blog post, a newspaper report, a prose narrative, a chart) represent different modes. Xiaulo Guo provides a prime example as she employs a multimodal approach in *UFO In Her Eyes* (2010) to present a novel about a village in China struggling with development and related changes in society. Guo tells the story of the village through the "official files" of an investigation into a reported UFO sighting in the village that further raises issues about a suicide and the administration of the local village chief.

The "official files" include partial transcripts of interviews and other notes from multiple investigators, primarily sent by regional and state officials. These short interview transcripts and notes reveal aspects of the life of residents, their personalities, and different meanings of development and responses to change. The personality of the interviewers themselves and their varied levels of empathy for the villagers become visible through these notes that also reveal differences and competition between different agents and offices. The notes and interview transcripts also retain the form of reports in a file, including administrative features such as file numbers. Thus, the presentation includes a range of voices of both investigators and interviewees, but the format of the novel comes across more strongly than the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices. Even though it is possible to classify this novel as utilizing one mode (investigative files) the variation within those records and the ways the author

creates (fictionalized) investigative files to tell a story represents what I mean by multimodal form, replacing the standard narrative mode.

Guo never attempts to conclude or introduce the interview statements and notes with general comments but has constructed those notes so that the reader pieces together the personalities and issues within the village. The absence of an authoritative conclusion or an omniscient narrator is one component of her strategy, and the varied reports and skepticism of some investigators can raise the reader's awareness of the potential biases of the investigators and the incomplete reports of the interviewees, making the reader skeptical of the multiple voices that go into the construction of the representation of the village and related events. The reader is left with the uncertainty of "what really happened" or "what Guo intended", which is a hallmark of the non-linear and postmodern approaches to presentation and thus demonstrate ways to take critiques about the construction of reality and narrative seriously.

Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) provides a different example of the potential multiplicity in a multimodal format. The central portion of the text is an unpublished manuscript by Zampano describing a documentary film and its creation, complete with footnotes, about the phenomenon of a living house (which changes as people explore it). However, that unpublished manuscript has been amended. In the larger narrative Johnny Truant finds this unpublished manuscript by Zampano and edits and adds his own introduction, footnotes, and commentaries. Another unnamed editor inserts further (largely inconsequential) footnotes. Beyond these multiple modes and voices within the main text, distinguished through typographical choices, the novel includes an appendix with poems and objects related to the living house that Zampano collected along with material about the life of Truant. This multimodal novel becomes a vehicle for presenting multiple voices that highlight the complexity of the construction of narrative / knowledge / description. Refraining from giving the final version, the novel hints at the different assumptions that inform different perspectives.

Two additional examples of multimodal techniques demonstrate the significant variance of this strategy. While Guo and Danielewski center the multimodal form, these examples employ it as an addition to their narratives. Margaret Atwood in *Blind Assassin* (2000) inserts into her complex time-jumping narrative newspaper clippings, obituaries, and other textual material at the end of various sections that reveal important bits of information that help the reader piece together the complicated storylines. The main character in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) writes a blog during one stage of her life to relate her experiences negotiating issues of race in the United States as an immigrant from Nigeria, and some of those blog posts appear at the end of chapters detailing that period of her life.

Through these four examples, the potential variation of multimodal approaches are apparent. While academic works and textbooks use multiple modes, these examples push the strategy further. To experiment with this strategy requires pushing beyond these standard forms of multimodal communication in ways that bring multiple voices and sources of information to problematize the construction of knowledge, constantly asking the student or reader participate in the work of constructing knowledge.

Applying Multimodal Forms

Applications of this strategy to pedagogical contexts can vary as much as the preceding literary examples. A few principles, however, can strengthen such experiments. Allowing complexity and contradiction to stand through the multiple modes and voices presented is a central idea in this strategy (and other nonlinear strategies). As a student in a classroom or a reader might expect a more typical linear and definitive explanation, the format needs to be introduced clearly, in contrast to many literary uses of multi-modal forms. It is also vital to distinguish between quotes from actual legal or historical documents or statistical data, if used, and fictionalized descriptions, if using reports such as Guo employed.

Using fictionalized statements in a classroom or written account is not our common sense of our work. It is important that the created assertions be distinguished, but fictionalized assertions are commonly used. Generalized statements about a religion (which many of us regularly critique) are, in some respects, fictionalized. As White has argued, the decision of what pieces of data to use and what to exclude and then constructing them in a narrative arc or literary trope is akin to fictionalization (1978). While I critique both of those "fictions," I advocate for using this fictionalizing practice for two reasons. First, if the account is explicit that these are the creation of the scholar, based on expertise in the area, then the multimodal form is more straightforward about the role of the scholar in constructing knowledge than more traditional pedagogical forms such as common textbooks. For example, fictionalizations are standard pedagogical practice in certain contexts, such as staging a debate or model UN, where students take on the role of a particular group, nation, or activists for a specific cause. Such exercises may be more successful or less, depending in part on the quality of the student understanding of the position / community that they represent, and the same is true of a multimodal pedagogical account prepared by a professor.

As an experiment, I have produced a description of the religions of India in a multimodal form, following Guo's example (a portion of the introduction and two statements excerpted below). Creating a fictional report about different community views of the Indian Census and the ways it labels religions introduces the complexity and contestation of religious identifications there. This multimodal format highlights the presence of different voices and conflicts through the interview summaries, supplemented with charts and passages from legal and historical documents to bolster the different arguments.

In my experiment, I refrain from making any authoritative assertion about the proper labeling. Instead, I acknowledge the complexity of interpretations and representations. In that sense, the conclusion leaves the debate for people directly involved to negotiate rather than presuming that the

author has a bird's eye view that can determine what is "right". The multimodal presentation, therefore, reinforces that point by highlighting to the reader how complicated political, legal, and historical declarations often have no right answer. This case study is not debating the humanity of a marginalized group, although these declarations have real effects in the world (as some of the communities argue), but is discussing what boundaries define particular groups and distinct religions, questions that have no right answer. For such cases, a multimodal approach is relevant.

Excerpts from Religions of India

Over the past two centuries, multiple disputes have arisen in India over religion, and one of the prime places where these disputes have been negotiated is the census, specifically concerning what are classified as distinct religions and what are subgroups (labeled as "sect" in the census) of a larger religion. The census has typically presented two questions. The first asks about the religion of the person, providing a list of options that include "other". The second question records the person's sect, if they provide one. What follows represents multiple arguments for how religions should be listed (What is a separate religion? What is a sect of a larger religion?), as if the hypothetical investigators were tasked with surveying religious leaders and organizations to determine the best way to list religions in India in preparation for the next Census of India.

The following description is my creation, not an official census investigation. It presents potential arguments with the sole purpose of illustrating the complexity and contestation surrounding religious identifications in India. In this hypothetical investigation, representatives of particular organizations that had significant interest in the question of religions in the census were asked to make statements about their religious identification and their understanding of the proper classifications related to this census question, providing supporting historical documents when applicable. The organizations consulted in this hypothetical investigation are representative of groups that have argued for changes in the common classification of religions in the past or have been subjects of such arguments (such as another group claiming them or excluding them from a larger group).

In what follows, each hypothetical interview begins with the 2011 census data on religion, and the representative responds to the classifications in that report. When appropriate, the interviewer asks the representative to respond to the assertions of a representative of another group that directly relates to the status of the representative's group. The hypothetical report provides extensive summaries of these interviews and excerpts of documents that convey the tone of the statements, but these are not created to resemble verbatim transcripts.

The excerpts of historical documents included below present the text of actual documents. Any deviation is an unintentional error, though the selection of which excerpts to include are mine. The summaries attributed to the representatives of different communities are my distillation of the arguments that I anticipate and/or have observed groups making. The

entire report, however, is my construction and is not an actual historical document produced by the census officials in India.

Representative of DELHI BASAVA MANTAPA OF LINGAYAT

The Lingayat community is mislabeled as a sect of Hinduism in the 2011 census. We are denied the option of even identifying as Other Religion with the sect Lingayat. Moreover, our community is erroneously combined with the Veershaiva community, which worships Shiva and is a sect of Hinduism.

Lingayat, on the other hand, is a distinct religion that rejects many aspects commonly recognized as Hindu. Lingayat follow the teachings of Basavanna, a 12th century philosopher, who rejected the Vedas and the authority of the Brahmins and their ritualistic practices, most especially forms of caste discrimination that remain a feature of Hindu Brahmin practice, along with other forms of elitism. We are different from Veershaiva who continue many practices that are Hindu and worship Shiva as Hindus. As we follow the teachings of a philosopher who lived 8 centuries ago, rejected Hinduism, and established different practices, we are akin to Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, each of which are recognized as a separate religion based on the teachings of a founder who rejected Hinduism.

The 2011 census data grossly undercounts the Lingayat community because it is not recognized as a separate religion. Other counts suggest that over 10 million people in the state of Karnataka alone are Lingayat. In contrast, the 2011 census data for sects only identified about ¼ of that number despite combining Lingayat erroneously with Veershaiva Hindus (see excerpted 2011 Census of India data below).

All Religious Community	Total	1210854977
Religion:Hindu	Total	966257353
Sect:Hindu	Total	962970404
Sect:Lingayat / Veer Shaiva	Total	2663229

In March 2018, the Nagamohan Das Commission in Karnataka issued a report that recognized Lingayat as a separate religion and directed the Karnataka government that "Lingayats in Karnataka may be considered as a religious minority" (quoted in BS Web Team 2018). The Karnataka government provided that status to Lingayats. Since Lingayats are most concentrated in Karnataka, we ask the Centre to respect and follow the declarations of the Karnataka government concerning Lingayats.

Representative of RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH

Hindus formed this great civilization throughout the Indian subcontinent that has a tradition of acceptance and tolerance for a variety of ideas and practices. Being Hindu is not about adherence to a particular defining belief or practice, which is the problematic conception of religion that the British imposed on us. Hindus hold a variety of philosophical positions and worship a variety of deities. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an organization that represents all Hindus and defends the rightful place of Hindus within the land of the Hindus.

The RSS recommends following the definition of Hindu by V. D. Savarkar, the patriot and activist for India's independence from the British Empire. Savarkar rejected British definitions when he presented his definition in his famous patriotic pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* published in 1923. Savarkar's title page answers the title question as follows:

> A HINDU means a person who regards this land of
> BHARATVARSHA, from the Indus to the
> Seas as his Father-Land as well
> as his Holy-Land that is
> the cradle land of his religion.

The Census of India should adopt this definition and recognize those who identify as Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh as Hindus for their religion, recognizing each of these as sects within the broad, expansive Hindu religion. Such a correction to the Census of India would eliminate the vestiges of the British effort to divide the people of India into competing religions and build greater unity in the nation.

…

In addition to the Constitution designating Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, as Hindu, a similar assertion is recognized in Indian law with the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, which generates an expansive definition of Hindu. In Section II of the Hindu Marriage Act, the law declares that it applies to the following

> *(a) to any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms and developments, including a Virashaiva, a Lingayat or a follower of the Brahmo, Prarthana or Arya Samaj,*
> *(b) to any person who is a Buddhist, Jain or Sikh by religion, and*
> *(c) to any other person domiciled in the territories to which this Act extends who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion.*

In this explicit assertion, multiple sects that the Census has treated as Hindu since 1951 are stated to be Hindu; Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs are designated separately but remain Hindu, and any one who is not following a foreign religion (Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism) is automatically Hindu.

…

RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH REPRESENTATIVE response to Lingayat statement:
The Lingayat have been recognized as Hindu, even in the more restrictive definition that the Census of India has been using for decades, and nothing has changed to alter that designation. In Lingayat assertions, they erroneously assume that Hindu means Brahmin-dominated, which they reject. But that is an erroneous, narrow view of Hindu practices. People who are Hindu have a variety of attitudes towards who can serve in a leadership role in rituals, and most who are Hindu reject the notion of discrimination based on social status that has erroneously been

associated with Hinduism. Thus, their objection to Hinduism is misplaced, and many of the practices and teachings of Basavanna reflect the ideals that many Hindus accept.

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 also states explicitly that Lingayat and Virashaiva are Hindu (as quoted above), and the Census should continue to adopt that position and dismiss this fanciful desire for status as a separate religion in the Census.

The unfortunate decision of the Karnataka government to extend minority recognition to Lingayats was a perversion of the status of minorities for political gain. Because people who identify as Lingayat hold a significant portion of the electorate of a number of districts of Karnataka, the Congress party in power in Karnataka attempted to give this special status to Lingayats in exchange for their votes. For these reasons, the Centre in December 2018 rightfully rejected the designation of Lingayat as a minority religion (Star of Mysore 2018). Thus, this ruling in Karnataka has no standing in relation to a decision of the government of India.

Multiple voices or perspectives

Another common strategy to challenge the assumption that any narrative is complete, authoritative, or singular is to incorporate multiple voices or perspectives into the description. Depending on how it is employed, incorporating multiple voices in a narrative or description can challenge the assumption of complete descriptions and allow the contradictions and differences to remain unresolved. Specific literary works that employ this method provide ideas to refine the method for pedagogical purposes.

This strategy is nothing new in literary works. Wilkie Collins (a contemporary of Charles Dickens) employs multiple narratives, providing different perspective of events, in his novel *Moonstone* (1868). While Collins' approach generally pushes a linear narrative forward through different voices that lead to the resolution of the mysterious theft of the moonstone, other literary examples of this approach challenge the expectations of linearity and resolution.

Louisa Hall employs this strategy in *Trinity* (2018), which is a fictional biographical work about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the lead scientist in the creation and testing of the first nuclear bomb in the United States. During his life after the dropping of the bombs, he declined from being a national hero to being the object of derision and accusations because of alleged ties to Communists during the McCerthy Era. With the novel, Hall tells his story through the voice of multiple characters who interacted with him at different times in his life, beginning with the testing of the bomb and continuing through the rest of

his life. These particular storytellers are not omniscient narrators in their own right but tell their impressions of the man in the context of their specific life situation. Thus, in many cases, we learn more about their family troubles and grief or joy while they describe the context of their experiences with Oppenheimer than we do about the man, making Oppenheimer almost a secondary figure in the book. These accounts also resemble a stream of consciousness style rather than a directed or tight narrative.

What is most effective in the novel as a whole, at least for the purposes of this project, is Hall resists any temptation to tie all of the representations together into a singular package. While it is clear that each is a single representation of Oppenheimer at a specific time and that the accounts, as a whole, generate a relatively linear narrative, no ultimate picture emerges of the "real" Oppenheimer. Each representation is itself clearly incomplete, based on a single interview or an evening's dinner reminiscing, without filling in other details. Some of the observers admit their own lack of understanding, their limited interaction with him, and their faulty or contradicted memories. For example, the surveillance placed on Oppenheimer during the development of the bomb requires the observer to admit the limits of their knowledge, trying to discern whether a rendezvous is a romantic liaison or an exchange of classified information. The absence of a tidy summation or complete picture is the brilliance of this basic approach for pedagogical descriptions. At the same time, the use of various narrators telling more about their own lives than Oppenheimer provides a broader view of the time, particularly issues of ethnic, religious, and gender expectations and discrimination.

Hall's success with this approach in *Trinity* compares favorably to the use of this approach in several other literary works. Mark Z. Danielewski incorporates multiple voices into his telling of the story in *The Familiar Volume 1* (2015). The overall story shifts so quickly between several locations and characters, chapter by chapter, that it can leave the reader pondering the connection between them. In that sense, Hall's presentation is clearer to follow while also challenging the singularity of any description. In Sijie Dai's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002), the author relates a compelling

story about two boys sent to a reeducation camp during the Cultural Revolution in China. About two-thirds of the way through the book, Dai presents three versions of the same event, which effectively conveys the complexity of any narrative, based on the perspective of the narrator, but the shift to this device in the middle of the novel, which is not continued afterwards or addressed prior to this section, makes this much less effective to challenge the linearity of the overall narrative than Hall's application of the strategy. While Dai's application is much less effective than Hall's, it succeeds more than the device in Juliet Lapidos' *Talent* (2019). In Lapidos' final chapter, she switches to brief descriptions of the main character coming from multiple voices. After a full novel with a singular, authoritative narrator, this addition not only throws off the reader by its sudden shift, but it also fails to challenge the dominance of the singular narrative already presented.

Applying Multiple Voices

Both students and readers to whom we want to provide information often want a clear and tidy description. This method certainly does not provide that, which is part of the point. If our readers or students come away from our engagement with them sensing that they know everything, or even a simple picture of the topic, then we have constructed simplified knowledge that we probably need to critique using critical theory. Presenting multiple perspectives or descriptions of a topic, while somewhat dissatisfying to the recipient, helps move the reader forward in their understanding of the complexity of the topic and the construction of knowledge generally.

So the challenge is to move them forward without losing them completely. The preceding review of a few literary examples that employ this general strategy suggests several principles. First and foremost is avoid resolving discrepancies through a conclusion or presentation of the ultimate viewpoint. Such a resolution undermines the principles emphasized in postmodern and postcolonial critiques that inform this pedagogical method. Instead, negotiating multiple perspectives that cannot easily or completely be resolved helps our students and readers recognize the limits of any description.

Thus, in academic works, a conclusion that acknowledges the complexity or analyzes the interests informing different voices can reinforce the difficulty of generating an ultimate description or conclusion. Second, it is vital to guide the reader in their movement from one voice to another. All four works attempt this, between the use of separate chapters (Hall and Dai), the use of labels for each voice in the concluding chapter of Lapidos, and the use of typography within sections of Danielewski, which I found the least adequate in terms of guidance. In the classroom, explicitly telling students that we will analyze three accounts of whatever we are studying orients them to the strategy before providing information that simultaneously illustrates the limitations of each description. The same can be tackled in a written account in multiple ways. Third, to generate the understanding of the limits of any telling, a consistent and integrated use of multiple voices is much more effective than a more limited insertion, as in Lapidos.

Leslie Dorrough Smith and I have coauthored a textbook describing the religions of the world using a version of this approach. Divided into a traditional format, with one chapter for each religion, we present four different representations in each chapter and follow each of the four representations with analysis. This analysis section highlights some choices informing each representation, specific functions and implications of those choices, and some elements excluded or ignored. The analyses intentionally do not address what is a better or worse representation, as we have designed them to leave the reader recognizing how each pushes the description in different ways. The consistent organization and numbering of the representations and inclusion of analyses sections provide the reader with guidance throughout the chapter.

This approach is also applicable to contexts where multiple stories circulate about a particular figure or topic. Whenever we encounter varying accounts, one option is to develop a primary narrative, then note the variations, but such a method tends to prioritize one narrative and smooth out some of the inconsistencies. An alternate method is to use typography to include multiple versions in a

presumably linear structure, more akin to the biblical account of Noah and the flood than the first

accounts of creation in Genesis.

The brief account that follows illustrates a multiple voice description of a figure known as Jhule

Lal, including a short introduction. A figure significant for some who live in or trace their heritage to

Sindh (now the southeastern province of Pakistan), the nature of Jhule Lal depends on whom you ask. In

the passage that follows, typography serves to distinguish changing voice. Certainly, what follows is a

small sample of what is possible and reflects condensation and choice by the author, yet it avoids, at

least partially, the illusion of one story being primary.

Excerpts from Jhule Lal
The story of Jhule Lal has a variety of versions, some emphasized by devotees who identify as Hindu,
some by devotees who identify as Muslim, and some shared elements. People have identified Jhule Lal
with a Quranic figure, a Sufi dervish, and a Hindu deity, so the version that follows addresses the
challenge of deciding whose narrative to put first by including both a connection to Hinduism and Islam
in the first two competing sentences. The formatting that follows aligns multiple versions commonly
told by Hindus on the left or a single indent from the left and elements told by Muslims aligned to the
right, with some centered passages reflecting shared or less clearly identified narratives.

Jhule Lal is a deity identified with Hinduism, also known as Udero

Lal and associated with Varuna, the Vedic god of water.

> Jhule Lal is a Sufi master identified with Islam who
> is also known as Shaikh Tahir.

He is an avatar of Vishnu.

> He is associated with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, a Sufi
> pir in Sindh.

He took birth in Sindh.

He arose as a white bearded adult who came out of the

Indus River riding on a fish.

> He is an appearance of the enigmatic Khwaja Khizr
> associated with water.

He appeared in response to the prayers of some distraught Sindhis

when Mirkhshah, the ruler of Sindh in the mid-tenth century CE

a kazi (Muslim judge) in 17th century CE Sindh,

commanded that everyone, including those identifying as Hindu,

convert to Islam.

Some even say Mirkhshah declared that his forces will cut

the sacred thread and top knot of hair.

Jhule Lal demonstrated numerous miracles, including

riding a fish upstream in the Indus River and, as a child,

receiving a basket of gifts, including money, from the river

after making offerings there.

Jhule Lal made the Indus River flow backwards to

save a Muslim woman from a lecherous Hindu

king.

When Mirkhshah's minister visited the baby Jhule Lal, the minister

saw the baby suddenly appear as a young man with a black beard

and then as an old man with a white beard. Heading back to the

court, the minister was then surprised to see Jhule Lal coming out

of the river leading an army.

When Mirkhshah's forces attempted to arrest Jhule Lal, he inundated the

palace with fire and flood.

He led an army that his father organized against Mirkhshah's forces.

Jhule Lal taught tolerance, a central virtue of Hinduism

and the true meaning of the Qur'an

to Mirkhshah, convincing the emperor to rescind his order

requiring everyone to convert to Islam. Mirkhshah and his court

honored

worshipped as a divine being

Jhule Lal for his wisdom.

Benefits of Non-Linear Strategies

These two strategies that I have illustrated are only two possibilities of a wide range of non-linear strategies that employ multiple time frames, styles, and ways of organizing presentations. The standard goal is to challenge the assumption of a singular viewpoint and a linear progression. They push us to question our methods of taking an authoritative, even omniscient voice as we present information and craft arguments and align them more clearly with our critical theory. The approach requires a new effort to develop the application of these strategies to pedagogical practices, but the effort produces some benefits.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, making readers and students aware of the limitations of our knowledge and the dynamics of constructing knowledge, even at the introductory level, means that we do not have to "unteach" what we taught in the introductory classes when students enroll in upper level coursework. This benefit, however, is even more important for students who only take one course in our field. The self-reflexive humility that derives from a recognition of the contextual nature of all knowledge is also valuable for students, majoring in other programs, to engage at the introductory level. These methods of description pair well with efforts to develop critical thinking skills, for example, and a careful application of those skills in class can help students recognize that they are applicable in contexts outside of the course.

These nonlinear presentations of information have potential to increase engagement and retention of information. While I do not have statistical data to support this, anecdotally I have noticed students remembering details of some nonlinear readings better. The novelty of the style might be a contributing factor, and the extra effort that it requires of some readers might increase their retention. These points raise a potential challenge, also, as such presentations may require more effort from students who, at times, may be unwilling to put in the extra effort. Clear direction in these strategies is vital to mitigate the added effort and potential confusion and frustration that these strategies may generate.

While developing examples employing various strategies, I have noticed additional connections within the material that the nontraditional framing has highlighted. Like experimenting with different ways of classifying the same data, these nonlinear strategies have the potential to help us and our students to gain new insights to the material, and thus construct new knowledge, while we also recognize that the new insights and broader knowledge are also embedded in our own contexts and systems of knowledge construction, like all knowledge.

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