

From Sundance to suspect: A rhetorical analysis of the Nate Parker controversy

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Abstract

Artists influence society. We also often consider the question of whether we can or should separate the art and the artist. In January 2016 *The Birth of a Nation* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival to near unanimous praise. Shortly after the release, past allegations of sexual assault against the filmmaker, co-writer, and star Nate Parker's past came to light. This revelation about his past continues a long and unfortunate history of artists who have completed culturally relevant works but who have been morally suspect human beings. I therefore explore how communities reconcile and support an artist accused of reprehensible acts or how they condemn the artist and reject support for them or their work. I find that commentators who engage in this controversy call forth specific communities. These communities are bound by their identities, and I suggest how they potentially are able to move forward, grow, and possibly come together across lines that include gender, race, ideology, social status, and personal identity and how they communicate and grow as individuals. Through revised discourse, these communities may be able to one day communicate across cultural lines that are currently deep chasms, separated by ideology and identity.

Keywords: Nate Parker, race, gender, identity, ideology, sexual assault, communication

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A friend of mine, on the day of our undergraduate graduation, asked if I had ever heard of an author named David Foster Wallace; I had not, but I soon found out, and his impact on me as a student, reader, and person has been inconceivable. Wallace once wrote, in regards to tennis, "it's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of individual. We're deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness." As I proceeded through this process there were times of aloneness in which I had to remind myself of another piece of Wallace's sage wisdom; "the truth will set you free. But not until it is done with." To everyone who has helped me find my truth thank you.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction & Rationale

Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation* brought forth a firestorm of critical praise with its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, 2016. Critic Ben Nicholson claimed it to be "gut-wrenchingly powerful, not least through its chilling and upsetting climax." Nicholson is not the only critic to comment on the gripping nature of *The Birth of a Nation*. Critic Peter Travers claims that, "A surge of righteous indignation courses through the film until all howling hell breaks loose. It's a stupendous directing debut for an artist who is unflinching in his portrait of a black America pushed to the limit, with the outcome still in play." *The Birth of a Nation* is Nate Parker's epic retelling of Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia, not far from where Parker was born and raised ("Nate Parker"). Turner's Rebellion, one of the most violent slave uprisings in American history, left a bloody trail of some 60 people dead from white slave-owning families, many among them women and children killed with blunt instruments, knives, and farm tools (Stevens 2016). In these respects, *The Birth of a Nation* is a film that is powerful, emotional, and hard to look away from not only in its violent historical subject matter, but also in the ways that unequal treatment is seen and challenged in today's America.

The film was originally heralded as a masterpiece. In fact, the number of glowing reviews after the film's festival premier would have one believe that a number of the Academy Awards should have been put in escrow, reserved for a film that could not be outdone. Many of the Hollywood establishment, including director Spike Lee, film marketer Ava DuVernay, and American media mogul Oprah Winfrey, spoke in support of the film and its maker. Critics also sang its praises with some claiming, "no, the movie can't escape its maelstrom of bad PR, and reviews aren't written in a vacuum either. But lest the point get lost, what Mr. Parker has committed to the screen is a righteously indignant, kinetic and well-acted film" (Anderson 2016).

As Tasha Robinson wrote, “Eight months before its intended release date, the hype machine embraced Nate Parker’s biopic as an Oscar front runner.”

In addition to the critical praise, *The Birth of a Nation* was said to be a much-needed response to the Academy Award’s lack of diversity. *The Birth of a Nation* not only addressed one of the most infamous slave revolts in history, it was also created and led by a black artist. The film takes a sympathetic look at Nat Turner and puts African Americans in a central, powerful role at a turning point in American history. As critic Alan Scherstuhl notes, “It’s a passion project, an indie stab at an African-American *Braveheart*, a bluntly potent revenge thriller spun from the truth of Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion.” Scherstuhl goes on, “It dares not to soften black anger or question its righteousness. It is, as Woodrow Wilson might have it, history reclaimed with lightning.”

From the beginning, Parker threw himself into the making of the film. He spent more than seven years on the project, and at times threatened to give up on acting to make a film about Turner’s Rebellion (Smith; Danielle, *Exclusive*). Parker took on multiple roles, thrusting himself into all aspects of the film, not just the leading role but also as executive producer, director, and co-writer (Barnes and Buckley). In addition to the work that Parker did on set, he also spent \$100,000 of his own money on the endeavor (Lincoln). With the film’s January premier, it seemed Parker’s personal and professional investment had paid off.

But that was in January 2016. As the film’s October 7, 2016, nationwide release approached, a dark cloud began to form over the work, with the most ominous formations billowing directly over the auteur himself, Nate Parker. It was at this time that Parker’s troublesome past came to light, specifically, a 1999 rape allegation brought against him and *The Birth of a Nation* co-writer Jean McGianni Celestin. Parker and Celestin both are black men;

their accuser was a white woman. At that time of the sexual assault allegation all three were students at Penn State University. The accuser claimed that she was intoxicated and unable to consent. Both men went to trial in 2001. Pennsylvania law prevents the admission of an alleged victim's sexual past as evidence, the exception being in cases where there was a previous relationship between parties involved. In this case, Parker and the accuser had previously had consensual oral sex (Conti). Parker was acquitted while Celestin was found guilty of sexual assault, a lesser charge than rape. Celestin's decision was later overturned on appeal (Gersen). The accuser would go on to struggle with depression throughout the remainder of her life and committed suicide in 2012. In a recent interview with *Variety* the accuser's brother states that "she became detached from reality," and that in the 10 years between the trial and her suicide her mental health declined culminating in her taking her own life (Setoodeh). Furthermore, her death certificate states that she suffered from a "major depressive disorder with psychotic features, PTSD due to physical and sexual abuse, polysubstance abuse." (Setoodeh).

As Parker's past became part of the public conversation, thunderous praise for the film turned mostly to silence. Abandoned by his famous supporters and coupled with Parker's callous comments about the trial, his accuser, and sexual assault, the camera swung from the film to the filmmaker, and its focus was unforgiving. Many began to ask, as did Roxanne Gay, whether we can separate the artist from their art. In the case of Nate Parker, Gay concluded, "I am reminded that I cannot."

Taken on its own merit, this is a tragic situation in which justice went unserved and lives were forever altered. Unfortunately, Parker's case parallels other instances in which creative geniuses who otherwise were lauded for their cultural influence engaged in morally reprehensible acts. Other examples include Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, Michael Jackson,

and R Kelly. For this reason, *The Birth of a Nation*, its critical reception, and responses to Parker's past offer an important opportunity to better understand the role of ethics, race, art, representation, and social identity in the public sphere. Analyzing the discourse surrounding this controversy will allow scholars to consider how communities understand the relationship between art and artist. Looking toward the public discourse surrounding Parker and the film, I investigated the following: how do communities and critics justify their support or rejection of culturally relevant art when it has been created by an artist with a troublesome past?

This question deserves scholarly attention for at least two reasons. First, the particular case of Nate Parker and *The Birth of a Nation* intersects with several controversies of great and immediate consequence in our society. The film initially was thought to be a possible answer to the lack of people of color in the previous year's Academy Awards nominations. Other layers of the controversy include popular culture, American history, African American history, African American identity, sexual violence, and masculinity. In our present world there are many movements that challenge our country's social order (e.g. Black Lives Matter, contemporary feminist movements, and the reemergence of white nationalism). This particular case is of importance because it touches on some of these social controversies.

Second, the question of the artists' role and responsibility in society remains opaque, even as our storytellers are said to be more and more important in the process of cultural maintenance and change. Art is a mirror to society. Art is also something that has been seen to grow and live close to the public, addressing topics in the public sphere that are diverse and divisive, including religion, politics, and the economy. As American painter Robert Rauschenberg once propounded, "The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history" (Taylor). Yet, dysfunctional artists such as those mentioned above are not limited to recent times

and also include the likes of Pablo Picasso and Vincent Van Gough. Understanding how audiences support or denigrate, condemn or praise the dysfunctional artist will illuminate aspects of our culture and the lengths we will go in order to support something that we hold as influential, necessary, and even sacred. The voluminous response to the Nate Parker controversy shows that he as an artist is influential to culture and society. In comparison to other artists whose art or themselves have drawn the ire of society (e.g. Mel Gibson; Casey Affleck), the coalescence of race, masculinity, and intersectionality in the controversy surrounding Nate Parker makes critical analysis of this controversy necessary and potentially productive. In the end, critical analysis of how writers support or condemn the flawed artist can improve our understanding of culture, art, artists, and our expectations of all three.

In this thesis I draw on previous rhetorical scholarship to explain the impact and influence of public discourse about a popular-art controversy. To do this, I selected 30 texts from a variety of sources. Through the application of Maurice Charland's (1987) constitutive rhetoric, I discovered that by addressing a controversial issue through their individual lenses, commentators call forth specific communities. This thesis also provides contributions to the study of constitutive rhetoric and the role that authors or artists play in society. As such, this thesis opens the possibility for future research in these areas and others, such as the role of identity and ideology in the formation of communities through rhetoric.

This thesis' contributions include the following. First, I consider Roland Barthes's (1978) claims about the authority of the author; I apply constitutive rhetoric to an artifact in popular culture, which is a departure from constitutive rhetoric's political roots; and finally, I explore how identities tied to ideology can be limiting. I also propose possibilities for further research. I argue that it is worthwhile to further explore ideologically constituted identities,

considering that “ideology is a narrative that retains certain ties to reality” (Cheyfitz 62). As Althusser notes, while ideologies “constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world” (36). Second, we must ask how can actors restore their reputation in the digital age? Third and finally, how can communities constituted through rhetoric communicate?

This thesis proceeds as follows: In Chapter 2, I review literature from multiple areas to better understand the complex space that artists in American culture occupy. In Chapter 3 I explain the texts used for this study, why they were selected, the methods used for analysis, and the questions that drove that analysis. In Chapter 4 I analyze the artifacts and present the communities that the commentators develop and call forth from their rhetoric. Finally, in the last chapter I present the implications of my findings and the potential for future research that may stem from them.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The Nate Parker controversy is new but its difficulties are not. Race relations, demeaning cultural representations, sexual violence, and the myth of the creative genius have long bedeviled public intellectuals and scholars alike (Barber). A review of their thinking on these topics, paying attention to the role of the artist in society, popular culture as political field, the special status of celebrity in the digital age, the tortured state of Black masculinity in the U.S., and the authority that authors hold, informs this thesis.

Section One: Role and Reputation of the Artist

A controversial work of art often prompts critics to ask if we can separate the art from the artist. Before this perplexing question can be addressed, we must first understand the mutual influence of culture and personal experience on art and artists, as well as the ways that artists are perceived within our society. Throughout history artists have served several roles in society and through those roles artists have maintained a clear, over-arching function, which is that of “form givers to the most pervasive ideas of their (the artists) time” (Andre et al 329). Further, “in the individual and collective creations of artist past and present resides the sum total of our civilization” (Andre et al 329).

Because artists serve society in such a profound way, we must consider the relationship between culture, art, and the artist. Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* serves as good illustration of these complex connections. In his adaptation of the Shakespearian tragedy, Polanski’s life trajectory from childhood to adulthood can be easily traced. Polanski was born to Polish-Jewish parents in France, 1933. Shortly before the German invasion of Poland, the family moved back to their motherland (Hărășan 125). As history documents, this proved to be a disastrous decision and ultimately lead to the separation and later death of Polanski’s pregnant mother (125). Some

twenty years later, in 1969, Polanski began work on a project outside the United States. His wife, actress Sharon Tate, who was pregnant with the couple's first child, accompanied him. Later, Tate would return to the United States while Polanski remained abroad. After her return, Tate along with the couple's unborn child would be among the victims of the Manson Family commune (Hărășan 126). After the murder of his wife, darkness crept into Polanski's work, depicting the reality of fear, paranoia, and violence he had experienced throughout his life. Polanski's films during this period also reflected changes in the United States during the 1970s (Hărășan 125). Polanski's *Macbeth* featured the use of symbols and themes that portrayed the cultural, political, and societal climate of the United States at the time.

Artists' personal experiences such as Polanski's impact, influence, and manifest in their art. Furthermore, the events of the world also influence artists work greatly. Perhaps because their work reflects larger historical events, artists such as Roman Polanski are not seen on the same level as the general population; they are placed on a higher plane and are seen as culturally significant. Andre et al outlines these assumptions as follows. First, artists are thought to be humanitarians when in fact they are equally if not more concerned with their career and status as any other person is (327). Second, there is a long held belief that stems from 19th century Romanticism that artists are akin to priests or saints (327). Finally, there is a belief that artists, being economically and politically weak, should band together to impose their ideals on the art system (328). Below, I explore each of these expectations.

It is noted that the common assumption that artists are humanitarians is a beautiful supposition but also a dangerous myth (Andre et al 327). Haacke also notes that artists are not inherently altruistic and are in fact likely more concerned with their careers and reputation than are others (Andre et al 328). By the same token, artists cannot be great self-sacrificing

humanitarians, at least no more so than is anyone else. To this point, John Perreault argues that when artists are asked to choose between money and truth the portion of artists who will opt for their pocketbook is no different than that of any other calling or class (Andre et al 329).

This notion that artists should be held to a higher standard is an unfortunate holdover from the 19th century (Andre et al 327). During this period, it became sacrilege to look at an artist's position either economically or ideologically and the role that the artist played in the structure of society. In spite of this notion, it is surely impossible for the artist to maintain their position and reputation and at the same time be independent from controlling societal factors that influence or direct the art they are producing, for neither art nor artists can separate themselves from the society in which they exist. Therefore, it is important not to conflate art and morality.

Perreault also states that there is truth in art, but the truth is often not beautiful and beauty is not necessarily moral (Andre et al 329). Polanski's *Macbeth* illustrates the lack of necessary connection between beauty and truth. As film historian James Greenberg notes, the ugliness in Polanski's *Macbeth* well captures what the filmmaker had truly "endured in his own life – violence, cruelty, brutality – living through the horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and Manson" (quoted by Hărăsan 125).

The reputation of artists largely hinges on what art they choose to make; for example, art with a seemingly political message is often not immediately validated as art. Hans Haacke illustrates this by demonstrating that the art system is totally and completely dependent on the larger capitalistic economic system in place (Andre et al 328). As such, art depends on charity, idealism, economic exploitation, folly, intelligence, death wish, and the need to absolve guilt through art indulgence by those with excess capital. From the perspective of dialectical materialism, then, rather than thinking of artists as exceptionally moral or as heralds of life's

beauty, we might instead understand artists as communicators for the ruling class, or aristocracy. Art critic Cindy Nesmer notes that throughout history artists have been message makers (Andre et al 329). Previously artists have been the message makers of the establishment at large and as such if they cause a disruption they will eventually get the attention they demand. Perreault states that art is dependent largely on a bourgeois class that is in power but adds that in Western culture, due to the capitalistic structure, the reputation of the artist is also influenced by big business (Andre et al 329).

Section Two: Popular Art as Cultural Force

On the topic of big business, popular culture is something that is enmeshed in our everyday world. As Brummett states, while “we go through life experiencing and enjoying music, clothing, architecture, food and so forth we are also participating in a rhetorical struggle over what kind of society we will live in and what sort of people we will be” (41). This is to say that popular culture is crucial to meaning-making, whether we are aware of it or not. Ray Browne defines popular culture by stating that “popular culture consists of the aspects of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, customs, and tastes that define the people of any society. Popular culture is, in the historic use of the term, the culture of the people” (25). As such, the rhetoric of popular culture is then the rhetoric of everyday life (Brummett 41). While it may be dismissed as banal, popular culture nevertheless appeals to many people because it provides an opportunity for both personal satisfaction and a communal bonding.

While the opera resonates with some and theater with others, popular genres speak to the masses, and by the same turn are used by most people as ways to create, maintain, or reinvent meaning in their lives. When art is easily accessible to the public it can serve as a lens through which we can view changes in our society to the political, social, and economic order (Selwood

37). Perhaps therefore since the 1970s interest in art, specifically public art, has grown (Selwood 37). Public art asks audiences to engage in the community discourse surrounding the art. Way continues that such public discourse within communities is valuable because it is found outside of speeches and newspapers, which are not always heard or engaged in by the public (422).

Popular culture such as music, film, or public art is also a source of power in society. Brummett states that power is the ability to control events and their meaning (42). We might take, for example, British conductor Simon Rattle's boycott of the Austrian Freedom Party. At that time, Rattle proclaimed "it is either a time to resist or a time to retreat and now is a time to resist" (Street 433). Taking such decisive political stances is effective because it costs artists relatively little and can improve the artist's celebrity and reputation as well as the perceived importance of the issue at hand. Taking political stances can also have the adverse effect if a celebrity's base does not align with the political position they have taken. As Street notes, artists such as Bono or Sting may decide to engage in political action (434). Because artists hold a place of prominence or distinction they have a platform to communicate their opinions—a platform not generally available to most people.

Popular culture is something that, in addition to power and politics, can greatly influence communities. Selwood argues that public art is a cultural investment, one that is vital to the economic recovery of many cities where it is commissioned (38). She continues that public art humanizes an area and can activate a sense of pride in a community and increase the safety of that community (39). Just as their political position can influence, figures in popular culture can also inspire social movements and communities. Celebrities can impact, legitimize, and popularize causes and movements by engaging them, lending credibility and popularity. Street argues that celebrities' public statements and actions have weight because celebrities have the

collectively recognized right and privilege to have legitimate and valid opinions (437). He goes on to argue that these movements need artists but they do not create artists (437). It is not enough for artists to engage in and perform at or for movements. Rather, for popular culture to be effective in this manner it must also be perceived as authentic. Authenticity in this sense is important to the movement, the artist, and the art. As Lyndon Way states, this assumption is rooted in the romantic tradition that it comes from the soul, it is not something that simply emerges from a movement or society (424).

In sum, popular culture can be a bridge-builder, uniting people, forming a movement, raising awareness for a cause, and even articulating subversive politics. Street notes that the performance of art is ritualized and that this ritualization and the memories that are connected to it invokes the music of social movements; and that music can transcend the boundaries of the self and bind the individual to a collective consciousness that is greater than they are individually (437).

Section Three: Celebrity Ethos as Cultural Currency in the Digital Age

Artists are first and foremost people, and as such they are capable of their own independent thoughts and actions, be they political, social, or otherwise. These actions and choices can be interpreted, analyzed, and scrutinized. However, as Street notes, since some artists are also celebrities what they do as stars in popular culture does matter because, in this sense, they are not like the rest of the population (434). When an artist is brought into the public sphere for negative reasons or through controversy, the circumstances around their alleged actions are often hotly debated, and the public breaks into camps either defending an artist that they admire or respect or condemning the artist for their alleged actions.

Take Woody Allen, for example. In 1992, film maker Allen and his long-time partner actress Mia Farrow parted ways amid allegations of child sexual abuse and molestation (Salek 477). In a bitter and public custody battle for the couple's adopted and biological children, details of the allegations and court proceedings were leaked. In the end, no formal charges were brought against Allen with the court citing lack of physical evidence (Salek 478). After the conclusion of Allen's court case the controversy lay dormant for more than 20 years, only reappearing in 2014 when Allen received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2014 Golden Globes. During the broadcast Farrow tweeted that it was "time to get some icecream [sic] & switch over to #GIRLS" (Salek 484). Her son Ronan Farrow made a more direct attack on his estranged father tweeting "Missed the Woody Allen tribute – did they put the part where a woman publicly confirmed he molested her at age 7 before or after Annie Hall?". These digital snipes were like oxygen for the old fire, turning a microblogging character attack into a cultural controversy.

Twitter offers users a public platform in the form of 140-character messages that can be shared publicly or privately, using direct messages (DMs). Salek remarks that the current convergence culture provides traditional media and Twitter users the opportunity to work with one another to produce salacious news based more on the presentation of drama rather than the actual revelation of new information (479). This partnership between Twitter users and the traditional media resulted in what Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley (2014) term an "online firestorm". Online firestorms are defined as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM [word of mouth] and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley 118). In these

online firestorms, Twitter or other social media users, along with the traditional media, work together to create conflict based on the presentation of the information at hand.

In the Woody Allen case, Farrow started the fire but her son Ronan fanned the flames. When used as Ronan and Mia did, Twitter takes on a powerful confessional tone, meaning that they are acknowledging an event that elicits feelings of shame or embarrassment. Through the confessional use of Twitter, it was seen how the platform could be used by the Farrow's followers to identify with them and express their support for the family. Ronan Farrow's follow-up tweet impassioned and emboldened his and Mia's followers and their rhetoric in the slew of attack tweets directed at Woody Allen (Salek 486). The attacks took a paradoxical turn as followers used the Farrow's celebrity as their case for credibility, and also Allen's celebrity as case for doubt. Others chose to take aim at the public who supported Allen and Hollywood for allegedly enabling him. As Twitter users referenced past allegations against Allen and his continuing success in Hollywood as a benchmark for accepting claims made by Ronan and Mia Farrow as @LawlessGhost did, tweeting "I dislike how people gloss over his pedophilia and act like his art provides justice" (Salek 486). By taking the Farrow's claim as truth as many did these Twitter users "chided the public and Hollywood for valuing the ethos associated with Allen's work versus the questionable details of his infamous past" (Salek 486).

Throughout the Twitter firestorm others defended and downplayed attacks against Allen, stating as Twitter user @CaccioppoliMike did tweeting, "In all due respect that was for Woody's films not his life ... wonder what is in others closets ..." (Salek 487). Allen does not use Twitter, and as a result was unable to capitalize on the interpersonal connection between followers and himself in the way that the Farrow's were. Allen's lack of online presence for some only served as further cause for suspicion (487). In this instance the discourse seen

through Twitter and the traditional media further highlights the significance of ones' celebrity in the modern public sphere.

Section Four: Black American Masculinity

Much like ones' celebrity status in society, racial or cultural identity, too, plays a significant role in public controversy. Social scientists have long been interested in the representation of black masculinity in society (Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton 468). Historically, the majority of news stories in the United States have tended to stereotype black men in a negative light, often casting them as criminals, drug dealers, derelicts, or other kinds of social deviants (Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton 468). Stereotypes are defined as “the shorthanded rules that we use to categorize people” (469). Bogle defines stereotypes of African Americans differently by giving them five distinct categories: toms (good Negroes, loyal to white masters), coons (no-account Negroes, lazy/subhuman), the tragic mulatto (a person of mixed race), the mammy (a house servant, also loyal), and the buck (strong, raging, hypersexual) (4-18). These stereotypes outline the many ways that black men are pigeon-holed in society and how they continue to persist in modern times.

After more than five years of planning *The Washington Post* ran a series titled “Being a Black man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril.” (Fletcher). In this series of articles, journalistic portraits of black men were featured in a variety of socioeconomic, occupational, and experiential backgrounds. These portraits provided readers of *The Washington Post* with a different context through which they could view black men in their communities. Because there is a specific history in the United States between African Americans and whites, shaped by slavery, civil rights movements, and social and economic challenges, race-related scholarship is thus replete with theoretical and empirical work on the stereotypes of African American people

(Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton 469). Articles such as those from *The Washington Post* hold the potential to inform, influence, and possibly shift societal views that were once stereotypical.

The power to construct or challenge stereotypes of black masculinity is not limited to news articles. Paul Gilroy points out that in contemporary musical forms African diaspora works within an artistic and political framework, which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves repeatedly to both celebrate and validate the unconquerable fact that they have survived (Street 435). Stereotypes are the quintessence of difference, and as such they bolster and emphasize cultural power imbalances and further both social and symbolic power structures. These news articles, musical performances, and other artistic platforms in popular culture contest a U.S. history that is, as Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton state, “heavily weighted in criminality and the failure of Black men;” however, the structure remains that contemporary stereotypes portray the black male as a criminal, a pimp, a drug dealer, an irresponsible father, and a loser. Taking from Bogle’s five categories of stereotypes, the construct of the black man and black bodies is both historically and currently in popular culture divided into two categories: one being racial and the other being sexual.

In looking at the literature, it can now be understood that the artist’s role in society is one that is significant and impactful. While artists often hold a space in society of celebrity, they are also individuals who make decisions and act in ways that often mirror the actions of the larger population. As such, artists are people too, capable of making their own decisions and possibly suffering the consequences of those decisions. Furthermore, it is also apparent that popular culture is something more than just the music of Drake and Future or the latest film adaptation of a popular book series. Popular culture is also a site of political struggle. Through the interpretation and analysis of criticisms about a situation tied to popular culture, we can learn

how cultural artifacts and their creators influence us. From the literature, it is also apparent that modern celebrity is ever evolving yet largely carried by social media in the digital age. Finally, race clearly matters in America and here, specifically, historical stereotypes of black masculinity have influenced how artists of color have been allowed to engage in the broader aspects of culture.

Section Five: The importance of the author

The author of Ecclesiastes cautions that “of making many books [there is] no end;” (“Ecclesiastes 12:10-12:13”). The same can be said of literary interpretation. Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author* vigorously argues against the literary tradition of considering the intentions of the author in the interpretation of the text (3). To Barthes, all writing was more than just the author. It was many voices together as one and the writing is the invention of those voices. Given the position Barthes takes he seeks to move the focus from the author onto readers and their interpretations (4). Barthes essentially argues that as authors, we are borrowing from pre-existing ideas, and since all words already exist there is no original content—only infinite borrowing. This argument hinges on the idea that we as human beings create our own meaning based on lived experiences, and given that no two experiences are the same only the meaning that we ascribe to an event of text matters, not the creator of the text. Meaning, to Barthes, is specific to the person, therefore, the intention of the author is irrelevant compared to the interpretation of the reader.

The argument that Barthes presents is compelling given the human desire to believe that we are masters of our own destiny. Barthes believes that “to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author” (6). However, in relation to the idea of separating the art and artist, this argument must be

reconsidered. Artists are often societal enigmas. Nate Parker is no different. But given Barthes's position, Parker's intentions and ethos are irrelevant to the audience's interpretation and understanding *The Birth of a Nation*. Put differently, while Barthes's thesis might have intuitive appeal, it seems less obvious when considered in the context of a specific case. And when extrapolating out from Parker to other artists who behave badly, we can see how assessing an artistic text based solely on one's own interpretation might lead to a moral quagmire.

With this in mind, I reconsider Barthes's argument with his iconic status in mind but also with an eye towards the importance of community identity and ideological stance. Artists are authors, and they, too, hold an iconic place in society. While Barthes presents a compelling argument, his unequivocal stance on the authority of the author seems unlikely at best and dangerous at worst. This argument therefore deserves further scrutiny from a variety of circumstances. This thesis presents just such an opportunity. Therefore, in Chapter Five, I will return to Barthes's thesis, questioning its strength in light of my analysis of the Nate Parker controversy. But first, in the next chapter, I review my methods for analyzing the discourse of a cultural controversy that engages this conflict and all its dimensions—artistic, cultural, popular, racial, and gender.

Chapter 3 - Texts and Methods

As artists impact society, those who critique artists also play an important role, especially when an artist or their art is controversial. This leads to the overarching question of the project: how does a community reconcile or reject the artist who has created an important cultural artifact while the creator is also known to have committed reprehensible acts? The rhetorical action of supporting or condemning an artist is one that requires justification on many levels, not simply a vote for or against. Put differently, as symbolic acts meant to influence others, these arguments can be critically analyzed to draw conclusions about how critics use discourse to validate the work of the artist or damn it. These rhetorical decisions say much about critics themselves, their worldview, and their cultural assumptions about art and artists (Burke, *Grammar* 289-91).

Therefore, to address my question, I collected 30 commentaries on the controversy (see Appendix). The texts come from a wide variety of authors including film critics, feminist scholars, and African American cultural activists. Each of the texts serves as an example of rhetorical argument about the controversy, giving me access to the author's assumptions as well as their expectations about their audiences (Black).

The texts for this thesis were selected on the basis that they came from sources that are known to engage popular culture as a *bona fide* topic. Sources known primarily for political commentary, e.g. *The National Review*, *The New Republic*, or *The Nation*, were avoided. Rather, I selected artifacts from sources oriented toward popular culture and art, such as *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone* magazine. I also included sources known to cover culture as well as political affairs, though not necessarily from a partisan perspective, including *The New York Times* and NPR. In this way, I avoided sources that likely covered the Parker controversy as a vehicle for

partisan arguments or overt political ideology. Instead, I sought sources more likely to report first and foremost on the cultural and artistic dimensions of the controversy.

Once relevant texts in such sources were identified, I continued the process of selection by first reviewing the authors and then observing their positions on this issue. My purpose was to curate a wide-ranging collection of opinions on Nate Parker. The artifacts selected were published between the release of *The Birth of a Nation* at the Sundance Film Festival and the film's wide theater release on October 7, 2016. Some sources are reviews of the film but also feature discussion of how the unfolding situation affected the film and the film maker. Others mostly discuss what the action of seeing or not seeing the film meant to them and what this type of activism says about our culture and society. All overtly address the Parker controversy in some way. Overall, my selected texts broadly represent published responses to the Nate Parker controversy from the community of critics and public intellectuals concerned with popular art and culture.

These artifacts vary greatly in length, from a few sentences to several pages long. Some are transcripts of interviews with Parker himself or between critics. Others are opinion-editorials, which are shorter than interviews, or the longer feature articles published in online magazines or websites. I have selected these texts on the rationale that arguments carry latent messages. Specifically, as commentators deliberate the Nate Parker controversy, they necessarily must also comment on the role of art and artists in society.

To focus my reading and critical interpretation, I identified references to Nate Parker or other creative persons within my selected artifacts. Many of these references were obvious, while others were more surreptitious. An example of such furtive mentions can be seen in advocate Tanara Burke's criticism:

I am standing against a system that finds avenues for perpetrators of sexual violence to succeed, while simultaneously destroying the people they violate. I am setting clear boundaries that say no matter how gifted *you are artistically*, physically or otherwise, your gifts will not give you asylum on my island if you perpetrate sexual violence.

(Emphasis added)

While Burke neither mentions Parker or any other specific person, nor directly calls out artists more generally, she clearly has an actor in mind—someone with the talents normally ascribed to artists. I focused on references such as this as well as those that were more direct.

After identifying all references to Parker or artists more generally, I then read and re-read these sections, asking a series of critical probes of the discourse. Based on my review of the literature, the following, specific questions were asked:

- To the rhetors, what makes an artist?
- Controversial art is inherently political; what role do controversial artists play in the discourse surrounding issues of race, sex, and masculinity in popular culture in the digital age?
- To these critics what is the role of the artist in society?
- Historically, artist have been the meaning makers of society. Do controversial artists impact meaning-making more than artists who are not a controversial?
- According to the rhetors, can a person be morally obligated to engage in a piece of art that has been created by an artist with less than desirable personal characteristics?
- What is the relationship between art and society? Or, does art imitate life or does life imitate art, according to the critics?

- Should society censor art? In terms of not engaging in a work of art based on the actions of the artist?

These specific questions were derived from the review of literature and aided in the analysis of the 30 critical artifacts.

After closely reading the texts and asking the critical questions, key similarities and differences among the texts began to emerge. The first element that I noticed was on which aspects of the film, controversy, or artist the commentators focused. Further reading demonstrated not just on what the commentators fixated, but also what they valued. Through further reading of the texts and deeper analysis, the differences between the groups of commentators became more apparent.

Once discovered, the distinct similarities and differences between the texts, as well as deeper reading into what the commentators valued, rhetorical theory was used to illuminate and understand how and why the commentators made their rhetorical decisions. Through the application of Maurice Charland's constitutive rhetoric the texts and the commentators were placed into three distinct identified communities: the critics, the jurists, and the integrationists. In the next chapter, I consider the how the rhetorical choices of the commentators distinguish one constituted community from the other. I also reveal what common elements they share.

Chapter 4 - An Analysis of Commentaries about the Nate Parker Controversy

Kurt Vonnegut once remarked that a critic is “like a person who has put on full armor and attacked a hot fudge sundae or a banana split” (124). Many share the famed writer’s conviction that critics are ridiculous, facile, and irrelevant. But based on my reading of 30 critical statements about the Nate Parker controversy, nothing could be further from the truth. Not only can critical opinions influence cultural artifacts and public reception of them, but, as I demonstrate below, thanks to constitutive rhetoric critics can create and, to an extent, control the communities they hail (Black; Charland).

Below, I present the insights gained from my analysis, demonstrating how discourses function as constitutive rhetoric. I argue that when critics produce criticism they are calling forth specific audiences to which their comments are directed. In analyzing the Nate Parker controversy, I found that critics did this in different ways contingent on the situation. The result is the constitution of three distinct communities, empowered yet constrained by their ideological identities. First, I will describe the discourse of each community, examining the positions that the critics occupy to understand the philosophical and ethical stance that they, as well as their respective audiences, will most likely take in engaging the controversy. Second, I examine how the critics address the controversy and the ways that they articulate their constituted position through their use of style, invention, and arrangement of their argument. Finally, I discuss what communities the critics call forth and ultimately how likely each community is to engage in action in response to the rhetorically constituted positions they hold.

Section One: Rhetorically Constituting Communities

As rhetorical scholarship has become more audience focused, concern for the impact of biases, ideology, and the power of words has grown. In contrast to the Aristotelian notion that an audience is to be rationally persuaded by rhetoric, critical approaches since Burke hold, to varying degrees, that discourse constructs and provides its audience with an identity. In this sense, language has the power not only to persuade, but also to create an identity, mobilizing individuals into a collective. Two works that are concerned with rhetoric's impact on the audience are Black's (1970) and Charland's (1987). These works will provide the theoretical grounding for this chapter.

Edwin Black considers powerful forces such as bias and the psychology of rhetoric in *The Second Persona*. The ethics of rhetoric are framed by Black when he states that "moral judgements, however balanced, however elaborately qualified, are nonetheless categorical," for "they shape decisively one's relationship to the object judged" (109). Black argues for a shift in focus of rhetorical criticism from the speaker to what he refers to as the auditors, or "the second persona" (111). Black maintains that the central focus of rhetorical acts is speech, and he identifies the second persona as any person who engages the speaker. This conception adheres to classical theories of rhetoric, which hold that the auditor sits in judgement (Black 111). As Black focuses on the auditors and their ethical responsibilities, he outlines that they must acknowledge the constant biases of the speaker. Acknowledging partiality becomes the responsibility of the auditor, thus they become the second persona, a role taken by the audience in response to a speech or any text.

Speakers also must consider the audience they are addressing and will create a persona for their inferred audience. In this sense, the second persona functions as the speaker's view of

the audience and the ways the audience is likely to be persuaded. This implies that communication conveys not only attitude, but also intent. As auditors, it is imperative that we acknowledge both aspects of communication by the speaker, understanding not just their intent, but also their attitude. This is an important part of what we understand and potentially criticize about any message.

Black argues that the second persona is “the association between an idiom and an ideology” that “is much more than a matter or arbitrary convention or inexplicable accident” (119). Here, Black is calling upon auditors to not take idioms solely on face value, for to do so would fail the essence of being a responsible auditor. Black focuses his work on the ways in which auditors negotiate their ethical responsibilities in acknowledging the constant biases of speakers. Furthering this understanding and acknowledgement involves a deeper understanding of not just speaker ideology, but also audience identity. As Theodor Adorno states, “the human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes a human at all by imitating other human beings” (154). So to say, as Black focuses on the auditor, rhetors must shift the attention of their rhetoric to that of a more constitutive tone.

Charland furthers Black’s work, developing his own theory on constitutive rhetoric. Charland writes that rhetorical artifacts can develop and reshape audiences and their identities, confronting the notion that audiences can be assumed. Rather, Charland argues that some rhetoric creates its audience and forms “the people.” Charland follows McGee as he notes that “the term ‘people’ can rhetorically legitimate constitutions” through rhetorical acts (136).

Charland identifies three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric and uses the framework of Althusser to further support these properties. First, constitutive rhetoric embraces an identity that “transcends the limitations of the individual’s body and will” (139). This implies

that if a “people” exists, it does so only in ideology. In other words, to tell a story is to vindicate a collective subject who, according to Charland, is the protagonist of some historical drama who has, or will, experience, suffer, and act (139). By placing individuals into a collective experience constitutive rhetoric binds people to an ideology, making them a part of the collective.

Second, constitutive rhetoric recognizes consubstantiality, or the connection between the dead and the living. This is to say that the dead and the living are not identical but are nonetheless identified together (Burke, *Motives* 21). Thus peoples’ histories are substantially one yet at the same time separate and unique. This postulation of a trans-historical subject extends the narrative and is the essence of the second ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric (Charland 140). The narrative is not new, but rather a long-standing story that is deeply connected and normalized to the people.

The third and final ideological effect is that in any narrative the freedom of the protagonist is an illusion. Charland argues that people position one constitution above all others, furthering the illusion of freedom and giving people a supposed sense of agency. He notes that freedom is illusory because the narrative has already been spoken or written and that the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric act as an impetus that pushes people “to act so as to maintain the narrative consistency” (141). Charland furthers support for this effect, noting, “constitutive rhetorics, as they identify, have power because they are oriented towards action” (143). As such, all constitutions that rely on narratives are headed toward an end. Given this predetermined end, such rhetoric imposes a course of action on its constituents, constraining options and making a sense of freedom of choice an illusion. When an audience is effected by constitutive rhetoric this is the culminating point: they have developed a collective identity,

engaged in and believe a narrative that supports this identity, and now must act to affirm their identity.

Applying the theoretical framework of Black and Charland to rhetorical artifacts surrounding the Nate Parker controversy helps to explain the role that rhetoric played in the formation of distinct audiences concerned with the controversy. Speakers are not limited in addressing controversy through means of persuasive rhetoric and may call upon like-minded audiences to strengthen the community to which they belong. As the artifacts used in this study are analyzed it becomes clear that rhetors approach the controversy differently, acknowledge their biases, and engage in the ethical debate of separating the art from the artist, while at the same time calling forth those who will prove to be more than simply an audience, but rather a community oriented towards action.

Section Two: Critical Discourse Constituting Communities

In this analysis, discourse from more than two dozen authors commenting on *The Birth of a Nation* controversy was studied to discover how rhetors support or oppose laudable art created by someone of questionable moral character. From my reading, three distinct approaches, and, consequently, communities, were crafted. The three approaches can be distinguished most fundamentally by their respective ideologies, and hence, identities. They include the critics, who commit to art for art's sake; the jurists, who value truth and justice; and the integrationists, who hold fast to their intersectional identities. In what follows, I further describe these communities and their rhetorical constitution. For each group, I will detail the rhetors' arguments, summarize their overarching positions, and finally, describe the constituted community's social, political, and racial dimensions.

First community: The Critics

The first community identified was critics who engaged in the controversy through a traditional discourse of reviewing Nate Parker's film. Due to the pressing nature of the controversy surrounding the film, these critics are obligated to address it, if only in passing. Some address Parker as a person, others his character, and still others how the public controversy has shaped the film's reception.

Of the artifacts that I selected for analysis 13 came for commentators who focused on the film. In these artifacts there is little discussion of the controversy surrounding Nate Parker and rather, these artifacts focus on the artistic achievement that was attempted. Many of these artifacts came from well-known film critics such as Peter Travers, A.O. Scott, and Richard Roeper and were published in sources including *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times*. In contrast to the other identified communities, these artifacts are limited in the scope of their genre and are only reviews of the film, its artistic merits, and the on-screen achievement.

In comparison to the other commentaries studied for this thesis, the artifacts in this category focus more on technical aspects of the film that are nonetheless important to the question of separating the art from the artist. To my point, if one is to separate the two, subjectively good art is easier to distinguish than subjectively bad art. These writers tend to praise or blame the film and what the filmmaker sought to achieve.

While the critics spill relatively little ink on the larger controversy, many do consider how the audience should weigh their support for the film and for Parker. But in doing so, the critics offer limited or no personal reflections on their considerations of Parker and his alleged

heinous acts. Rather, they present the moral dilemma as something with which readers should struggle, for themselves.

Critics also hold that it is not their responsibility to persuade the reader about the cultural controversy, one way or the other. In this sense, it is not for them to pass judgement on Parker, morally, ethically, or otherwise. As film critic Peter Travers notes:

Here's a tough question: Do you judge Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* as a film, or put the man behind it on trial as a former student at Penn State in 1999 who was accused of raping an 18-year-old woman – a crime for which he was acquitted. I'll leave the playing God stuff to social media, where it thrives, and stick to what's on screen which, by any standard, is a monumental achievement.

Travers acknowledges the importance of the art while reserving his personal position and limits himself to what he is professionally tasked with doing: reviewing the film on its artistic merits.

Other critics are more forthcoming with their opinions about the obligation of America to engage *The Birth of a Nation*. Kara Brown claims that there are already enough movies focused on slavery and the experience of slaves. She complains, "I'm tired of white audiences falling all over themselves to praise a film that has the *courage* and *honesty* to tell such a *brutal* story." To Brown films such as *The Birth of a Nation* are often considered "good" or "important" by white audiences because, as she states, "it is difficult for white audiences to see black people as anything other than subservient." Brown notes that of the six films nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award that were made by black people, three were about slavery or slavery-related violence; two were about black women who are beaten emotionally and physically; and one, *The Blind Side*, is about a white woman who steps in to make an already promising young black athlete better. She solidifies her position on films that are about slavery stating that,

“Often, films about slavery receive laborious, highbrow praise for truly showing the horrors of the institution to a larger audience – the unspoken suggestion being that after watching these films, white Americans will better understand and empathize with the slave experience.”

In response to Brown’s notion that there are too many slave movies, Mychal Denzel Smith contends that it is necessary to engage in the subject because “America would rather forget.” Smith continues, countering that the canon of slave films is neither saturated nor complete,

I loved both *Fruitvale Station* and *Selma*, but I can’t bring myself to watch them again, to cry uncontrollably through the violence and the helplessness. . . the reality is that film is how we create American cultural memory, and while it’s tempting to believe that because we’ve had a few major releases recently with slavery at the center, we have some type of canon to draw from, there isn’t. No slavery narrative exists.

In these ways the critics outline the ethics of why they support or dismiss the film. These commentators ask the audience if it is ethical for them to watch films about the darkest parts of humanity and if it is ethical to support a film when the filmmaker has an undesirable past.

While ethics are messy, other issues are more easily engaged. Such issues include viewer obligation and the morality of engaging in suspect art. Stephanie Zacharek states, “Anyone who believes he or she will find true gratification in refusing to buy a ticket to *The Birth of a Nation* should probably stay away;” she continues: “this sort of punishment by refusal can’t rewrite the past, and it suggests that closing ourselves off from a movie is a bold way to engage with the world, when in fact, it’s the opposite.” This further raises the question among critics of whether engaging in a piece of art can be a moral obligation. Viewing controversial films, performances, or paintings can be a political gesture; taking a stand to not engage is equally political, speaking

to the idea that inaction is a form of action. There is also historical precedent of boycotting artists who have been alleged or known to have engaged in illegal activity. For example, Woody Allen and more recently Bill Cosby are well-known figures whose audience support waned due to their alleged actions.

Finally, critics point to the reach of the film. In the case of a historical drama such as *The Birth of a Nation*, the medium of film provides a unique lens through which history can be told. Scott notes, “I believe in the moral force of art – and in the special power of film to write history in lightening – and also in the ethical responsibilities of artists and audiences.” Film is a powerful cultural tool and in America the most celebrated cultural medium. As Smith observes “it is much easier to get 10 million people to see the same movie than it is to get 1 million people to read the same book.”

The Birth of a Nation takes its title from DW Griffith’s 1915 film by the same name, and much like its predecessor it had the potential to shift the larger cultural discourse. As Stephanie Zacharek notes, “movies, and sometimes the people that make them, work on us at strange, subterranean levels that we can’t even begin to comprehend.” Through the medium of film, we are better able to understand our culture, and potentially our history. Some of the critics contend that because of moral and ethical obligation as well as the historical implications of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film has found itself to simultaneously be, as Scott notes, “the must-see and won’t-see film of the year.” While the critics may be obligated by their profession to see it, none argue that it is the moral responsibility of their audience to do the same. Some, in fact, urge audiences to stay away to maintain the moral high ground.

Through their discourse the critics ask readers to weigh the importance of art along with their own moral and ethical judgments. In comparison to the other communities, the critics are

the least likely to state that the allegations against Parker influenced their perceptions of the film. Ideally, these commentators and the audience they hail believe they can separate the art from the artist and remain objective, judging the art on its own merits.

As the audience reads these texts, the notion of art for art's sake is normalized and becomes a part of their community discourse. Doing so places one constituted community ahead of others. As such, the rhetoric of these artifacts effectively positions each person who engages in it as a member of the collective, creating a community. Once the community is established, the agreed-upon narrative of separating the art from the artist is formed. Finally, the process produces what Charland describes as the illusion of freedom. Here, the community has already formed and in doing so the audience within the community has valued its constitution over any other community or constitution. This is appealing rhetorically since the rhetoric of their chosen community is directing them towards some sort of action, giving them a sense of purpose and agency.

Second Community: The Jurists

In contrast to the critics, jurists focus their responses on the court case as a stand-alone issue. Generically, these essays largely consist of opinion-editorials, columns penned by guest contributors, transcribed interviews, and essays that address the history of accusations against black men by white women. Of the 30 analyzed artifacts, jurists penned 7. These authors mostly remove the film from their assessments of the situation, and they also tend to deflect from their personal judgement and biases, emphasizing instead the facts of the case. Authors such as Allie Conti of Vice News, and Jeannie Suk Gersen of *The New Yorker* pen pieces whose titles directly address the case; “Would Rape Allegations Against Nate Parker Play Out Differently Today?”

and “The Public Trial of Nate Parker” respectively. In doing so, they reconstruct a court case that is more than a decade old.

As with any controversy that catches the interest of the public, once the 1999 rape charges became widely known in 2016, the microscope of the media was deployed. One of the ways the jurists approach the court case is by asking questions of forgiveness. As Gersen points out, “we are left wondering about the justice of not letting people who are accused and convicted of a crime move on, let alone those who are accused and acquitted.” This is an important distinction to make as it does not follow that every person accused of sexual assault is unquestionably guilty. It is also important that those addressing this case recognize the troublesome history that exists in the United States regarding accusations of sexual assault by white women toward black men. Gersen notes, “In 1951, a black man in Alabama was accused by a white woman of following her and walking towards her. He was convicted of a crime for having the ‘intent’ to have sex with her against her will, by force, or by putting her in fear.” In his 1953 appeal the judge noted “the fact the she is white and he is black is reasonable for the jury to consider.” This history of assumptions based on race extended to Parker’s trial. His wrestling coach, himself a black man, stated “rape allegations come up from time to time when girls feel guilty for what they did” (Conti).

In the years since the trial there has been a cultural shift on college campuses and in the realm of social justice. Some of this shift comes from, as Gersen notes, “a rising consensus that, when a woman says that she was raped, there are almost no circumstances in which it is acceptable to challenge her account.” Further, this shift has put increasing pressure on the justice system, both on college campuses and in the legal system, which still disproportionately affects black men in all aspects, including accusations, arrests, convictions, and sentencing.

Campus justice is something that the jurists address in this controversy given that it is apparent that there are forms of justice beyond the judicial system and outside of college campuses. White points out, “when it comes to sexual assault, legal vindication isn’t the same thing as moral vindication.” This form of justice can allow those who are refusing to engage in Parker’s art to believe that they can circumvent the shortcomings of the justice system by effectively punishing Parker in social and public life, where, as Gersen states “the presumption of innocence is not an aspiration.”

The final aspect of the trial addressed by the jurists are elements of the case that were not mentioned on Penn State’s campus before, after, or during the trial. The two men on trial, Parker and Jean Celestin, were both students and wrestlers for the university. Sharon Loeffler writes, “Parker and Celestin were on the wrestling team and they had the power of the Penn State Athletic Department behind them.” The complainant’s brother furthers this sentiment as well, noting that “I think by today’s legal standards, a lot has changed with regards to universities and the laws in sexual assault.” After his acquittal, Parker was not punished in any way. Celestin, who was found guilty of sexual assault, was expelled from the university. In 2002, the Women’s Law Project filed a federal Title IX lawsuit against Penn State on behalf of the complainant for allegedly failing to protect her from harassment. “The lawsuit claimed that the men hired an investigator who showed other students her photo ... Penn State settled that case for \$17,500” (Loeffler). By reviewing such details, the jurists imply that Parker escaped justice, though they make no such claim directly. Rather, laying out the facts of the case as obtained from documents, the jurists silently point to this conclusion. Loeffler reminds that “when she was 18 years old and incapacitated, Nate Parker and Jean Celestin had power over her. They abused that power, and they continue to wield that power to this day.”

Jurists are most concerned with presenting the facts of the case as it happened, judgements that were handed down, and evidence beyond the case that point to Parker's guilt or innocence. Nevertheless, in their single-minded for what happened in the past, jurists call upon an audience that cares most about timeless Truth. In weighing the fact of the case, this community searches for is truth with a "T", which is to them this is the essence of reality. Individuals engaging in these artifacts are asked to become a part of a community that is concerned with guilt and innocence, justice, and reconciliation. A clear line of argument emerges, indicating that justice went unserved. In presenting the court documents, interviews with relatives of the accuser, and information that illuminates how the victim was harassed, this narrative is expanded.

Once the audience engages in these artifacts there is little doubt that for them, freedom is an illusion. After reading the commentaries written by this group, the lens through which one views Parker is tinted with a much darker hue. Engaging in artifacts that are related to the court case also orients readers toward concern for sexual assault, challenging their faith in the justice system to hold accountable those who commit acts of sexual violence and imparting an understanding of the role that power, male privilege, and toxic masculinity play in marginalized communities.

Third Community: The Integrationists

The final community is also the most diverse. Authors of the 10 texts included in this group come from a variety of backgrounds, foci, and professions. This includes public intellectuals, activists, and academics such as activist and women's rights advocate Tanara Burke and American feminist writer Roxanne Gay. Their works are published in sources such as *The*

New York Times and *The Atlantic*. The scope of the genre of these articles is broad, ranging from transcripts from one-on-one interviews, opinion editorials, and cultural analysis.

In the same fashion, the topics considered are sundry, ranging from the author's inability to separate the art from the creator to one's ability to empathize with Nate Parker, who "is a man experiencing the height of his success while being forced to reckon with his past" (Gay). These artifacts are, at the same time, concerned with historical aspects of the film and the accuracy of the story that is portrayed. However, and most importantly, these artifacts are concerned with the issue that this community embodies: intersectionality.

In invoking this essential conflict, Tanara Burke quotes W. E. B. Dubois, who writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Burke illustrates how intersectionality plays out in her sense of who she is: "I carry that history and experience in the same body and mind that identifies as a Black radical; my social and political make-up are shaped by nationalist, Pan-African and revolutionary ideals, and I lead with my Blackness without shame or apology." This sense of many pieces of the self can be seen in the integrationists' discourse. Most notably, the conflict between racial and feminist identities pulls the integrationists two ways.

Many from the black community have asked that the story of the film, Turner's Rebellion, be given more attention in American history. As Tanara Burke notes, "Like most black folks that I know, I have been waiting years for a strong, well-written and well-acted story about Turner." Overall, stories told by black artists about black experiences and black history rarely find financial support or wide distribution. As Roxanne Gay states, "The story the movie

tells is important, and to see a movie like this getting mainstream attention is equally significant.”

But the details of Parker’s past create a problem. As Gay notes “I cannot separate the art and the artist, just as I cannot separate my blackness and my continuing desire for more representation of the black experience in film from my womanhood, my feminism, my own history of sexual violence, and my humanity.” Like many of the integrationists, Burke cannot reconcile Parker’s past with the importance of his art and concludes that she is “standing against sexual violence in all forms. I am standing against a system that finds avenues for perpetrators of sexual violence to succeed while simultaneously destroying the people that they violate.” She ends by recounting a litany of black male artists, “like R. Kelly, Mystikal, Cee-lo Green and Bill Cosby,” stating unequivocally that, like them, “I have to let Nate Parker and ‘The Birth of a Nation’ – go.”

The threatened, contested state of black masculinity in the United States makes the conflict between race and gender even more salient. As Morgan Jerkins notes, “Parker’s history of Nat Turner revolves around a particularly powerful presentation of black masculinity—one that reflects the subject of liberation and puts black women in a difficult bind.” Repeatedly, integrationists observe that there is a notion that Parker has received unfair treatment. It is this suspicion that introduces a difficult complexity, threatening to pit black men and women against one another. The defense by members of the black community of those alleged to have committed acts of violence against women is what, as Jerkins says “makes black women believe that they have to choose between their blackness and their womanhood.” Further, in the film Parker portrays a sexual assault perpetrated by white men on a black woman as the motivation for Turner’s Rebellion. As Jerkins notes:

The message is clear: subjugation of black female bodies has long been perpetrated through sexual violence. But this message becomes muddled when we consider the accusations of sexual violence against the film's creator and how the notion of personal liberation may not be equal across gender lines.

Jerkins continues, "This conundrum is tremendously difficult for black woman like myself, who want to make black men aware of our struggles but not feel as if we are tearing them down."

The refusal to pick one identity (race) over the other (gender) suggests a community of black women who are indomitable.

The strength of this community's constituted position is tied to notions that patriarchy is as much a problem within as it is outside the black community. Integrationists, for example, point to the fact that socially and culturally, reporting sexual assault has been made a harrowing experience for victims. White describes the experience of survivors having to take their battered bodies to the hospital only to be prodded in the precise areas where they were physically assaulted. This, in the hope of finding a shred of evidence that may be used in court. In addition, they must speak to the police and relive the attack and at the same time defend themselves – "their intellect, their honesty, their drinking habits, and their sexual history" – all of this coupled with the experience of repeating themselves for months of inquiry about who they are, what they've done, and why they've come forward. Overall, Deborah Douglas asks, "so does buying that ticket mean those who flock to theaters October 7 are betraying women, supporting rape culture, or otherwise committing themselves to being part of 'the problem'?"

In outlining the experience of survivors, integrationists decry the priorities of a society that places the significance of an artist and his, always his, art and history ahead of the experiences and struggle of women. Jerkins addresses this by stating that "those prioritizing the

significance of the movie over its creator's history exemplify how often black women's experiences are pushed aside, and to what extent discussions of black leadership and black liberation are filtered through a male lens, both in real life and on screen." Natalie Bullock Brown, as quoted by Douglas, notes,

I do think black women are tired ... If you look at who has been hopping up to defend black manhood of late, and really throughout history, black women have always been at the forefront. What I'm sensing from black women who are wanting to break rank is, 'I'm tired of supporting you when you don't support us.'

Jerkins argues that simply breaking ranks and rebelling is not enough, "because the pattern persists, there needs to be a [sic] upheaval of another kind within our community – one that is not rebellion, but a shift in discourse, and in how we view each other's unique struggles."

In these ways, the integrationists seek to bind the individual to the collective. As an audience is developed and called forth their commentaries ask readers to consider victims. This rhetorical strategy is particularly useful for developing the group's identity, for once an audience understands sexual assault from the victim's perspective, they are compelled to have some level of empathy. It is then difficult to ignore how they might feel if the victim were a friend, a sister, a mother or someone close to them. In this way, the discourse draws on feminist commitments to experiential knowledge and extends the community to anyone who cares about the well-being of women. Also in keeping with feminist ideology, at a fundamental level every member of this constituted community is the same: they are people with a right to autonomy over their bodies and to refuse unwanted physical and/or sexual contact. At the same time, they are all their own unique individual with their own stories. In the end, the discourse of the integrationists acknowledges the value of each person's story and creates a community that values them, too.

Finally, the audience that the integrationists call forth is, in comparison to the other communities, the most clearly asked to act. The commentators invoking this community are composed of those who would call themselves activists or have done activist work. The community that they call forth through their rhetoric is the same. This community is concerned with many relevant issues, including social justice, equality, and human rights. As the writers in many cases refuse to see Parker's film, they are orienting their audience to do the same. This exemplifies Charland's third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric (141). This effect produces the illusion of freedom for the audience, for they may believe that they are making a free choice but by engaging in these artifacts they are placing the constitutions of the authors ahead of all others. In doing so they are taking the same stand that the authors are taking, unconsciously adhering to the rhetoric of their constituted community.

Section Three: Community Comparison

In this analysis, I identified three distinct communities concerning the controversy surrounding Nate Parker and his film *The Birth of a Nation*. I separate these communities by the ways that commentators address the controversy, noting key differences between the discourse of the critics, the jurists, and the integrationists, respectively. There are, however, also key similarities that must be mentioned.

First, all three constructed communities are resolute in their respective identities and ideologies. Within each community the commentators outline their positions and articulate them accordingly. In each community that is constituted through the rhetoric of the various commentators, they do not mince their words, calling forth a specific community, ideology, and identity composed of like-minded individuals. As such, within each community the commentators who address the Nate Parker controversy ask questions of morality, ethics, and the

potential obligation of engaging in controversial art that may promote an important cultural message.

Second, even while all three communities are resolute in their alternative ideologies, they do share a common commitment to addressing social perceptions of sex and sexual assault. The integrationists are most centrally concerned with altering these perceptions. They argue that justice in the legal system went unserved and the community that the integrationists call forth is one that will withhold their support for the film based on this. As Gillian White points out, “Being cleared of wrongdoing by the judicial system – which time and time again has been proven to reliably and systematically fail the victims of sexual violence – is an achievement that comes with a fairly low bar.”

Meanwhile, the critics are most concerned with the film but do also consider the broader implications of the controversy and the court of public opinion in which Nate Parker has been tried. The critics recognize that the question of obligation can be asked in reverse: is there ever an instance in which one is morally obligated to not engage in a piece of controversial art? For these critics, it is recognized that “nowadays the principled refusal to watch a film is a response to the bad behavior, proved or alleged, of its maker” (Scott). While they ultimately relegate the question as incidental, the critics do not dispute that sexual assault plays a role in the film’s controversy. For the jurists, the question of the social perceptions of sex and sexual assault is rooted in their acknowledgement that if Parker had been similarly accused of rape today, his career would not have advanced in the same way and that his future success would now be in question as well. In sum, while they give it differential attention and consideration, all three ideologies can at least acknowledge the problem.

Third and finally, within the texts, the support that Parker and the film find depends on the constituted community. For the critics, they hail an audience that is concerned with the artistic merits of the film and address their support for the film accordingly. The jurists, on the other hand, are speaking to an audience concerned with facts pointing to guilt or innocence, allowing their audience to come to their own conclusion regarding support. As such, the jurists are mostly neutral on Parker and the film. Meanwhile, the integrations leave no such room for middle ground and constitute a strong-willed, opinionated audience. Recalling Black's call for auditors to consider the moral implications of speakers and their second personas, this point of comparison is the most paramount to understanding of how these distinct communities articulate their support or lack thereof for Parker and his film, and for our ethical assessment of each.

Keeping these similarities in mind, how might we describe the mindset of these respective communities? For the critics, they still consider art for art's sake. As such this community must segregate their lives and reality from the art that they are criticizing. As the jurists begin to think about a social controversy they must grapple with their personal positions in relation to the allegations made against the accused. They can then begin the process of examination and if warranted re-litigation. Finally, the integrationists, they consider personal representation, equality, and inclusion. Considering these things, the integrationists are mindful of the role that race, gender, sexual relations, and identity representation play in our lives, and how these topics are culturally ramified.

These similarities make a great deal of difference in the theoretical, practical, and ethical implications of my findings. In the next and final chapter, I return to each of these points. I also consider what important questions remain regarding art vs. artists, rhetorical constitution, and racial and gender justice.

Chapter 5 - Theoretical Implications and Future Research

This thesis originally asked the following question: how do rhetors justify their support for or rejection of important art when it has been created by an artist with a dark and troublesome past? Applying Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric to my selected artifacts, three distinct communities emerged. The first community, the critics, task themselves with reviewing Parker's film with the purpose of judging it on its own merits as a piece of art. The second community, the jurists, consider allegations against Parker but they are also concerned with the facts of the case as well as the historical documentation of allegations of sexual assault made by white women towards black men. The final identified community, the integrationists, lead with issues of intersectionality and stand firmly within their identity.

Based on these findings, this thesis makes three contributions. First, I reconsider Barthes's claims about the authority of the author. Second, I show that constitutive rhetoric, largely used in political discourse, can be used to productively analyze popular texts. Third, my analysis demonstrates that when identity is tied to ideology, the ability to engage other cultures can be limited. As such, these implications suggest three areas of future research: first, considering ideologically unified identities, second, how can actors restore their reputations, and finally, how can communities constituted through rhetoric communicate?

Must the Author Die?

In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes states that "once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality – that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol – this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins" (2). Thusly Barthes argues that the intention of the author is irrelevant compared to the interpretation of the reader. But in my

analysis, whether the author “dies” depends on the ideological and rhetorical motives of the commentators, as well as the rhetorical situation. This is to say that Barthes is correct in that *sometimes* the author is irrelevant; however, it is more apt to consider the context of the rhetorical situation when seeking to understand authorial authority. As Bitzer states, “I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse: how are they described? What are their characteristics? Why and how do they result in the creation of rhetoric?” (1). Based on my analysis, rhetorical critics would be wise to heed Bitzer when considering the authority of the author.

Take, for example, the critics. For them the answer is simple: the author does not matter and is therefore dead. Based on the context of their task, their job is not to consider the author but to interpret what the author has put before them. Therefore, to this community, the meaning intended by the author, Nate Parker, is irrelevant, as is his history and current moral standing. Rather, their critical interpretations matter. The same can be said for the audience they hail and construct as a like-minded community. This audience is to be concerned with what is on screen and little else. The critics therefore are mostly unconcerned with Parker’s alleged actions from 1999 in this context, and by extension, they are unconcerned with Parker.

The jurists, who focus on the court case at the heart of the controversy, take the most complex position on the author. They are cognizant of the role Parker played and cannot completely separate him from the attention that they give the court case. To them, Parker and his art are linked, just as Parker is tied to his past. This community is unable to let the artist die because removing the author, Nate Parker, from the context of the court case would allow him to escape accusations in this new, public re-litigation of the case. When we as human beings try to understand the complexities of something like blame we either internalize the feelings that come

with blame or externalize those feelings. Given that this is the natural response, it is easier for some to empathize and connect with the way Nate Parker has responded to being blamed. As Dr. Mary Lamia notes, “those who self-blame may attribute virtually any negative outcome to a lurking sense of deficiency.” She continues, “others, those who externalize blame place it on victims or other actors that are or were beyond control.” Considering Nate Parker and his guilt or innocence allows the jurists to constitute their community. In the end, while the jurists ultimately value justice as determined by their objective examination, they must consider the author and the author’s ethos to know justice.

Finally, the integrationists are the inverse of the critics. To this community there is no separating the art from the artist, nor author from text. Parker and his actions—as well as the broader history of race and gender conflict—must be considered in relation to the film. For the integrationist to attempt to remove Parker from the discussion would further marginalize sexual assault victims and survivors. Through the intersectional and multicultural composition of this community, integrationist identity is tied to ideology, just as other defining characteristics the critics and the jurists are also tied ideologically to their identity. But unlike the critics or jurists, the integrationists write from a place in which they have been asked to sacrifice themselves for a supposedly greater good. Through their rhetoric we see that the historical notions of fracturing one’s self for the betterment of their race, or for the advancement of the opposite sex, is something that they are still routinely asked to do, and something that these commentators refuse to do. As such the integrationists cannot interpret the art of Nate Parker without addressing that Nate Parker, alleged rapist, produced the work, keeping the author very much alive as they interpret the meaning of the film.

By reconsidering Barthes's ideas from *The Death of the Author* in light of my analysis, rhetorical scholars are reminded that they cannot approach artifacts from the same arbitrary position. Rather, context remains crucial in one's ability to understand the position of the author, the author's authority, and the author's work. The context from which the author creates is important, but so, too, is the interpretation of the audience. To truly understand a rhetorical act, both must be considered. In addition to the context of the author and the interpretation of the reader, understanding the world in which the author is writing is also important. Through these considerations as they pertain to Barthes's thesis, we can see the role that the author plays in the meaning created by their work through a lens that is neither shaded for or against the author but that offers a middle path through which the importance of the author, their audience, and the situation both exist in is seen.

Constitutive Rhetoric as a Lens for Popular Text

As a rhetorical genre, constitutive rhetoric simultaneously presumes and asserts a fundamental collective identity for its audience, offers a narrative that demonstrates that identity, and issues a call to act to affirm this identity ("Constitutive Rhetoric" 616). In this sense, constitutive rhetoric holds that language has the power to not only persuade, but also to create an identity within the audiences, mobilizing individuals into a collective group. Previously, Charland's constitutive rhetoric has been cited almost exclusively in studies of political discourse and religious identity. Based on my analysis, constitutive rhetoric is also a viable lens through which popular texts can be analyzed, beyond the world of institutional politics. Popular texts are crucial to our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our communicative abilities (Brummett). This study demonstrates that constitutive rhetoric is an effective framework for better understanding popular culture as a site of ideological struggle.

Potential Limits of Ideology

As Burns states, ideology has been used to “characterize a vast array of tightly or loosely organized sets of ideas, ideals, beliefs, passions, values, *weltanschauungen*, religious and political philosophies, and moral justifications” (449). This thesis argues that adhering to a specific ideology dogmatically limits our ability to move past both ideology and identity. By lessening the impact that both characteristics have on us, we as a culture can begin to move forward while also considering the ways that perceived social progress can have value or potentially be harmful to both ourselves and our respective cultures.

As the ideologies of the communities’ form using constitutive rhetoric, it becomes difficult for the members of the respective communities to separate themselves from their collective identity. This is the ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric; it limits the communities that it creates. The ideology that exists in the communities of critics, jurists, and integrationists is a defining characteristic. But through the ways that they define themselves as communities, the commentators and their audiences close themselves off to other communities, ideas, and possibilities. In doing so, their ideology limits their worldview and potentially their cultural experience as well as their ability to communicate across community and cultural lines.

The integrationists most clearly display this pattern. As Roxanne Gay discusses, it is important that a film about black experience is getting the attention that *The Birth of a Nation* received, and it is also equally important given the difficulty that black historical dramas regularly face in production. Like the other integrationists, however, it is impossible for Gay to reconcile the alleged actions of Parker and support his art, given her constituted identity. In addressing the controversy around Nate Parker, Morgan Jerkins notes that she and many black women have the desire to make black men aware of their struggle but also equally believe that it

is important to them as black women that they do not lessen black men's experiences. Many in this community are liberal feminists who want to support a black filmmaker such as Parker but, as they state, they cannot because of who they are. While they do not overtly connect their social identities to their positions on Parker, as constituted communities of critics and jurists are subject to the same ideological limitations. As such, in each of the three identified and constituted communities their specific, unique outlook and understanding of what Nate Parker and the controversy around him means are articulated.

However, the limits of ideology and, consequently, personal identity, do not begin and end with Nate Parker or the commentators of each community. Each of us is potentially limited by ideology, particularly if constituted as our social identity. Among the remaining fragments of the work of the Greek poet Archilochus there is a line which reads as follows: "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (Berlin 1). This dichotomy reflects the role that ideology plays on our identities; on one side, there are foxes, those who "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory" (Berlin 1), on the other side there are those who are characterized as hedgehogs, those who "relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel" (Berlin 1). It is the entrenched and narrow focus of the hedgehogs that the foxes vigorously fight against. To those who would be foxes, it is important to be open-minded, rather than reducing our entire existence to a worldview that is best characterized as tunnel vision. Engaging in opposing viewpoints is emotionally and intellectually taxing. In addition, we naturally are drawn to confirmatory information. We must, therefore, actively seek opposing viewpoints.

Social progress requires that actors see beyond entrenched ideologies as much as possible. To do this we must first acknowledge and understand our own intellectual precedents,

regularly engage and revise our personal assumptions, and consider that views that are in opposition to our own may lead to a denouement which will make us more compelling proponents for change. One of the first steps in addressing the potential limitations of our own ideologies is to interrogate our personal views and engage in budding answers from an assortment of sources. To consider conflicting opinions, and alter our opinions when new, relevant, truthful information is presented (Ryfe and Stalsburg 50).

The value of social change is that it is not about us as individuals but society. When we consider the impact that we have and ask if we are agents for doing good, personal identity and ideology loses some of its power. There is no more taxing mental exercise than to overcome our internal barriers that limit our ability to question our ideology and ultimately ask if we are doing the most good that we can be doing. Consistently, as a culture, we are failing at these tasks.

Parker Restoring His Image

Public figures from presidents to movie stars make bad choices. As have others before him, Parker engaged in a strategy known to political scholars as image restoration. Image restoration theory, coined by William Benoit (1995) features five modes of image restoration. The five modes outlined are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Parker, when addressing the allegations from 1999 engaged in two modes: denial and evading responsibility. First, Parker denied any wrong doing. Denial, Benoit states, can take two forms, “whether the accused denies that the offensive action actually occurred or denies that he or she performed it, either option, if accepted, should absolve the actor of culpability” (75). Parker did not deny that he engaged in intercourse with his accuser, but did deny that a sexual assault occurred and maintained that the encounter was between consenting parties. Second, Parker engages in a form of evading responsibility. The strategy of evading

responsibility features four options: scapegoating, defeasibility, excuse based on an accident, and finally, the actor may claim that the action was done with positive intent or motivation. Parker speaking in defense of himself has used defeasibility in a similar way to denial. When defeasibility is used the accused is not denying the event occurred but is stating that due to lack of information about the event one should not be blamed for it having occurred.

Strategies outlined by Benoit and deployed by Parker can be effective if the audience accepts them. In the communities that Parker addresses the acceptance is varied along identity lines. Critics, who are concerned with the film on its merits, are more willing to accept his self-defense. Jurists and their community, who are concerned with the court case, are most likely to listen to his defense from a position of neutrality while they consider the facts of the case. Finally, the integrationists, who do not separate their identity for the sake of the art, are less likely to accept Parker's attempts to defend himself publicly.

Considering my analysis regarding the constituted communities, Parker would need very different messages to reach each of these groups in his campaign to restore his image. Future analyses might therefore consider the links between ideologically unified communities and the rhetoric of self-defense. It might also consider whether some communities can be reached at all.

Can Constituted Communities Communicate?

When investigating a cultural phenomenon that involves a public figure who has been accused of heinous acts, in the interests of fairness it is important to ask if that person, convicted or acquitted, can redeem themselves or is their reputation tarnished forever? This is an important question given that there is the standard of innocent until proven guilty, but also in cases such as Nate Parker's, sometimes innocence is a byproduct of a broken system. In either case, the journey to rebuild one's reputation is difficult and potentially impossible, particularly given the

polarized reactions observed here. As the commentators from the communities of critics, jurists, and integrationist show, the context of the rhetorical situation that a person is in matters a great deal. But given entrenched positions expressed on both sides of the Parker debate, it is hard to imagine that public redemption is possible.

Potentially, and more importantly, can the communities that approach that persons' alleged actions in vastly different ways ever communicate with one another? Through their discourse, the commentators separate themselves from other communities and, as seen by Charland, placing their version of the truth above all others. The integrationist community is where this separation is the strongest. The integrationists are composed of many identities, chief among them are those whose identities are intersectional. Of these intersectional identities, some are self-proclaimed feminists (Burke, "Double Consciousness"; Gay) who note that they will not sacrifice their interests as women nor their racial identity for the sake of supporting Nate Parker. By leading with their identities, whatever those identities are, commentators are inviting conflict. The act of leading with an identity can potentially give way to human beings core tribal nature; When presented with cues that signal who is "us" and who is "them," groupthink can be a powerful tool for influencing action around a single idea.

The feminist community has long struggled over conflicting interpretations of feminism, with no single definition serving to perfectly unify or transcend differences. bell hooks notes that many in the United States still see the feminist movement as one "that aims to make women the social equals of men" (18). This is problematic as she further notes that even men are not equal in the "white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure" (18). The struggle for equality therefore crosses racial and gender lines. To make rhetorically constituted communities more open to cross-identity communication, we might pursue hooks's notion that differentiating

being a feminist and supporting feminism. As hooks states, “To emphasize that engagement with feminist struggle as political commitment we could avoid using the phrase ‘I am a feminist’ (a linguistic structure designed to refer to some personal aspect of identity and self-definition) and could state ‘I advocate for feminism’” (29). Discursively separating the political commitment from one’s identity avoids preconceived notions of what feminists are supposed to think and opens feminism to all sorts of social identities (hooks 30).

By opening our community borders to those with different positions we can move towards that for which hooks advocates: supporting feminism rather than being a feminist. Leading with the change we wish to see, rather than with our ideological identities, might allow communities to engage in a cross-community conversation about pressing topics of vested interest to all. Currently, we are limited in our abilities to communicate across cultural and community lines; this beckons us to expand our research horizons and look beyond ideological limits to expand the strategies that we use to reach out to communities that seek to achieve the same things but view the world through a different filter.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to answer the following question: how do rhetors justify their support for or rejection of important art when it has been created by an artist with a dark and troublesome past? Through application of Charland’s (1987) concept of constitutive rhetoric to a selection of cultural commentary on the Nate Parker controversy, I found that how rhetors justify their position on art versus artist, as well as authorial authority (Barthes), is contingent on the rhetorical situation (Bitzer). The identified communities of the critics, the jurists, and the integrationists address the controversy in particular, patterned ways, inviting their constituted communities to do the same. While my analysis offers new insight into the place art and artists

in society and a better understanding of authorial authority in texts, it also raises troubling questions about the ability of the ideological identified, constituted through rhetoric, to find common ground.

With this in mind, all communities must look deep within themselves to consider how their ideologies might be blinding them and thereby perpetuating racial, gender, or other injustices. As the cliché goes, evil triumphs when good people do nothing, and to do nothing in response to Nate Parker would be to remain complicit in a world where injustice is served on many and to allow it to continue makes one an accomplice. Engaging in controversies that cross cultural lines can be difficult. But in a hyper-connected world, the tangled web of our social and cultural identities is ever more important, relevant, and in some cases damning to our lives and the future.

In the end, a clear sense of self is empowering but, as argued here, potentially troublesome, too. Some limits—our fallibility, for example—cannot be surpassed. But other limits, such as our finite experiences and perspectives, can be overcome if we remain open to the experiences and perspectives of others. Through self-reflection, active engagement with those who hold different constituted positions, and a desire to promote social good, it is possible and even likely that we, too, can aid in the end of systematic inequality, moving across ideological lines and furthering our understanding of ourselves, our culture, and of other human beings.

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