Retelling the Composition-Literature Story

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Review: Retelling the Composition-Literature Story
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Review: Retelling the Composition-Literature Story

Laura Brady


It is tempting to use the titles of these two anthologies to summarize the differences between the two books: Linda S. Bergmann and Edith M. Baker’s use of “and/or” reflects their collection’s question about the place of literature in the composition classroom, whereas the title of Judith H. Anderson and Christine R. Farris’s anthology appears to move past any division, to integrate reading and writing instruction. But Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education is less about maintaining the debate than it is about considering the space between the two sides. Likewise, Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction: First-Year English, Humanities Core Courses, Seminars is less concerned with establishing a unified disciplinary approach than it is about using contradictions and tensions in productive ways. Titles, in other words, never tell the whole story.

The stories told in both books are worth our time and attention—and the collections work particularly well when read together.

It’s worth mentioning the backstory for the collections. Many readers will already be familiar with the way that Gary Tate and Erika Lindemann told one version of the story of composition and literature in their 1993 debate in College English

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Lindemann argues that there is “no place for literature” on the grounds that first-year composition introduces students to academic discourse and should have an interdisciplinary emphasis. She writes: “We need to join students in exploring [. . .] sites of composing found in the academy. Instead of asking our students to write about what it means to be educated, let us assist them to join the conversations an education enables” (316). In contrast, Tate argues that we should be preparing students for conversations “outside the academy” and that the “current focus on academic discourse” risks “turning freshman composition into the ultimate ‘service course’ for all the other disciplines in the academy” (319, 320; original emphasis). Tate concludes that we should include literature and any other texts that can provide resources to our students.

Tate and Lindemann are not, of course, the only two scholars to tell the story of the relationship between composition and literature: both collections also recognize works such as Winifred Horner’s collection Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap (1983); James Berlin’s Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges (1984), Rhetoric and Reality (1987), and Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures (1996); Sharon Crowley’s Composition in the University (1998); and several others. But the initial exchange in 1993 between Lindemann and Tate in College English and the continued “Symposium” on the subject in 1995 gave this particular story a visibility that several of the essays in the NCTE and MLA collections recognize (Farris and Anderson, Moneyhun, Rose, Berg, Kaufman, and Torda in the MLA collection; Bergmann, Heyda, Ciesielski, Baker, and Segall in the NCTE collection). Have we moved past the terms of the debate as set forth by Tate and Lindemann? Or do the same terms govern the continuing conversation? These two collections suggest that the debate has shifted to larger questions about public discourse, citizenship, disciplinarity in general, and—even more broadly—the purposes of education. Four essays serve to illustrate the expanded terms.

Anderson and Farris’s introduction to Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction provides an excellent contextual analysis by including the historical origins of the Lindemann-Tate debate, its sequels, and its stakeholders. Their analysis concludes by focusing on “what ties the subcultures of literature and composition together and what relation this tie has to the social purposes of English as an institution and as a discipline” (7). The editors move beyond the literature/composition dichotomy to emphasize the “creative and productive use of texts and contexts in writing instruction.” They integrate the tension rather than seeking to resolve it.

Clyde Moneyhun’s essay in the collection, “Literary Texts as Primers in Meaning Making,” also reviews the history and terms of the debate over the place of literature in the composition classroom. In addition to providing a summary of Lindemann’s and Tate’s points and counterpoints, he (like several other contribu-
tors) notes the ways that Sharon Crowley extends the argument against literature to question not only the goals of first-year composition but, more broadly, the goals of higher education (213). Moneyhun suggests that “If, with Lindemann and Crowley, we reject Tate’s argument based on the importance of humanist content in a liberal arts education, perhaps we can accept a more utilitarian defense of using literary texts in a composition classroom” (216) as a way to teach students to read any kind of text critically. This approach, Moneyhun explains, is a version of the “transferable skills defense,” but he emphasizes the ways that literature differs from other texts to provide better “primers” when teaching students concepts such as authorial intent, reader response, and the social construction of meaning (217).

In the NCTE collection, Dennis Ciesielski’s essay “Whole English, Whole Teachers: Maintaining the Balance between Rhetorical and Literary Expertise” focuses on the response to the Lindemann-Tate debate about the place of literature in the composition classroom. Like Moneyhun in the MLA collection, Ciesielski seems inclined to value literature as a primer of sorts—but Ciesielski specifically values literature as a guide to the “efficient social-epistemic skills relative to success both in future university writing and the world beyond the classroom” (132). Unlike Moneyhun, Ciesielski would resolve the literature/composition debate with “a whole English teacher” (130). This unified disciplinary subject, he argues, “will recognize that reading and writing are the constituent parts of one intellectual body” (132). Ciesielski favors not just consensus, but synthesis: whole English, whole teachers.

Mary T. Segall, another contributor to the NCTE collection, remains comfortable with a multifaceted and ongoing debate. Her essay adds “The Missing Voice in the Debate: What Students Say.” Segall reviews the continuation of the Tate-Lindemann debate found in the 1995 College English “Symposium: Literature in the Composition Classroom” (Steinberg et al.). While valuing the perspectives of the symposium, Segall notes that student voices are missing. Her essay summarizes 501 student responses to a questionnaire that she received. Those responses show support for both sides of the argument and reflect the complexity of both reading and writing. Segall concludes: “Just as we would be hard pressed to define a generic discourse or composition classroom, our students defy singular description. [. . .] Perhaps the most beneficial effect of this student questionnaire, however, is an invitation to listen more closely to what our students have to say about their own academic welfare” (202).

This sampling of responses to and variations on the Lindemann-Tate debate illustrates the range of perspectives to be found in both collections. As with the Lindemann-Tate debate, the most interesting aspect of these current collections is not the positive or negative value assigned to imaginative literature; it’s not even the varied definitions of what counts as “literature” or “discourse” or “discipline.” Instead, the collections address compelling curricular and ideological questions and
organize their responses in distinct ways. *Composition and/or Literature* organizes its essays around three (overlapping) contexts: institution, department, and classroom. *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* organizes its essays around three (overlapping) patterns of classroom practice: literature as central focus; literature as heuristic; literature as means of engaging with the larger culture. Like Lindemann and Tate, both collections question the purpose of writing instruction. Does first-year composition prepare students for academic writing and (eventually) disciplinary writing—or does it prepare them to be citizens of the university community and (eventually) the world? As the debate continues fifteen years later, however, these two collections demonstrate the value of re-casting the question more broadly: What is the purpose of higher education?

**Civic Education and Deliberative Action**

The larger question about the purpose of higher education is implied in the subtitle of the NCTE collection: *Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education*. As Bergmann explains in the introduction, “Many of the chapters [. . .] have been provoked by Bill Reading’s call in *The University in Ruins* to rethink our assumptions about the shape and purpose of the university” (9). Readings’s book provides an interesting framing context. Readings traces the history of the university and its functions, noting a shift away from a model that preserved a national culture and identity and toward a transnational corporate model that is largely market-driven. By responding to Reading’s challenge to examine the purpose of higher education, the NCTE collection attempts to examine the political and ideological values that inform classroom practices. This is an ambitious goal and one that the collection does not quite achieve. Although the editors invoke Reading’s arguments in each of their own essays (Bergmann, “Introduction: ‘What Do You Folks Teach over There, Anyway?’”; Baker, “Composing English 102: Reframing Students’ Lives through Literature”), only one other contributor (Wiederhold) explicitly engages with Reading’s arguments or with the role of the rhetor as a citizen-subject engaged in deliberative social action.

In “Rhetoric, Literature, and the ‘Ruined’ University,” Eve Wiederhold foregrounds the potential role that rhetoric may play in promoting changes in education that might rebuild the “university in ruins” that Reading describes. She cites Reading’s own advocacy of the teacher as rhetor: “A rhetorical approach [. . .] provides a forum in which to think through how to participate in culture” (78). Wiederhold is quick to note the parallels between Reading’s argument and James Berlin’s work:

Long before *The University in Ruins* was published, Berlin analyzed how the material conditions that led to the formation of English departments were designed to serve
the economic and social needs of those in power, and his work explored how power is reproduced through institutional policies. [. . .] Berlin advocated a rhetorical pedagogy that envisioned change engendered by redefining literacy as social action; he believed that students need to be equipped with rhetorical strategies that will allow them to critically reflect upon and participate in public discourse arenas. (78–79)

Expanding on Berlin (and Readings), Wiederhold challenges us to acknowledge and address the contexts in which we teach, including structures of subordination. She asks us to “address what rhetoric has always addressed: What is effective, to whom, and under what circumstances?” (87). Finally, she encourages us to remain hopeful about the possibility of resistance and change through civic education and deliberative action.

Civic education and deliberative action emerge as the theme of Dominic DelliCarpini’s essay, “Composition, Literary Studies, and the End(s) of Civic Education,” even though he does not explicitly invoke Readings. DelliCarpini focuses on the goal of preparing students to intervene in civic affairs. He wants more than service learning: he calls for engagement in civic conversations (18). Within this context of deliberative social action, he traces the rhetorical tradition’s use of literature. He recognizes the many ways that literature might be used to engage students in current issues and debates, but cautions that literature cannot be privileged over other texts (28). DelliCarpini advocates students’ and teachers’ reading and responding to culture through a wide range of texts and contexts. In many ways, he shares Gary Tate’s vision that “excludes no texts” (321, original emphasis). This is much the same point that Edith M. Baker, one of the editors of the NCTE collection, makes in her own contribution to the volume. For Baker, it’s also a matter of broadening the definition of literature to include “multiple forms and a variety of texts”; in this way, she asserts, teachers “can provide the arena for students to compose themselves—and to challenge the larger world” (187). In contrast to Tate, both DelliCarpini and Baker develop their arguments with specific reference to rhetorical and institutional contexts and with the specific goal of increasing students’ critical awareness and civic participation. One can imagine both Baker and DelliCarpini turning to the essay by Katherine Fischer, Donna Reiss, and Art Young, “Computer-Mediated Communication and the Confluence of Composition and Literature,” for practical ideas on how technology might help students draw on multiple genres, disciplines, and contexts to reach audiences well beyond the university.

If DelliCarpini and Baker focus on the ends of civic education, three other essays might be said to focus on the ends of civility in education. Essays by Timothy J. Doherty, Edward A. Kearns, and Barry M. Maid all focus, to varying degrees, on divisions between composition and literature faculty and their consequences.

Kearns pessimistically diagnoses “professional schizophrenia” unless we reunite not only literature and composition but also emotion and intellect. Doherty’s tale of
an institutional split between a writing program and an English program notes the toll it took on collegiality and trust. He ends on a note of guarded optimism by focusing on “the conversation we should have had” (44). Doherty calls for new conversations “about the structures that serve all stakeholders in literacy education and imagine several ends of literate life” (50)—surely not the best phrase to capture his hopes for innovation and collaboration across disciplines. Maid takes up Doherty’s question of institutional structures, but he concludes that division is inevitable. Maid’s analysis of the relationship between composition and literature has “everything to do with issues of privilege, power, and economics” (93). He illustrates his points by outlining the “aristocratic hierarchy” in college English departments, in which first-year composition, taught by “cheap labor such as TAs” allows the English faculty to keep teaching literature (94–95, 96). Maid suggests that independent writing programs provide one “obvious answer” to the division between composition and literature. Even when writing faculty continue to be a part of English departments, Maid argues that they “need to take their discipline and their destiny into their own hands” (105, 107). Because Maid recognizes important economic realities about the ways in which higher education depends increasingly on a labor force made up of graduate students and adjuncts, I wish Maid had taken his points a bit farther to suggest how independent writing programs can resist and change the power dynamics rather than replicating economic conditions in a new location. I am grateful to Maid for raising economic and ideological points, and I certainly don’t expect him to answer one of the most pressing—and difficult—questions confronting everyone in higher education, but I do find myself wondering how independent writing programs are better positioned to achieve the large-scale organization that is needed for collective change. This is, however, a topic worthy of its own book-length debate.

This wish for something more—not just in one essay but in the collection overall—leads me to John Heyda’s essay, “Along the DMZ between Composition and Literature.” His title metaphor captures the hostilities between composition and literature as they get played out in first-year composition. The essay traces the resistance to curricular revisions that seek to question the goals of first-year composition, focus on active and interactive processes of reading and writing, and address negativity and passivity. As a result of such a curricular revision process, Heyda believes that composition and literature faculty could join forces productively, but he questions whether either side can “step away from entrenched pedagogies long enough to collaborate” (122). In some ways, Heyda’s critique and metaphor hold true of this collection: the boundaries between literature and composition remain largely intact, with each side content “with the maintenance of token ‘forces’ in defense of a status quo in which neither side can claim much satisfaction” (111).
In the afterword to *Composition and/or Literature*, Patricia Harkin advocates moving away from disciplinary frameworks. She argues that “disciplines see only what they recognize no matter where they look” but that the profession of English studies “first looks at the ways in which discourse works in the world and then adapts disciplinary procedures to describe, explain, analyze and (sometimes) change them”; as a result, Harkin suggests that “when we think about our practice, notions about what the discipline requires are perhaps less useful than contingent local judgments about what disciplinary knowledge would most help us to promote the literate behavior the situation seems to call for” (208). Contingent local judgments are, perhaps, the best feature of this collection, which offers several practical examples of committed teachers who question their own teaching goals, challenge traditions, and suggest new applications. As much as I value the individual insights in *Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education*, I wish that the collection addressed more fully the question implied in the subtitle.

**Textuality and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric**

*Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* moves toward the social-epistemic rhetoric that James Berlin called for in *Rhétorics, Poétiques, and Cultures* (1996). Berlin defines social-epistemic rhetoric as “the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (77). His approach recognizes that our work is always and inevitably shaped by ideology—by those values and practices that we come to take for granted and that reproduce existing power dynamics. For Berlin, the individual subject need not—should not—be passive. The individual (a teacher, for example, or a student) is both shaped by ideology and able to be an agent for change (78). To prepare students “to be better participants in democratic economic, political, and cultural arrangements,” Berlin asks us to make “instruction in reading and writing, literacy in its most expansive formulation [. . .] our central concern,” including “textuality in all its manifestations”(176). This is what Anderson and Farris accomplish. By integrating literature and writing instruction through the concept of textuality, this collection examines the specific conditions and circumstances for the production, distribution, exchange, and reception of literacy and ideology.

In the essay “Writing on the Boundaries: A Cultural Studies Approach to Literature and Writing Instruction,” Lori Robison and Eric A. Wolfe draw an explicit connection to James Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric—and also to Stephen Greenblatt’s conception of culture, “The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform” (Greenblatt 225). More so, perhaps, than some of the other es-
says in this collection, these authors emphasize the political and social implications of reading and writing as active processes and ask writers to “be aware of [. . .] how their own cultural positions contribute to that context” (196–97). It would be interesting to put this essay in conversation with Wiederhold and DelliCarpini’s essays in the NCTE collection: all focus on the ways that a rhetorical approach empowers agency, increases civic participation, and makes change possible.

In “Reading Detectives: Teaching Analysis and Argument in First-Year Writing,” John Cyril Barton, Douglas Higbee, and Andre Hulet recognize that any approach to teaching is going to be informed by a political standpoint. They choose to focus on considerations of genre conventions for the ways that they reproduce or typify actions, reactions, and contexts using examples drawn from the detective fiction genre. Detective fiction, they argue, “thematizes the essential elements of first-year composition, such as analysis, argument, and thesis” while also providing a diverse range of settings and factors that help students see that “arguments and analyses are always produced and received in social contexts” (174). A critical reading of detective fiction allows students to “conceive of the ideological implications of a genre—for instance, when a convention (such as a white, male detective) becomes a liability rather than an asset” (183). Once students understand discursive patterns and their implications, it becomes easier for them to analyze, interpret, reproduce, resist, or otherwise engage with other conventions, including the genre of academic writing, and thus begin to understand how politics and critical thinking are connected.

Although the emphasis on political implications and agency may vary among the essays, most of the contributors share a sustained interest in teaching reading and writing together as critical, rhetorical processes. Like Clyde Moneyhun (discussed earlier), Faye Halpern finds literature particularly useful for teaching rhetorical moves such as argument, because literary texts lend themselves well to multiple readings and interpretations. She expects students to learn to move beyond a close observation of literary nuance and complexity. “The complexity thesis,” she explains, “enables the writer to focus on the detail rather than the debate. The details take over and cannot be summed up into a single, arguable position” (137–38). Halpern pushes for argument—for a sense of the big picture, as well as the small details. Broadening the concept of literature and expanding literacy strategies are goals that Rona Kaufman and Lee Torda share. They describe themselves as committed to critical literacy, to “helping students see how language is a way of knowing the world and being known by the world and how using language can lead to change” (258). Allison Berg’s contribution, “Integrating African American Literature and Writing at a College of Public Affairs,” takes up the question of how literature matters outside of English studies by “emphasizing the rhetorical and political contexts of African American literature in ways that speak to public affairs majors” (246).
questions that Berg poses—questions similar to those that most of the essays in the MLA volume try to address—might be productively applied to all first-year writing courses that integrate literature:

Why read literature? What is the relationship between author and audience? How does literature reflect and help to shape social, cultural, and political aspects of public life? How does membership in a community of readers and writers influence one’s understanding of a particular text? (246)

These essays examine a couple more questions: What counts as literature—and who gets to say? What attitudes, values, or behaviors does our teaching implicitly or explicitly reproduce? The essays by Halpern, Kaufman and Torda, and Berg might be put into conversation with essays by Ciesielski and Baker in the NCTE collection.

Communicative contexts, conventions, and questions are also an important aspect of the humanities core course at the University of California, Irvine, that Michael P. Clark and Elizabeth Losh describe. The curricular centrality of first-year English courses, Clark and Losh contend, will increasingly depend on the abilities of such courses to “address social, institutional, and academic functions associated with the role of these courses in the students’ general education and with the institutional function of these courses in the university as a whole” (33). To accomplish this difficult goal, they value the “conceptual depth” of literary study for the way in which it allows teachers and students to examine disciplinary categories and social practices for producing and reproducing knowledge. The relation of “disciplinary topoi” to “other kinds of knowledge, media, and technologies of communication” provides the focus for course content, objectives, and assignments. The course that these authors describe seeks to establish “intellectual and pedagogical coherence” in an interdisciplinary, first-year, required course (59, 32). The interdisciplinary nature of the humanities core offers an additional benefit: “it can open up opportunities for collaboration among the faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral instructors that can extend beyond the classroom to link scholarly research to a larger public sphere” (33). Collaboration and community emerge as another pattern in Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction—especially in essays that describe humanities-based courses taught by faculty representing several disciplines.

COLLABORATION, COMMUNITY, AND A FE W COMPLICATIONS

In “Literature as Language in First-Year Composition,” Jeanne Marie Rose talks about her position as a “maverick adjunct” who resisted programmatic goals and policies. Now that she supervises a program that strives for consistency across sections (based on a rhetorical approach to texts), she hopes to achieve consensus among
a large faculty, even as she recognizes the influence of “deeply entrenched [. . .] training and socialization” that can create resistance (243). Helen M. Whall’s essay, “Crawling before Writing” provides one sort of answer to Rose’s question of how to build community, by describing the summer workshops at Holy Cross College—where seasoned faculty teach the CRAWL (Critical Reading and Writing: Literature) curriculum to new faculty. By teaching each other, the faculty renew each other and strengthen department morale (118, 133).

Helen Emmitt, Daniel Manheim, Mark Rasmussen, Milton Reigelman, Maryanne Ward, and Philip White also value the collegiality and community shared by the teachers of a humanities sequence at their school—“a selective liberal arts college in Danville, Kentucky” (99), where all writing instruction is now integrated into subject work, on the logic that freestanding composition courses create an artificial writing situation. Instead, the interdisciplinary humanities sequence has become a site to “build writing skills” and to give students “a feel for what is expected of them in college writing and how these expectations differ from those in high school” (112). According to the authors, the humanities sequence also fulfills a certain cultural void: “What many of Centre’s students lack is the experience of an unforced, unpretentious engagement with the humanities as a natural part of their lives, the sort of experience that is much more readily available to students from big cities in other parts of the world” (103). I have to take issue with the assumptions here. What is unforced about a required course? How is a structured curriculum “natural”? And what assumptions about cultures and cities (and class) are the authors making when they refer to the “sort of experience [. . .] readily available to students from big cities”? This essay does not have the same level of critical self-awareness that characterizes most of the other essays in the collection.

In “The First-Year Humanities Program at Earlham College,” Gordon W. Thompson provides one more take on the humanities core. He describes how, until recently, his small Quaker college in Richmond, Indiana, required two first-year courses: Humanities A and Humanities B. The two courses shared a common reading list drawn from a range of disciplines and were taught by full-time faculty members from English, history, and classics departments. Students learned to summarize, analyze, and interpret, but also how to study texts in their historical and social contexts and how to reflect on a text’s implications for their lives (82, 84). The common curriculum was recently replaced in favor of separate seminars, with separate topics, taught by individual instructors—a change that Thompson finds “inevitable and right,” even as he mourns the loss of shared mission and cross-college collaboration for faculty, as well as the loss of the common first-year experience for students (96–97). The course that Tamara Goeglein describes in another chapter in the collection sounds similar to the new Earlham curriculum: students read “historical texts against literary texts against philosophical texts” (151). The similarities are not surprising;
Goeglein recognizes that “the current shape of my first-year seminar resembles in some measure the required humanities courses that I took at Earlham College in 1980” (151). Unintentionally, these essays illustrate the ways in which structures of education reproduce cultural knowledge and values.

The concluding essay in *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* reframes questions of textuality and community in a way that demonstrates the value of both large and small narratives. Anderson and Farris’s integrated view reminds us to pay attention to “whose capital is tied to pedagogy and first-year English.” Their vision extends beyond their local and specific goals for their students to “a future professorate that views the teaching of both [composition and literature] as legitimate and satisfying intellectual work” (285). Their concluding chapter outlines the history and circumstances that enabled their collaboration and describes the specific model for literature and writing instruction that is in place at Indiana University. That model includes undergraduate curriculum, graduate coursework, and faculty collaborations.

**Retelling the Composition-Literature Story**

From the outset, *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* chooses to take a “bottom-up” approach to see how the integration of literature and writing instruction, “debated on the national scene to the point of theoretical paralysis, […] has been achieved in practice in many courses at diverse colleges and universities.” As the editors go on to explain, “a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, thoughtful praxis rather than political imperative, at present has a better chance as bridging this supposed divide” (14–15). This collection’s emphasis on “thoughtful praxis” results in a series of essays that all reflect on what does (or does not) work in composition classrooms, examines the conditions and contexts that shape those choices, and considers the implications of specific teaching practices. In this way, *Integrating Literature and Writing Instruction* continues the model of contingent local practices used in *Composition and/or Literature*. The contributors acknowledge composition/literature tensions as a means of making students self-reflective about contradictions in their own reading and writing processes; they also remain self-reflective about how their classroom approaches differ depending on local contexts and goals. Because the MLA volume assumes a more integrated approach than the *Composition and/or Literature* collection (which includes essays that represent both sides of the debate), the essays in the Anderson and Farris collection—despite the wide differences in classroom approaches—cohere more tightly. That is, they collectively develop common concepts of textuality and intertextuality, community and collaboration—even as they explore differences and illustrate the ways in which each example is a product of its own unique conditions. It’s valuable to read the two collections together for the
ways in which they invite readers to build connections and extend conversations about the relationship between composition and literature

I said at the outset that the 1993 Lindemann-Tate debate provided a backstory to these collections, even while noting that other scholars have told and retold the story of composition and literature. These new collections add details to the story in terms of representing current, local practices; demonstrating the ways that concepts of literature and literacy have expanded in the past decade or so; and in describing reading and writing as integrated rhetorical processes. Both collections demonstrate that we have made some progress in addressing the questions that Berlin—and Crowley and Readings and Greenblatt—posed in the mid-1990s.

Works Cited


