

Faculty Fellowship Narrative

Part One: 'Narrative Cognition'

Part Two: 'Texting Eternity'

Abstract:

'Narrative' is the impetus for my scholarship and my art, both. They are distinct—narrative studies and novel writing—but braided together to such an extent that it would be difficult to separate them. Therefore, for my Faculty Fellowship I propose undertaking two different projects simultaneously. First, I shall write the rough draft of *Narrative Cognition*, a book toward which I have been conducting research for the past decade. Second, I shall write the final draft of *Texting Eternity*, a novel for young readers to which I have devoted the past four years. The time is right in my career to fulfill both objectives. I anticipate publishing *Texting Eternity* within one year of completing a Fall 2011 Fellowship, and publishing *Narrative Cognition* within three years. However, these timetables are only realistic with the time away from teaching and administrative duties that a Faculty Fellowship affords. With concentrated attention in Fall 2011, both of these projects and their timeline for publication will be achieved.

Background:

Narrative studies and novel writing have been the dual foci of my career from the outset. My Ph.D. dissertation—the first of its kind approved by Northwestern University—included both an original novel and three critical essays on problems of narrative technique. My subsequent professional work has been rooted in performance studies^{*}, for which I have created two graduate courses: ‘Writing-As-Performance’ and ‘A Narrative Approach to Person-Development’. These courses have migrated, with mutations, to Louisiana State University, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The University of Texas at Austin, and The University of California at San Diego. However, to date I have published only articles and book chapters on narrative; a Fall 2011 Faculty Fellowship will enable me to coalesce the cumulative experiences of teaching narrative—as well as the accumulated insight of others teaching my performance studies curricula—into a book-length treatment of the topic: *Narrative Cognition*. Part of that insight and experience is the related activity of being a novelist, and this is why I am also eager to simultaneously produce a final draft of *Texting Eternity*, my fifth novel for young readers, the prior four of which were published to critical acclaim (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987, 1990; HarperCollins, 1997, 2005).

Contribution:

Narrative Studies is a burgeoning interest within many disciplines (e.g., literary and rhetorical studies, cultural studies, performative anthropology, developmental

^{*} See Pelias & VanOosting. (1987). “A paradigm for performance studies.” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 219-231. [This was the most frequently cited article within the journals of the National Communication Association in the decade between 1990 and 2000.]

psychology, and neuroscience), as well as the focus of collaborative study across disciplinary boundaries.

My own thinking centers on four questions regarding how human beings:

1. *Acquire* knowledge through story and storytelling;
2. *Store* and *access* knowledge through story and storytelling;
3. *Disseminate* knowledge through story and storytelling;
4. *Validate* or *invalidate* knowledge through story and storytelling.

To put it another way: How do human beings use narrative and narration to *learn*, *remember*, *teach*, and *prove* what it is we think we know? No other scholar, to my knowledge, has proposed such a comprehensive typology.

Specifically, *Narrative Cognition* will use this typology to address the following topics: (1) story structures and narrative strategies; (2) children's narratives of racial identity; (3) a narrative approach to trial-by-jury; (4) narrative medicine;* (5) brain structure, function and episodic memory; and (6) the politics of visual narratives. This last topic has been a sustained focus of my research for over fifteen years. The politics of visual narratives includes political *arpilleras* (three dimensional appliqué textiles) smuggled out of Chile during the regime of Pinochet, *retablos* (portable decorative boxes) from Peru chronicling *Sendero Luminoso* (the plight of peasants caught between Shining Path Marxist rebels and the military), and war rugs that began being produced in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. For this last example, I have traveled to Afghan refugee camps in and around Peshawar, Pakistan, interviewing child weavers. After 9/11, I elected not to publish this ethnographic research, needing first to

* See Program of Narrative Medicine, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University (information available at <http://www.narrativemedicine.org/>).

disambiguate the recorded texts of Mujahedeen freedom fighters and the countervailing narratives of Taliban trainers. However, now is the time to publish my research, and *Narrative Cognition* provides the intellectual context for doing so.

The anticipated contributions of, and critical attention to, *Narrative Cognition* will engage diverse audiences:

- an innovative new program at one of America's premier medical schools;
- both the public and policy-makers concerned with the construction of racial identity; and
- U.S. military and diplomatic personnel engaged in Afghanistan.

While it is more of a challenge to cite similar 'contributions' for a novel, *Texting Eternity* is an equally ambitious work that will engage young readers with issues of spirituality and technology.

Conclusion:

If awarded, a Fall 2011 Faculty Fellowship would enable me to complete: (1) a first draft of *Narrative Cognition*, promoting its publication as a monograph by 2015; (2) a final draft of *Texting Eternity*, with the goal of publication during Academic Year 2012-13. Both books will receive critical attention and reflect positively on Fordham, but are time-sensitive with regard to relevance. Therefore, I am grateful for the opportunity of Fordham's timely support of my efforts to maintain the record demonstrated by my CV of consistent publication of meaningful manuscripts with distinguished houses.