

## Assignment/Prompt

This essay has two parts, the first part will be a major building block of the whole.

In this essay, you will compare one contemporary text with an analogous text from the past. (For example, if you are studying an Instagram photo, or page, you might consider a 19th century carte de visite-- cards with small portraits that people gave to friends and acquaintances.) By analyzing your texts in their social contexts (one contemporary, one historic), you will consider what they can tell us about a concept in its time. (For example, if you were studying an Instagram photo, or page, and a carte de visite, you might explore what they indicated about the concept of “identity.”)

This will allow you to consider the question of what has changed, and what stayed the same, and what has changed, why.

Finally, you will reflect on your project by considering how your view of the past is formed by your contemporary surroundings, your own context. This is historiography.

Alexander Wing

## The Power of Performativity in Activism

It's 2 AM in Chicago and I'm coming back from a long and exhilarating night out with friends. I'm exhausted and just want to get home peacefully so maybe choosing to take the public train wasn't the best idea. As I enter the underground stop, I face a scene we all know too well: a man seemingly under the influence peaching a radical idea about politics. This time, however, the man advocates for the legalization of marijuana, which I'm sure many policymakers and scholars would agree with. His performance is activism or, “the policy or action of using

vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change” (“activism”). However, I’m not too sure that this man’s activism will convince anyone, in fact, it might do the opposite. This might appear obvious; you might say that the man was crazy and untrustworthy — but there’s a lot to unpack here. Clearly, the effectiveness of activism has a lot more to do with the message itself or any reasoning behind the message; in fact, I’ve noticed many Americans today do not even believe in logic or fact. If this is the case, what helps makes activism influential and how does performance play a role?

It might help to first take a look at a sample of contemporary activism. “The Arrow” is a YouTube recording of an acrobatic performance by former Cirque De Soliel performer, Matthew Richardson, and starts with a man walking slowly and cautiously towards another man. Their body language is cautious while a mysterious string instrument in the background hints at the uncertainty and nervousness at the start of a relationship. A performer holds a hula-hoop, the centerpiece of the act and possibly a symbol of the performer’s romantic relationship, open as the other performer chooses to enter the hula-hoop. A soft vocal plays and the hoop spins, coming to life, as the performers unite inside. The performers begin a spectacular dance but are interrupted by gestures of failed kisses, departures from the hoop, and disappearing layers of music. These sort of hiccups are no stranger to everyday relationships, but as time goes on, the hiccups stop and the dance intensifies, all layers of music return, and the performers begin to spin higher and higher. It becomes clear, through subtle signals in the dance, that one performer has a lead role and the other a follow role; follow roles are traditionally female while lead roles are traditionally male (Young). The relationship and dance continue to intensify until all of a sudden the music stops and the lights dim. The performers have reached a critical point in their relationship;

they lean in for a kiss like before but this time — they succeed. All and additional layers of music suddenly return along with splashes of colored chalk. The lead dancer is covered in blue chalk while the follow is covered in pink chalk. This sudden visual and sonic excitement amplifies the excitement for this important milestone in a relationship. The vocals return but with a chorused effect. The music gets more and more exciting until it suddenly slows. The performers return to a standing position within the hoop and lean in for a kiss, but they don't kiss. They touch foreheads and the scene looks unusually blue as the music fades to a deep, synthetic beat, a beat I commonly hear in gay clubs or bars. Here, the scene fades to text in remembrance of the pulse nightclub shootings which marked the end of many similarly beautiful relationships.

There are many shocking aspects to this video, some are as clear as the nightclub shooting and some are not so obvious. For example, this performance was clearly queer: it involved kissing and a romantic relationship between two men — yet, the performers engaged in clear male and female gender roles, roles that I have not observed in my own and some of my queer friends' relationships. This choreographical decision might actually be significant for an activist purpose as it involves careful use of “performativity”. Dorothy Lander describes performativity in the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* as:

Performativity conveys the idea that written and spoken words or utterances *do* things, effect actions ... any repeated cultural practice or reiteration of cultural norms is an effect that is produced in everyday relationships with others ...

[For example,] Gender performativity ... refers to cultural analyses of difference and identity in which the effect is that we are compelled to repeat normative practices—most

notably to produce gender through the repeated cultural norms of femininity and masculinity (Lander).

In other words, cultural norms are maintained and perpetuated by performances of the expected. This also gives performance the power to destabilize dominant discourses when performances violate instead of perpetuate norms and expectations (Lander). Thus, performative activism is activism that engages and challenges norms.

There are multiple instances where performative activism can be observed in Richardson's performance. Going back to gender, "The Arrow" not only incorporates clearly performative male and female gendering through lead and follow roles, but it takes the gendering to an even more explicit level by covering the lead with blue chalk and the follow with pink chalk. Ever since World War II, blue has been associated with masculinity while pink has been associated with femininity (Wright). By engaging contemporary norms of heteronormative gender, Matthew Richardson may be attempting to relate homosexual relationships to the stereotypical heterosexual relationship. He might be suggesting, to an audience uncomfortable with homosexuality, "don't worry, homosexual love is love as you know it". This can be observed further in other choices Richardson made in his choreography. He depicted the relationship between the actors in a storybook-esque heterosexual relationship. The relationship was monogamous, slow — the actors waited a while to even kiss — and followed the arc of a traditional heterosexual relationship as opposed to the fast-paced and polygamous impression some of my friends have about queer relationships. By engaging the norms of a typical heterosexual relationship through a performance by homosexual actors, Richardson can accustom homosexuality to a possibly uncomfortable audience.

But how can we tell that the audience truly felt the effects of Richardson's performative activism? A look over Richardson's YouTube and Facebook pages can offer some key insights. On his Facebook page, Richardson wrote that he hopes to, "use performance art to ask for more kindness, to gently open minds of people who don't understand" (Richardson). This confirms that his goal was indeed to make homosexuality and queer relationships more relatable and comfortable to an audience who doesn't understand or is discriminative. Whether aware of the concept of performative activism or not, Richardson used performance to engage norms and advance his activist goals. Further, his work was effective. Through looking at the video's reception on Facebook and Youtube, the most common comments were "beautiful" and "moving" (Richardson). These two common comments align with the idea that Richardson has successfully related homosexual love and beauty to his audience.

Performative activism seems to be a strong concept in our contemporary age: it has been described to exist in many recent activist movements such as Rosa Park's protest or the Women's Temperance Crusades (Lander). However, a look into historic activism may offer new perspectives on this topic. The word "Activism" as we know it today was not used until the 1900s ("activism") so I scoured the internet for scholars' thoughts on the earliest "protests" or "revolutions". The earliest and well-documented act I found was Socrates' death by execution. Then, I chose Jacques-Louis David's 1787 French Revolution neoclassical painting, "The Death of Socrates", as tangible and activist documentation of Socrates' death to look into.

The painting revolves, as you might have guessed, around the great Greek philosopher Socrates' death, the story of which was recorded by philosophers Plato and Xenophon (Baetjer). Socrates was sentenced to death after "impiety", or not believing in his city's gods, and "corrupt-

ing the youth” (Nails). After an unjust and short hearing, a democratic jury ruled Socrates to death by hemlock poison (Nails). However, Socrates could have simply run away or chosen to renounce his views and be set free; in other words, Socrates chose to die (Baetjer). Jacques-Louis David chose to paint the specific moment where Socrates was about to accept the goblet that contained his hemlock drink. Looking at the painting, there’s a lot that immediately pops out to me. The bodies and imagery are especially sharp and clear, the gray stone wall in the background is crisp and realistic, and the colors are warm, calm, and muted. This painting reminds of “The Last Supper” by Leonardo Da Vinci. A more in-depth look can explain this: David, despite having consulted scholars on Plato’s documentation, chose to paint twelve people in his image instead of the fifteen that David would have known to be accurate; there were also twelve people in “The Last Supper” (Baetjer). In David’s painting, a brilliant and soft light pours onto a Socrates draped in a clean white toga, evoking Jesus imagery and Christian overtones. The last supper was similarly focused on Jesus. At the center of David’s painting lies the goblet of hemlock, about to be taken by Socrates from a distraught executioner. Everyone in the room is overcome with sadness and so drawn with soft curves and warmly colored clothing — however, Socrates is not. Despite facing his immediate death, Socrates sits upright with a confident posture; his facial expression is calm and collected, his angles are sharp and geometric, and he seems to excitedly reach for the goblet of hemlock. Socrates, unlike his followers depicted in the picture, seems ready for what is to come.

This depiction of Socrates, along with other details in the painting, is somewhat surprisingly performative — especially since performative activism seemed to have only recently entered academic discourse. In David’s painting, Socrates was depicted as much more muscular

and younger than he should have been at his time of death (Grafton). The lighting and Socrates' distinct clothing engaged religious norms which helped relate Socrates' ideals of principle and "fighting for justice" to a highly religious France (Hermon-Belot). By advancing Socrates' story through strong performatives, David is encouraging France to not be afraid to die for their ideals and principles in the French Revolution. Where "The Arrow" engaged norms such as heteronormativity to advance the value of equal love, "The Death of Socrates" engaged norms of Christian heroism to advance values of principle. In other words, "The Arrow" performed a heteronormative myth while "The Death of Socrates" performed a religious myth. This can be shown further through each text's color choices: David chose colors to paint Socrates in a way reminiscent of Jesus while Richardson's chose highly-gendered colors. In addition, where "The Death of Socrates" used historical inaccuracies to strengthen its performatives, "The Arrow" used cultural inaccuracies to advance its performatives.

Although both texts seem to use performativity in a similar manner, the target audience and thus performatives of David's work are quite different from Richardson's. "The Death of Socrates" was a commissioned painting (Baetjer) which stands in contrast to the self-directed work of Richardson. The painting was commissioned by one of the Trudaine brothers who were highly politically motivated individuals who sought out well-educated revolutionaries in socioeconomically prestigious salons (Baetjer). This confirms a political motivation behind "The Death of Socrates" and gives a good idea of its audience: a socioeconomically privileged and revolutionary elite. The painting was unveiled at the Grand Salon of the Louvre to an audience of intellectuals where it was received well and was massively popular ("The Death of Socrates"). Thus, David targets a specific audience: just the intellectually elite in France who fancy visiting salons.

Richardson, however, targets a huge and diverse audience very quickly through social media, giving him very little control over who sees his work. These differences can help show how David and Richardson may have imagined activism differently. David may have imagined activism as an active revolution spearheaded by intellectuals while Richardson may imagine activism as more passive movement spread throughout the masses.

Finally, the barrier to entry in reaching a large audience through activism has also evolved throughout time. Both “The Death of Socrates” and “The Arrow” are visual art pieces utilizing performative activism yet they require very different backgrounds. The limited audience involved in activism during the 1800s is emphasized by the mere fact that David’s painting was commissioned. Although commissioned paintings were not uncommon in France, (Grafton) the political commissioning of the painting goes to suggest that there were socioeconomic limitations on who can effectively participate in activism in the eighteenth century. Richardson, however, produced his work on his own budget along with a similarly politically aligned production team (Richardson). Richardson was able to distribute his work for free to audiences of any background with an internet connection. There is also a difference in the intellectual barrier to reaching large audiences through activism. David’s painting required education on history and philosophy while Richardson’s painting called on much more widely accessible human experiences and norms. Similarly, anyone can discuss Richardson’s work over social media while only intellectuals could critique and discuss David’s work in salons. These differences help show how activism looked differently in the past versus now where social media like twitter have been transformative.

I think it's important to note that all of the evidence I've used is quite matter-of-fact and I've approached this paper in a very matter-of-fact manner. However, factual evidence may have missed a lot of important nuance and detail. Peter Ellerton, professor of critical thinking in the University of Queensland, discusses the value of opinions as: "Opinions are not just pale shadows of facts; they are judgements and conclusions. They can be the result of careful and sophisticated deliberation in areas for which empirical investigation is inadequate or ill-suited" (Ellerton). There were many topics in this essay that are not exactly well-suited for empirical investigation such as individualized responses and feelings towards performative activism. A more anecdotal and opinion driven approach could shed some additional perspective and humanity on this discussion of what is a uniquely human experience, activism. In addition, the facts I did discuss are not even purely factual. Topics such as performativity are inherently theory and not provable facts in the same way that  $1 + 1 = 2$  is. Thus, there are many valid alternative theories and comments. In fact, I've discussed performativity with my friend Michelle and she stated that she disagreed with the mere concept that humanity is "compelled to repeat normative practices" (Lander). Therefore, there are many ways to interpret the evidence I've gathered beyond my own interpretation that would be completely valid.

Throughout this essay, I've discussed performative activism in a way that separates it from activism in general or in a way that implies that performative activism is a singular technique in activism. However, it is interesting and surprising to see how much "The Death of Socrates" shares in its use of performativity with "The Arrow" despite how different activism looked like in their respective times. This historical permanence of performatives in activism suggests that performativity may actually be fundamental in activism. After all, performativity is

theorized to be rooted in human nature and what activism doesn't engage and challenge norms?

Perhaps then, all activism is performative activism.

Works Cited

THE ARROW. Concept & Creation by Matthew Richardson. Dir. Damian Siqueiros. Editing by and Assist. Dir. Liliana Ortiz Casas. Dir. of Photo. Mateo Hernandez Casis. Cameras by Camilo Chitiva Zamudio and Guillermo Castellanos. Music by The Irrepressibles. YouTube. YouTube, 12 July 2016. Web.

Baetjer, Katharine. Catalogue Entry, 2017. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Death of Socrates", <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436105>. Accessed 5 April 2019.

"activism, n." OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2019, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957). Accessed 5 April 2019.

Lander, Dorothy A. "Performativity." Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice, Gary L. Anderson, Sag Publications, 1st edition, 2007. Credo Reference, <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sageact/performativity/0?institutionId=577>. Accessed 05 Feb. 2019.

Young, Tricia Henry. "Dance." The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History, edited by Wilma Pearl Mankiller, Houghton Mifflin, 1st edition, 1998. Credo Reference, <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/rcuswh/dance/0?institutionId=577>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2019.

Nails, Debra. "The Trial and Death of Socrates." Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Socrates, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, and Rachana Kamtekar, Wiley, 1st edition, 2006. Credo Reference, [http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/wileycsoc/the\\_trial\\_and\\_death\\_of\\_socrates/0?institutionId=577](http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/wileycsoc/the_trial_and_death_of_socrates/0?institutionId=577). Accessed 26 Feb. 2019.

Wright, Jennifer. "How Pink Became a Color for Girls." How Pink Became a Color for Girls, Racked, 20 Mar. 2015, [www.racked.com/2015/3/20/8260341/pink-color-history](http://www.racked.com/2015/3/20/8260341/pink-color-history).

T., M.B. "Socrates." The Classical Tradition, edited by Anthony Grafton, et al., Harvard University Press, 1st edition, 2010. Credo Reference, <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardct/socrates/0?institutionId=577>. Accessed 05 Apr. 2019.

W., D. "Neoclassicism." The Classical Tradition, edited by Anthony Grafton, et al., Harvard University Press, 1st edition, 2010. Credo Reference, <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardct/neoclassicism/0?institutionId=577>. Accessed 06 Apr. 2019.

"The Death of Socrates." Jacques Louis David | The Death of Socrates, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436105](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436105).

Ellerton, Peter. "Facts Are Not Always More Important than Opinions: Here's Why." Facts Are Not Always More Important than Opinions: Here's Why, The Conversation, 18 Sept. 2018, [theconversation.com/facts-are-not-always-more-important-than-opinions-heres-why-76020](https://www.theconversation.com/facts-are-not-always-more-important-than-opinions-heres-why-76020).

Hermon-Belot, Rita, and Hermon-Belot. "French Revolution." Encyclopedia of Global Religions, Wade Roof, and Mark Juergensmeyer, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2011. Credo Reference, [http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sagegr/french\\_revolution/0?institutionId=577](http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sagegr/french_revolution/0?institutionId=577). Accessed 07 Apr. 2019.