

**FRAGMENTED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FEMININE TEXT: AN  
EXPRESSIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

by  
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*To my grandmother, Lillian; I went for it with gusto!*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study advances communication scholarship on fragments (McGee, 1990), while demonstrating how to create and use an innovative approach to scholarship in this field. The research goal was two-part. First, to better understand the everyday critic's role in co-creating discourse. This master's project prompted eight collaborators to create an artifact in response or interpretation to a focal work, the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Ethnographic and autoethnographic methods were used to observe the discourse that emerged from this prompt. Observations challenge the separation between text and context, revealing the significant impact that vernacular fragments have on the rhetorical life of a work. The second research goal was to create an arts-based approach that would be most appropriate to reach this better understanding. This work can be used as an exemplar of arts-based research approaches applied to achieve theoretical understandings in communications scholarship.



## FRAGMENTED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FEMININE TEXT: AN EXPRESSIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

“What exactly is your project about?” “What is this project for?” “What exactly are you studying?” I asked seven women to become collaborators in my graduate final project without a clear idea of what this project would really mean. My answer for them was slightly different each time I explained what it was. There is not one angle from which to view this project, and so filtering the “point” of this project through various lenses, my answer refracts into various streams. The multi-faceted goal of this project is to:

- 1) Highlight the ways that we underestimate the everyday critic’s participatory and co-creative role in discourse, and particularly artistic discourse, once it has been offered for public consumption. I do this by:
  - a. Curating a discourse community around a work.
  - b. Observing the influence that a group has on the rhetorical life of a work,
- 2) Demonstrate how to use arts-based research approaches to explore rhetorical questions in a communications paradigm.

I have been very interested in advocating for and using alternative forms of knowledge in my graduate work. I do that here by using an arts-based approach to explore communication acts. I have looked to Patricia Leavy’s (2017) *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* as my basis for understanding a more-than qualitative approach to research. The Handbook starts with an overview of The Field, continues with exemplary studies in various media, and ends with arts-based approaches in various disciplines and additional considerations (Leavy, 2017). A foundational voice in the field, and one who influences my view on “artistic knowledge” is Shaun McNiff. McNiff makes an argument for the philosophy of arts-based research, grounding “trustworthy studies” in their ability “to be useful, influential, and convincing” (McNiff, 2017, p.33). McNiff shatters the assumed hierarchy that is privileged to empirical-based knowledge, writing that “it is contrary to the process of artistic inquiry to contain it within standardized formats and procedures” (2017, p.24). Once I was exposed to a new way of approaching knowledge, I was able to embrace new, nontraditional exemplars of scholarship and knowledge creation.

One artist who influences my idea of arts-based research is Sophie Calle. The way that her oeuvre disrupts space, examines texts, and exposes intimate interpretations of communication has

been inspiration for this research. Her 2007 work, *Take Care of Yourself* was composed of more than 100 separate pieces: all different interpretations of a break-up email, created by women of various professions (Calle, Frans Paviljoen, Desplechin, Rambach, & Rambach). In an interview with *The Guardian* she says that the purpose of the project was “to develop an investigation through various women's professional vocabulary” (Calle as cited in Chrisafis, 2007). The idea of dissecting an artifact, and in this case a communication act, was really appealing, and especially appealing to do so by mobilizing a feminine voice. These ideas are what sparked this project.

At the time that I was brainstorming this project, I read the 1990 special edition of the *Western Journal of Communication*, paying particular attention to McGee’s (1990) idea of fragments. I was, at that time, also looking at Clair’s (2011) method of critical autoethnography and reading an introductory book to performance theory. Reading these pieces in conjunction and mulling over my connection to Calle’s work, I saw a critical autoethnographic interpretation and creative use of fragments in *Take Care of Yourself* and wanted to create a similar project. So, I decided to recreate Calle’s method to examine how to manufacture a micro-level discourse community by asking a group of women to create fragments around a central object.

From a discipline standpoint, I have chosen to contribute to academic conversations in two ways. First, I make a contribution to our understanding of rhetorical scholarship about how fragments influence discourse. I have chosen to focus on how the everyday critic participates in co-creating discourse through skilled knowledge, use, and creation of fragments and the effect that has on a work. Second, I make this theoretical argument through an innovative methodological approach. In this project, I demonstrate how to create and examine a text using an arts-based method.

### **Building a Text Through Arts-Based Research**

One of the ways that this project contributes to current understanding of communications scholarship is to give an example of how to build a text using arts-based methodology. I will be specific when I use words like “text,” “work,” and “discourse;” some distinctions that I make in this project correspond with those already being used. Borrowing from Barthes’s terms in “From Work to Text,” Solomon (1993) makes a similar comment as McGee: scholars understand a distinction between a “work” and a “text.” The former is a singular, complete item; the latter is a “methodological field” (Barthes, 2009). In the case of this study, the *text* is an arts-based

“methodological field,” that I will construct from the story the “Yellow Wallpaper” and also conglomerate discourse that my collaborators and I co-create around this work. Discourse “constructs, defines, and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while excluding other forms of reasoning as unintelligible” (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 102). When I say “discourse,” in the context of this project, I’m including: the focal work itself, the artifacts we made, and the conversations we had together. In the case of this study, the *work* is the story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” I call it the “focal work” in this paper to be clear that I am referring to “The Yellow Wallpaper” in particular and also to distinguish it as the object that I chose to centralize. The text, or, “methodological field” that I have constructed centers the everyday critic through an arts-based approach. By arts-based, I don’t mean that I have required my collaborators to create visual art, but that I approach my textual analysis not *of* but *with* the everyday critic in an artful way; by gathering artifacts from them and having conversations with them, co-creating an analysis together.

To start my understanding of how to build a text, I look to McGee. McGee has argued that “text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of the discourse” (1990, p. 288). When we think about producers of a discourse, it is often academic rhetoricians and other professional critics who get credit for serious textual analysis and discourse production. For example, Leff and Sachs (1990) argue for a more nuanced textual analysis to produce more accurate and vivid close readings of a single text. The problem with the close readings that Leff and Sachs advocate for is that this methodology is only accurate and vivid according to the point of view of rhetoricians like Leff and Sachs; it omits any voices and understandings aren’t sanctioned as professional. Separating and elevating professional from general critics, formal from informal discourses, hinders our understanding of a text. Herbig (2015, p.48) refers to the difference between “vernacular” and “official” discourses, writing that “in certain cases [vernacular discourses] can go beyond what official discourse producers are presenting.”

In order to better understand the ways that vernacular discourses influence a text, I have chosen to work with the “everyday critic.” We underestimate how an audience contributes to the life of a work after it is in public circulation, and the implications that has for understanding works. By not fully understanding the role of the everyday critic, rhetoricians can misunderstand a text, too often considering it separate from context, and overestimate their role and the role of other professional critics in understanding a work.

## The Everyday Critic

McGee describes the difference between professional and everyday critics: “Professional criticism promotes identification with the critic, suggesting critics give voice to the communal judgements of salience, attitude, and belief” (1990, p. 282). The “everyday critics” create meaning around the text through consequential dialog and discourses about it (McGee, 1990). It is time to lessen the degree of separation between the professional critic and the everyday critic when we are working with texts. In order to have a more complete understanding of a text, we need to embrace the everyday critic’s role to make influential fragments. Professional critics don’t need to “give voice,” but instead, the everyday critic’s voice can speak for itself.

Understanding a text as a conglomerate of discourses that include multiple sources, contexts, and influences that exist before and beyond the work demonstrates the fragmented nature of discourse. Herbig (2015) argues that though discourses are fragmented, that does not mean that they are disconnected. In order to demonstrate the duality -- both interconnected and disconnected nature of fragments, he focuses on content and circulation (Herbig, 2015). I will continue with this assumption that fragments can show points of interconnection, but instead of talking about the “what” of fragments, focusing on the “who” of fragments. Who can make fragments? And what does that mean for a discourse?

When I put out the call for collaboration, the boundaries I presented were that collaborators did not have to be artists (though they could be); they must self-identify as female, femme, or femme-ish; they must be 18-40 years old, and they must be willing to collaborate with me. In addition to these limitations, I have underlying “soft assumptions” that make my collaborators a culturally specific demographic. Not only are they all young women, they have specific characteristics that are common to my friend and acquaintance group; these characteristics include: being highly educated, having an interest in literature and the arts, being more liberal than conservative, being feminist, having an interest in social justice. These characteristics align with the ethos of the focal text that I had given them. This choice was intentional in order to narrow down the everyday critic to a specific and intended audience.

Thinking about the ways that texts are studied along the lines of audience reception, Hall’s (2001) “Encoding/Decoding” was pivotal to conversations about audience reception. Hall (2001) writes three ways that an audience can receive a text: first, the “dominant -hegemonic;” second, the “negotiated code;” and third, the “oppositional code.” In the latter two, the audience is not just

a receptacle for a meaning constructed by the producer of a work, but they are actually active in the way that they are receiving and even critiquing what they consume. And, the interpretations that various audiences come up with are just as “right” as the dominant interpretation. Hall (2001) argues that when an audience has “equivalence” with a text, or, the audience demographic is similar to the author demographic, the intended meaning is likely to be similar to the received meaning. This is the case for the collaborators that I chose to work with: they have a high equivalence with the text.

McGee (1990) expands on Hall’s ideas about audience and argues that not only can (and do) audiences critically understand the media they consume, but they have an active part in the reproduction of discourses. McGee (1990) has a similar view as Hall (2001) when he takes the position that an author does not determine the absolute meaning of a work, nor does a work hold inherent meaning. I chose to collaborate with a group who would have a high equivalence because in theory, their “received meaning” would correspond with an “intended meaning;” in this way, an equivalent audience would “get” a work, and have the same interpretive authority over a work as the author or a professional critic. But I have found that there is not one, fixed meaning that can be uncovered in a work. Meaning is constantly being co-created between an audience and a work. Context includes the discourses that everyday critics create, and this is inextricable from the life of a text. We can broaden our concepts of context by including the everyday critic as an active discourse producer.

## **Method**

This project demonstrates how to use an arts-based research methodology to “make discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence,” in order to create a discourse community around a focal work (McGee, 1990, p. 279). I start my approach by asking a group of collaborators to create an artifact in response to the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1998). Before inviting collaborators to participate, I began this study myself to set a systematic precedent for my collaborators. I created a fragment from my interpretation of and interaction with the story. For my artifact, I designed and modified an upcycled coat (see Figure 1). During the process of making it, I started documenting my process with photographs and journaling. I also documented my reflections after making the artifact by journaling and presented the artifact at a conference where I spoke publicly about my process and my interpretation.



Figure 1. The artifact that I made for this project.

After securing approval from Purdue University Fort Wayne's Institutional Review Board, I started a snowball method of recruitment for collaborators. I sent a call for collaboration on my personal social media and contacted people I knew face-to face. I had several friends who shared my online post to their social media. From this outreach, eight women contacted me to collaborate and seven followed through to completion with the project. In total, I had seven collaborators. Five of my collaborators were local, and two were out-of-state. I talked to each collaborator online or via text and asked each one to create a response or an interpretation to the short story. The guidelines for the artifact were very vague, but I let them know that we could talk if they wanted more specific information. Only one collaborator wanted to further brainstorm her ideas.

I made the initial call for collaboration via my personal social media pages (Instagram and Facebook; see Figure. 2). All respondents made initial contact with me the same day, or shortly

after, and agreed to participate. After agreeing to participate, I asked them to complete their artifacts within two weeks. I checked in with each collaborator about one week after our initial conversation to get a read on their progress and arrange times, dates, and locations to collect their artifact and have a conversation about their work. I then met with five of my collaborators face-to-face in local coffee shops to collect their artifacts and discuss the project. The two collaborators who lived out-of-state had phone conversations with me and sent their artifacts digitally. This process took place from the call for collaboration on January 30<sup>th</sup> 2019 to the last interview on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

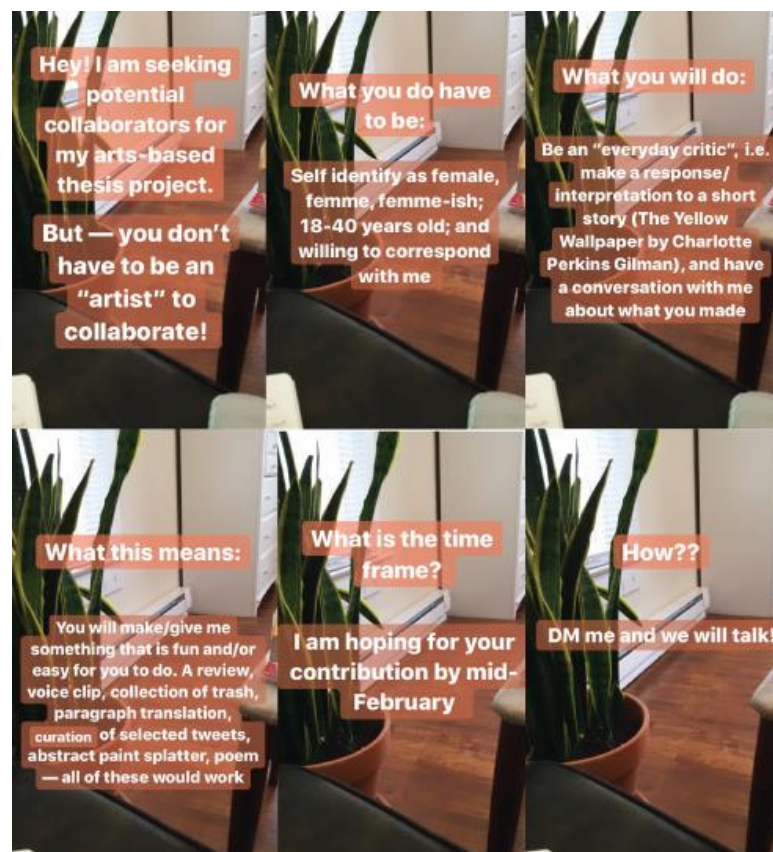


Figure 2. Screenshot images of the call for collaboration that I posted on my personal Instagram and Facebook pages. Also shared by friends to other personal social media accounts.

<b>Name of Collaborator</b>	<b>Artifact</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Location of Interview</b>
Brittany Bertlesen	Collage, Magazines (Figure 3)	February 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Phone Interview
Joycelyn Ghansah	Digital Collage (Figure 4)	February 14 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Phone Interview
Tobi Newson	Digital Collage (Figure 5)	February 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Café
Anonymous	Annotated Notes (Figure 6)	February 16 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Café
Sarah Thompson	Painting with Ripped Elements (Figure 7)	February 14 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Café
Danielle Sauder	Painting on Wood Panel (Not Pictured)	February 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Café
Jordan Manders	Multimedia Painting on Canvas (Not Pictured)	February 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2019	Café

Table 1. A list of all collaborators, a description of the artifacts they made, the date they were interviewed, and the location of the interview.

## **AutoEthnography**

Building a text that centers an everyday critic means that I have gathered an array of fragments from my collaborators: the artifacts they made for me, the conversations we had together, and the focal work. I have taken examples from these fragments and demonstrated how a discourse is created from and interpreted in everyday voices.

I have seen three arguments from my collaborators that I will focus on:

- 1) A work is not singular and fixed
- 2) Meaning is not inherent to a work
- 3) Meaning is not singular and fixed

I will describe each of these arguments and corresponding examples from my collaborators that provide a convincing way to interact with a text and its meaning.



The first argument is that a work is not singular and fixed. The work, “The Yellow Wallpaper” does not exist in one, unchanging, monolithic form. The ways that context can influence a work and change the form of a text was demonstrated as soon as I asked my collaborators to consider it for this project. My collaborators demonstrated context can influence and even become enmeshed with how we understand a work when they situated themselves to the story itself. When I explained the project, I simply prompted collaborators to respond to the story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” I did not give them a copy the story. There were multiple understandings of what the work itself was:

“I have never heard of it before.. I just listened to it on Audible.. I couldn’t find a copy to read on the internet... Have someone else read it to you...I love audiobooks because they just are so good at like, conjuring an image, you know?”

“I’m shocked I’ve never heard of this [story]”

“I didn’t know there was a summary... I could have just looked up a summary”

One collaborator, Danielle, read the story in high school, at a time when she was struggling with suicidal ideation and trauma in her home life. She said “I have not reread it since... until just now because of how close my reaction was to it. And I remembered it really vividly, even though it’s been 20 years since I read it” (D. Sauder, personal communication, February 15, 2020). She recalled deep memories of literature she was also assigned to read at the same time, and personal events that had triggered such vivid reactions to the story.

Another collaborator, Brittany, had been assigned to read the story at various times through her schooling. “I always remembered it, like being very engaged by it, and really enjoying it and liking it... but then when I read it this time, you know, for this project, I realized that... I forgot about these little nuances... there were a lot of like really small things that I remembered. But I realized that big picture stuff, I totally, totally forgot” (B. Bertelsen, personal communication, February 15, 2020).

The multiple ways that my collaborators approached the work itself show that a work isn’t a singular, fixed entity. Each person was asked to respond to the same focal work, but seven women were reading seven different works: some were working from an audiobook, another referred to memories of her high school reading list, one collaborator realized as I was talking to her that she

could have just looked up a summary of the story, and for myself, I was working from knowledge of a performance piece I saw in undergrad that was inspired by the story.

McGee suggests that there is no way to separate a work from its context, writing “*Discourse ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken ‘out of context.’*” Failing to account for ‘context,’ or reducing ‘context’ to one or two of its parts, means quite simply that one is no longer dealing with discourse as it appears in the world” (McGee, 1990, p. 283). Branham and Pearce (1985) talk about the interchangeability and unstable nature of texts and contexts, and especially so in the case of rhetorical situations that take on unconventional forms. This collapsible, changeable nature of text and context is true in the discourse community that emerged with my collaborators. The way that seven different works emerged from the prompt to interpret “The Yellow Wallpaper” problematizes the close readings of singular, fixed works. Context is inextricable with text, and the everyday critic is inextricable with context. The nature of the project pulls a text out of the theoretical vacuum and created a microcosm to illustrate how a work is changed by its audience.

Beyond the work itself, I realized during interviews that the discourse that was emerging with collaborators was a fluid conglomerate: a flow between the focal work, their artifact, speculation on other collaborator’s artifacts, and other lived experiences the collaborators had. One of my collaborators provided an annotated copy of the work. She mentioned that she had done this kind of work in her academic career and spoke to the differences between creating for this project versus previous times she had done this kind of review. “In my History courses when I did this, I had to be more objective and you know, just kind of look at the facts or how it tied into a general theme, or era. And this, I was allowed to let my feelings come through... and I took on the role of her, almost... while I’m reading it... I thought about how it would make me feel and I even related it to some experiences that I’ve had personally” (anonymous, personal communication, February 16, 2020) The rest of the discussion we had flowed between her interpretation of the story, the process she used to interpret the story, and the specific knowledges she uses to create her interpretation. Branham and Pearce (1985) describe why this happens:

In any specific instance, "text" and "context" are constituted by the work of an interpretive community. We argue that they are interactive, in that the meaning and, hence, substance of each derives from the other, and that they are fully reflexive, in that each may function either as text or as context (p.20).

Though she was doing the same kind of analysis she had done in the past, given the new interpretive community (being a part of this project) she noticed that her interpretation and process of annotation changed. She began to have different focuses when she was reading the text for this project than she would for a history class. Further, when she was talking with me, our conversation flowed between describing her process, talking about her interpretations, and talking about her lived experiences. In this way, the flow between text and context are manifold: first, when she was making the artifact itself, she demonstrates text and context are constitutive of each other. Next, in our conversation, text and context blend.

Returning to Herbig's (2015) discussion of "vernacular" and "official" discourses, he highlights their interconnection to make the argument that fragments are contextual. To continue the exploration of the contextual nature of fragments, I will focus on the decisions that the everyday critic is making when they create fragments. The decisions that the everyday critic makes when creating vernacular discourses are intrinsically tied to their positions as everyday critics. Highlighting the salience of positionality while making decisions, my collaborators and I demonstrate my second argument: that meaning is not inherent to a work. Instead, the everyday critic uses their positions to inform context and negotiate an interpretation of the work. In this project, rather than finding meaning in the work itself, my collaborators and I wove official discourses with a heavy leaning on materials and understandings that are available at the local level.

Many of my collaborators were intentional with their use of vernacular discourses. I asked each collaborator about their decisions when they were making the artifact. The woman who made an annotated copy of the story said, "for me, it made more sense, like, to just jot it down. And I thought it would actually be more impactful or honest to just in the moment write what I was thinking or feeling or thought instead of, like, trying to polish it and make it sound so, like, professional" (anonymous, personal communication, February 16, 2020). We talked about how her process was loose, interpretive, and intuitive.

This kind of decision-making process was similar for other collaborators. Brittany made a collage for her artifact (See fig. 3). She said about her process: it is "incredibly intuitive," and she "wasn't necessarily looking for anything" (B. Bertelsen, personal communication, February 15, 2020). In fact, she pulled the first two magazines from the top of a pile of magazines she had and just started flipping through them, "whatever made me think of the text... it was just kind of like

a feeling, something I was aesthetically drawn to” (B. Bertelsen, personal communication, February 15, 2020). While she had the text in mind, she said that her decisions come from a combination of: the magazine pieces she had access to, the patterns that she was drawn to, and intuitive feelings she had while making the artifact.



Figure 3. Brittany's Collage

Having access to materials was a common theme for this project. Joycelyn first attempted to make a video, but it did not result in the vision she had in mind. She then tried to use digital 3-D technology to make an image, but that also did not have the results she wanted. Thinking back about having to change her plans, she said: “Oh my God, I told Chelsea I would turn this in on Tuesday, so I was like, forget it. There’s Plan C” (J. Ghansah, personal communication, February 14, 2020). She finally made a collage (see Figure 4) that featured an image of a park that she

frequents. When I asked her about her choice to use that park as an image in her work, she talked about its place in her life: it's 30 minutes from her house, she found it with her sister, and she goes there to release stress (J. Ghansah, personal communication, February 14, 2020).



Figure 4. Joycelyn's Digital Collage

Tobi also had to improvise her artifact due to access to materials and time. She said, “I had no time to do anything. I had this grand idea for what I was going to do. It just didn’t work that way” (T. Newson, personal communication, February 17, 2020). For her artifact, she used Photoshop and her computer at work to create a digital collage on yellow paper (see Figure 5). Making my own artifact, I found that it was influenced by materials that I had access to: I exclusively used items that were thrifted or upcycled (see Figure 1). My decision to paint silk flowers yellow as a component of my artifact actually contradicts a passage in the text, where the narrator writes “It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things” (Gilman, 1998, p. 654). When we made decisions about creating our artifacts, my collaborators and I treat vernacular discourses with as much weight as official discourses, and in some cases, more.



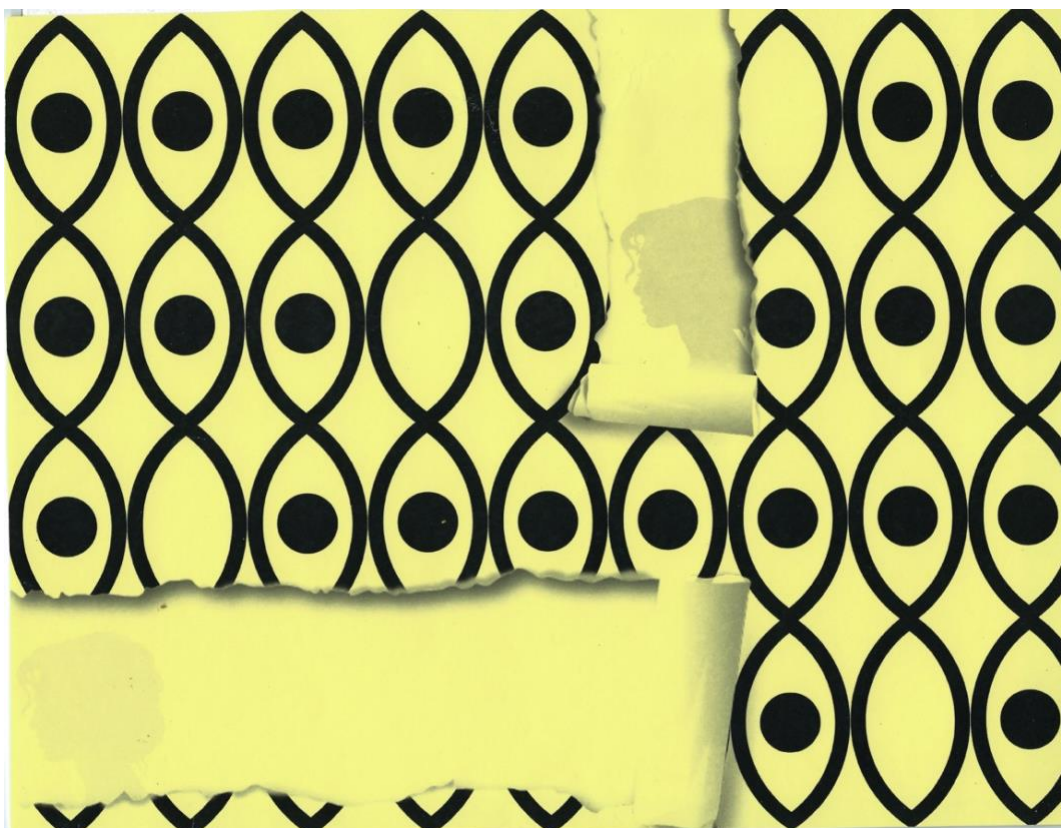


Figure 5. Tobi's Digital Collage

This process is very similar to the decision-making processes of professional critics. Solomon (1993) critiques the role of rhetoricians, and comments on reflexivity:

Although they provide an artificial replication of a natural process, convention programs and issues of journals can offer still more multiple readings of the same work by different critics. Such programs and essays increase our awareness of how much our critical conclusions reflect our own textual constructions rather than the work per se (p. 64).

Whether from professional critics or vernacular critics, there are always multiple possible interpretations of a work. The difference between professional critics and vernacular critics is that the former privileges from the guise of objectivity granted by the professional voice, while the latter does not. By asking an everyday critic to interpret a text, I essentially give them the same authority as the professional critic and challenge that there is a separation or hierarchy (authority) necessary for finding meaning in a work.

The final argument that I saw exemplified in the discourse with my collaborators was that

meaning is not singular and fixed. In the examples above, contextual interpretations leaned into honoring the vernacular voice. I also found that the decision-making process revealed a constantly changing and co-creative nature to the meanings we were interpreting with this text.

When one of my collaborators annotated a copy of the story, she got progressively more emotive with her comments as she made her annotations. Noticing a pattern of manipulation in the story, she responded to it from a very intuitive and personal standpoint which influenced her reaction to the work (anonymous, personal communication, February 16, 2020) (see Figure 6)

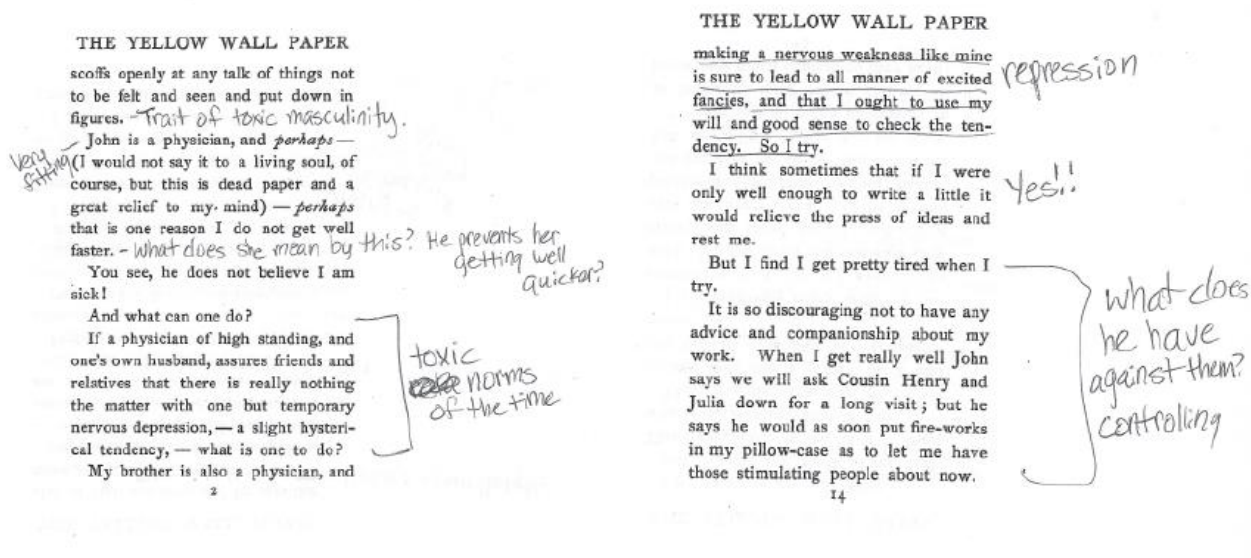


Figure 6. Anonymous Collaborator's Annotated Notes

Brittany, who made the collage, also had a process that unfolded as she worked, revealing interpretations to her. She said that she started by simply tearing and cutting pages from two Vogue magazines that she found at the top of a stack of other magazines. She described several “ding ding ding!” moments that changed her way of knowing the work as she went through her creative process: “I took all the prints that I had, and I was like, wow... All the prints that I found, they’re very high-end fashion. I really didn’t think about that ‘till after the fact” (B. Bertelsen, personal communication, February 15, 2020). She talks about subtle and nuanced decisions she makes that add up to an interpretation of the story that relates to a modern struggle with comparison culture, which is a topic that she confronts frequently in her daily work as a lifestyle coach. She did not think of the connection to comparison culture with the story until she had processed it in this way.

Sarah reclaimed a canvas that hosted a painting that she disliked, painting over it with the artifact she made for this project. Her starting point for the artifact was more of an internal experience with her thought to reclaim this canvas she disliked. During the process, she had a slight shift to include an audience in her interpretation. When talking about her artifact, she said, “I decided to rip it up at the very last moment and I thought it would be cool for them, whoever, you, whatever, to interact with it, to feel like you’re ripping out of your like, cage so to speak too” (see Figure 7) (S. Thompson, personal communication, February 14, 2020). She said the paint was still wet when she began ripping it.

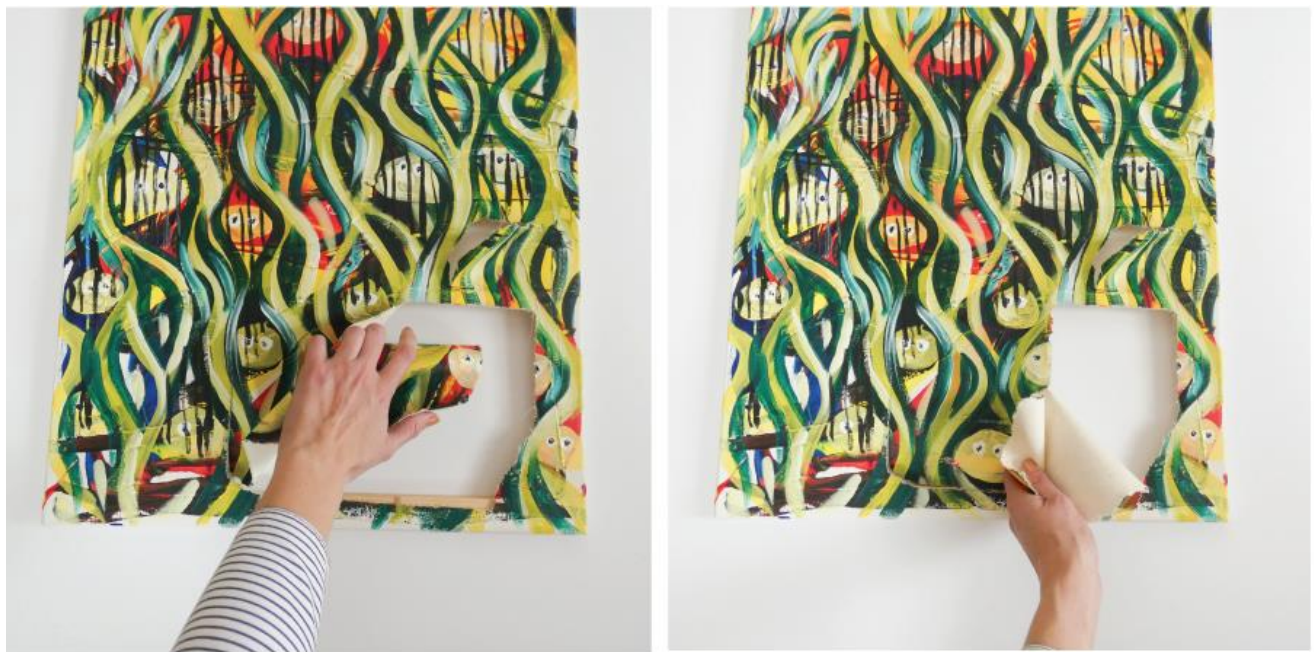


Figure 7. Sarah’s Painting with Ripped Elements

## Conclusion

In this project, I have demonstrated one way to build and examine a text. I started with a deeply theoretical communication question: what would happen if, as McGee argued, I constructed a rhetorical analysis under the assumption that “text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of the discourse” (1990, p. 288)? Operating under this assumption, I asked myself and seven collaborators to make a response to the focal work, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Gilman, 1998). Following this prompt, we made a variety of artifacts: from digital collage to textile art to text analysis. We got together and discussed the story, our



interpretations, and our creative process extensively; drawing connections to our lived experiences, speculating on the other collaborators' thoughts, and what potential viewers of this project might think of what we have done. These fragments -- simultaneously disjointed and interconnected pieces of information constructed the discourse that I selected to interpret as the text of this project.

Through this exercise: making artifacts and discussing them, I observed three arguments that this group made about the nature of a text.

- 1) First, a work is not singular and fixed; there are many “works” depending on factors like audience, interpretive community, and context.
- 2) Second, meaning is not inherent to a work. Multiple meanings are available to all works; the interpretations of professional critics and the everyday critic are similarly contextual and guided by positionality.
- 3) Third, meaning is not singular and fixed. Similarly to the second argument, meaning is negotiated with and guided by factors like discourse, interpretive communities, and positionality.

I intentionally centered my interrogation around the everyday critic in order to challenge the separation and hierarchy between the everyday and professional critic. Underestimating the everyday critic is tantamount to misunderstanding the rhetorical life of a work and the relationship between text and context. To faithfully explore this relationship, my analysis was not performed *on* participants but *with* collaborators. The text that I observed and the arguments that evolved from it would not have existed without the artifacts and discussions that we co-created, but more than that, they will not be able to exist again. Shaun McNiff writes that “a fundamental premise of artistic inquiry is that the end cannot be known at the beginning. Art is also infinitely variable” (2017, p.32).

When this work was in progress, I had the opportunity to present a version of this project at The Qualitative Report's 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference. I was particularly excited for this conference because Dr. Leavy would be a keynote speaker. I eagerly attended her talk in which she spoke about the “shapes” that research can take. She started the talk with a piece of advice that seemed obvious but felt very needed; and that is: to create more than one outcome for your work in order to maximize your efforts and to reach different audiences (Leavy, 2020). I constructed this project and wrote this paper with the idea of it appearing in Dr. Leavy's Handbook, but I imagine this

project has many other “shapes.” This project can be taken as an example of how to explore questions in communications scholarship using artistic inquiry.

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