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ENG 597: Graduate Capstone Seminar

7 July 2022

*What are you going to do? Are you going to be a passive recipient of education
or are you going to become an active owner of your education?*
—Gabriela Díaz de Sabatés, 2011

A Life of Learning

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE PORTFOLIO ANALYSIS ESSAY

In July 2021, I applied to Arizona State University’s (ASU) Master of Arts in English with a focus in English Studies program to learn more and to use my time in COVID-19 lockdown wisely. On July 31, 2021, I received a letter. It opened, “Congratulations!” The rest is history. My first two classes commenced on August 19, 2021. My final class will officially conclude on August 9, 2022, one day prior to my thirty-sixth birthday. During my time as a graduate student this past year, I have carefully archived my major assignments and now present those in my web-based Capstone Portfolio for English Studies. Please visit <https://andrewpegoda.com/eng-portfolio/> to explore this catalog of coursework and related materials. The paper that follows has several agendas. It outlines the purpose, audience, and design of the portfolio. Then, it describes select examples of my work and why they are important in my professional profile. It concludes with comments about my overall worldview and trajectory to and from ASU. Ultimately, this paper and the accompanying portfolio makes implicit arguments for lifelong learning and for the joy that all things reading, thinking, and writing can be—when the prerequisite circumstances allow.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE OF THE PORTFOLIO

My Capstone Portfolio for English Studies has a range of possible audiences and purposes. The first audience is myself, both now but especially in the future. I enjoy reviewing what I have written, whether from seventeen years ago when I submitted my first essay as a college student or from earlier this year. The gap of time and place allows more perspective. I always see small (and even large) errors or naiveté, but that is part of the on-going learning process. The resulting metacognition and reflection that happens when examining prior work also allows for a kind of learning not possible any other way. Currently, I am too close to much of the work I have completed at ASU to fully understand my thoughts, both the strengths and weaknesses, but in a few years and a few years after that, I will be able to review my portfolio again and gain new insights and will be able to further evaluate my learning. Thus, the first and main audience can only be myself, including a self that does not yet exist.

Another very important audience is both Kathleen Hicks, professor for the Graduate Capstone Seminar and program director, and the other English Studies graduate students. I hope that *anyone* can look at my portfolio and see how much I have enjoyed the range of classes and how much I have learned. As everyone taking this seminar will be sharing their portfolios with each other, I know I will also be learning from the work displayed in the other portfolios. I look forward to seeing their polished thoughts and gaining new insights.

Another audience is my own students at the University of Houston. Showing them work that I have completed as a student myself can be an important pedagogical lesson. This also helps establish a unique kind of honesty and openness. They can tangibly see that I really have been in their shoes completing different kind of assignments with a range of differing

expectations. I hope it encourages them to also keep records of their work and look back from time to time.

A final audience is anyone on the web who finds the portfolio. Since 2013, I have been actively engaged in public scholarship, publishing over six hundred blog articles and dozens of articles in publications like *Time*, *Inside HigherEd*, and *The Washington Post*. Such comes with its own risks in the form of hate mail, but the benefits far out way the not-so-occasional “you liberal commie” messages: I get to participate in a kind of teaching that reaches people from across the globe. (My website has recorded visitors from all but seven countries.) People might find my portfolio when searching for information about ASU’s English Studies program or about Disability Studies and “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings.” I am confident that this project provides information that interested parties will find useful.

DESIGN OF THE PORTFOLIO

I initially designed my portfolio in December 2021 as a new page on my main professional website, which is hosted by Wordpress.com. At that time, I also completely redesigned and updated the basic templates on my website. My design—with its carefully chosen and accessible colors, fonts, and spacing—is ready for all audiences, including those who may use a screen reader or who just need pages without moving images, graphics, and pop-ups: Embracing the ideas of Universal Design is always my goal. Further, the portfolio page itself is also designed so that any of the possible audiences outlined above will find it useful and painless to navigate. In particular, the information is presented in two columns and all the basic information is on one page. The first column on the left has a picture of me, a brief biography, a brief description of the portfolio, a section with links to my curriculum vitae and other interesting

information, and a list of my grades in courses at ASU. The second column lists every class I have taken and who taught the class and includes an example of a major assignment I completed for that course with a brief description. Each example is either an accessible PDF document or a YouTube video with complete captions. All links open in a new window to keep readers directly connected to the main portfolio page. (Two classes did not have any major assignments, and I include multiple examples from Composition Studies because I thoroughly enjoyed the class and coursework.)

ANALYZING THE PORTFOLIO'S CONTENTS AND SELF-EVALUATION

“‘Nothing About Us Without Us’: Voice and the Syllabus, A Research Proposal” was for Approaches to Research: English Studies with George Justice. After doing initial research, after doing a literature review, and after doing more research and planning, this core graduate methods course culminated in an extended research proposal that spoke to some issue that is of interest within English Studies, which basically encompasses any topic imaginable, as every issue involves texts and language and can benefit from rhetorical analysis. This artifact shows my ability to find a unique problem (i.e., the inattention to the course syllabus in academic literature), to investigate that problem through thinking and researching, and to outline a sound framework for addressing that problem, all the while placing it within larger trajectories of educational discourses. I use personal experiences and my own personal on-going fascination with all things related to the course syllabus to offer deeper insights and nuance to the topics at hand. This paper highlights my ability to synthesize and analyze scholarship from a range of academic discourses and to write clear, sharp prose. This paper would have benefited from subtitles, and the conclusion could be neater and less abrupt. If revisited, I would enjoy making

the proposal longer and more nuanced at every step (my dissertation proposal was around fifty pages!). I originally did not make it more expanded given that the structure and parameters outlined in the instructions were specific and rigid. For example, a stronger proposal might incorporate results from initial student, faculty, administrator interviews.

“Empowering Cesario, or The Harbingers of Genderfluidity” for Studies in Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare with Bradley J. Irish is a literary analysis that highlights my ability to read and analyze one of the world’s great works of literature, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. This class required two major papers—the prompt was completely open-ended and allowed for complete creativity. The second paper could be a revised and expanded version of the first but also required sources. I elected to revise and expand my first paper, and as I had already used sources, I added additional references. In this paper, I apply my knowledge of gender and queer studies to offer original ways of looking at Cesario, arguing that we can see Cesario specifically as a genderfluid character, not as a character merely in disguise. In addition to highlighting my analytical skills, this research paper shows my ability to engage with and expand existing scholarship. Further, this essay shows clear organization and a step-by-step unfolding of ideas with key terms clearly defined. Prior to this class, my only exposure to Shakespeare was a single play—*The Tempest*—as an undergraduate in 2007. Thus, if I reread *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* now, I would certainly have new and different insights, and now at the conclusion of this Master of Arts program, I would have more effective ways to convey my arguments. A more effective paper could be informed by more examples from other plays by Shakespeare or texts by his contemporaries, as such would help contextualize Shakespeare and Cesario. Another version of this paper might do a “thick description” analysis on select scenes. An expanded version could also consider some of the many adaptations. If revised, I might remove comments in the paper—

requested by the professor—about how notions of genderfluidity would be unintelligible in Shakespeare’s time, as such historical change is automatically implied when considering reader response theory.

“Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: A Crippled-Queered Literature Review” for Studies in 18th/19th C. British Literature: The Gothic also with George Justice is a bibliographical essay that shows my strong writing skills and my ability to grapple with the history of how scholars have engaged with *Frankenstein*, a text I had not read before. The topic was completely open-ended. This assignment was one of three major assignments, the other two being an annotated bibliography and an essay exam. In this essay, I analyze existing literature on *Frankenstein* and Queer Studies and on *Frankenstein* and Disability Studies. I then offer ways to merge and expand these scholarly conversations. I remember having fun writing this paper and smiling often because I knew or already knew of the authors of several articles I studied. If approached in a full research paper, I would add more examples of existing scholarship, and instead of only outlying directions for future research and analysis, I would do that analysis myself, similar to how I have analyzed other literary texts. I would also want to re-read some of the secondary texts, especially Funson Wang’s, to make sure my (negative) evaluation remains my opinion.

“Exploring Disability in Magical Realist Fictions” for Genre Studies: Magical Realism as a Global Genre with Claudia Sadowski-Smith is a literary analysis that underscores my ability to take risks and to offer fresh insights—again using Disability Studies—into a text that has been written about again and again, “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings.” This essay offers sustained, strong arguments with clear examples that gradually unfold and was the only major assignment in the class. I greatly enjoyed writing this essay because of how it stretched my mind and believe it is both different and interesting. I do feel the paper could be a bit more focused and

have fewer side tangents; although, some of what comes across as side tangents exist because of following requirements detailed in the instructions. If revised, I would make the paper shorter and just concentrate on “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings.” That would help my argument to be abundantly clear to readers.

“Open Letter to Inmates” for Internship: Pen Project Prison Teaching with Lance Graham is an essay that shows my ability to engage with a less formal genre of academic writing—a letter. This assignment was somewhat open-ended but asked that we write a letter to the inmates submitting work to the Pen Project wherein we describe what we learned while participating in the internship and reading their work. Rather than a formal analysis, per se, this writing sample shows application and creation: In it, I share my personal and professional experiences in a framework that aims to benefit the audience, an audience of people wanting to write more and possibly publish their work. This essay also highlights key parts of my own teaching philosophy. Strengths include strong writing, personal tones, and generosity. Looking at the letter now, I wish “I” appeared less often to potentially make it more meaningful for the people receiving it. As part of the program, we also regularly shared examples of published work with the people submitting work. I wish I had included some final examples in the letter, too.

Studies in 18th/19th Century British Literature: Jane Austen Studies with Devoney Looser had four major assignments. “A Partial Jane Austen Exhibit: Letters Among the Leigh Family” is my submission for an assignment that is one of, if not the, most creative and interesting assignments I’ve ever been given. We were charged with transcribing a never-before-studied letter among the Leigh family (Austen’s maternal ancestors) and then contextualizing it as if we were making a museum display. This project highlights my ability to do paleography and to offer relevant meanings and connections where they are not immediately clear. This

assignment again shows strong research and strong writing skills. It also shows my ability to write for the non-specialist but still professionally. The assignment was exciting to complete, and I think this passion shows in the final product. Throughout the assignment I went significantly beyond the minimum requirements by doing additional research into Austen's family. I made a family tree graphic and did research on the price of books overtime and converted these amounts to present-day currencies, for example. If expanded further, I would like to do more research about the Leighs and the Austens to further interpret the chosen letter. I would also enjoy further contextualizing it with the lives of other elites and with other fictional texts. I am also unfamiliar with exactly how museums present such displays: Reading a few dozen examples of such displays would help me better understand the genre.

“Crippling Composition: An Annotated Bibliography Organized Chronologically” is one of four major assignments completed for Composition Studies with Patricia Webb, a class I greatly enjoyed. This assignment stands out as Webb asked if she could use it in future classes as an example essay—thus expanding the target audience. This annotated bibliography, basically a catalog of eleven mini essays, again highlights my on-going interests in expanding my knowledge further into Disability Studies. And again, it shows my ability to read and evaluate academic articles, to place the articles in conversation with each other, and to then communicate the important ideas using clear prose. If revisited, I would like to read and evaluate more articles. I would also like to offer more of my own thoughts for crippling the field.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE FULL CIRCLE OF METACOGNITION

Collectively, I stand by all the work I have submitted for the graduate program. All my major work earned an “A+” from the professor and typically received the highest of praise.

Justice describes my research proposal as “intelligent, thoughtful, and potentially very important.” Justice further describes the annotated bibliography that became the bibliographical essay in *The Gothic* as “extremely well done....this is illuminating, important work.” Looser describes all my work as “masterful.” For the exhibit assignment, she says it has a “stunning array of research sources informing your work” and adds, “you have made a real contribution here.” Webb describes my annotated bibliography as “excellent” in three separate places. I am naturally kind of my own harshest critic, even as I always go beyond the requirements and spend significant time polishing. There is a paper—not included in the portfolio—for *Jane Austen Studies* that I had my worries about. I was never completely satisfied with it, but Looser’s feedback suggests that I was too hard on myself: “[T]his is an impressive paper, with a persuasive argument, and a splendid range of well-chosen critics.” As we are poor judges of our own work, trusting feedback and reactions from others is often the best way to understand one’s strengths and weaknesses.

Pouring over the contents of my Capstone Portfolio for English Studies brings satisfaction. I am pleased with the compositions (the essays and the video essays) I have produced over the past year. I have worked hard. At every step, I have been ahead in classes—sometimes substantially ahead, all the while teaching full time and handling overloads at the University of Houston. Planning and working ahead has enabled me to revise work before submission. The artifacts specifically highlighted in this essay and in the portfolio show dedication to the full process of producing quality scholarship—researching, thinking, reading, thinking, writing, revising, and thinking some more. My professional interests and teaching interests are especially reflected in the compositions completed for this program, many a paper connects to gender and queer studies and/or to pedagogy. I am especially pleased with all that I

have learned about research methods, literary analysis, and Disability Studies. Collectively, my portfolio shows not a changed person, per se, but shows how I have grown as a scholar. I have now practiced more forms of writing and have grappled with new and different texts.

When enrolling I had a goal of really embracing lifelong learning, and I believe I have done just that. I learned. I also enjoyed the different kinds of thinking I got to practice while studying fiction and linguistics and prison history and Shakespeare and Jane Austen and magical realism and Composition Studies and *Frankenstein* and Plato. I also wrote in my admissions essay about wanting to be a student again to better understand/remember the challenges my own students face. And indeed, I have new appreciation for students who encounter all kinds of different professors—and all the fair *and* unfair pedagogies they manifest. (I still have uneasy feelings about the classes where I should have received an “A+” given my 100 percent average, and I still remember being denied feedback on one of the major essays I especially enjoyed writing. But, life goes on.)

Given my extensive experience prior to the program—as a doctoral student, as a college professor, and as a writer, editor, and publisher—the tasks encountered the past year were mostly “easy,” as I already knew how to find secondary sources, to select topics and structure it as appropriate, to write and edit long papers, and to just figure out anything needed. Collectively, I have only become a stronger at writing. I am more confident about tackling different genres and different modes and about developing coherent, original thoughts in response to new information. I am more confident taking risks in my writing and thinking. And I am only more interested in being a lifelong learner and acquiring still more graduate degrees. (If only tuition were not so exorbitantly high. And income so inordinately low.) More than ever, I am committed to the kind of activism vis-à-vis thinking and writing (including video essays) that the late,

internationally renowned bell hooks practiced, including her constant resistance toward the Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist (Heteronormative Ableist Theistic) Patriarchy.