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An Investigation of the Rhetorical and Representational Aspects of *Bleed Green*

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a retroactive examination of a personal narrative titled *Bleed Green*, a story that characterizes my experience working for the supermarket Publix. I performed *Bleed Green* in front of an audience at the KSU Tellers' Spring 2021 Showcase. This essay serves both to analyze the rhetorical methods of my story and to precede the script of the performance, which accompanies this essay. In the essay, I contextualize the story through the lens of three widely underutilized concepts from various disciplines: framing, foregrounding and backgrounding, and representation and agency. Storytellers often critically analyze their works, particularly with the gift of hindsight, and I offer that the methods through which these works can be analyzed are far more diverse than some might consider. There is significant potential for storytellers to view their stories with an interdisciplinary lens, and my hope for this article is that it will expand the existing knowledge of such analytical methods for future storytellers.

Keywords: Storytelling, The KSU Tellers, Gregory Lakoff, framing, Teun van Dijk, ideological square, foregrounding, backgrounding, representation, narrative, personal narrative, autoethnographer

I. Introduction

The concept of a personal narrative is, by nature, quite broad. The best way I can summarize it is through the words of performance studies scholar Frederick Corey, who says, “The personal narrative swings between the public and private, between what is said and what is thought, between the individual and society, between the regulations of language and the regulations of the body” (250). In other words, a personal narrative is an expression of the self as one interacts with the world around them.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by personal narrative. As such, when I became involved in the

Department of Theatre & Performance Studies (TPS) at Kennesaw State University, there was one specific group that I wanted to be in more than anything else: the KSU Tellers. The KSU Tellers is a storytelling troupe housed within TPS, in which students create original devised work in the form of various genres of stories, such as folktales, fairy tales, family stories, and personal narratives—stories drawn from the tellers’ own life experiences. I had not known what I was getting into when I attended my first Tellers show in fall 2017, but as I sat in my seat watching a revolving door of different people telling unique and fascinating stories, I was hooked. There was so much creative

liberty and versatility in these performances, and though I had originally believed that it would be difficult for a single person to stand up on stage and tell a ten-minute story and be interesting, that was exactly what I witnessed. Once I understood what was going on, I wanted to join the Tellers more than anything. Finally, in spring 2020, I achieved my goal, though the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from performing with the group until the KSU Tellers Spring 2021 Showcase, in which my own story was finally able to come to fruition.

My story was a personal narrative titled *Bleed Green*, set during a three-month period of the pandemic in which I worked at Publix, a popular grocery store in the Southeast. While there, I suffered from the corporate mold imposed on the employees, as well as the strange and highly devoted work culture that propagated during my time there.

I crafted a story that functioned as a critical reflection on the company's work culture, which found its way into every facet of life at Publix and made any attempt at individualism nearly impossible. Most of my story grapples with this culture, depicting me as an enthusiastic member of "the Publix family" before quickly becoming disillusioned with the company's impersonal apathy toward the worker's wellbeing.

As I crafted my story, I employed many different strategies of storytelling to make my story cohesive and strong. However, I should note that I did not always make such decisions consciously during the creation process. It is with the gift of hindsight that a storyteller can truly grasp the intricacies of their story. For that reason, this essay takes a reflective approach to my story that characterizes the various storytelling methods employed. In this essay, I analyze

both the rhetorical—the persuasive and argumentative elements of the story—and the representational—the manner through which the story includes and portrays individuals—and how they made what could have been a boring story about a grocery store and turned it into a thoughtful reflection on the ethics of the corporate-employee relationship. This essay establishes a three-part analytical framework of my story: framing, foregrounding and backgrounding, and representation. These components of the story are interesting to investigate, as many people often overlook them in the discussion of storytelling practices. Instead, such concepts are typically found in the fields of rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy, and journalism and media studies. To reinforce my discussion of each section, I consulted the existing literature in these fields, applying the concepts to the practice of storytelling. It is my hope that, in taking this interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of storytelling, storytellers and scholars of the future will be mindful of the integration of these practices in their own work.

II. Lakoff's Concept of Framing

When a person tells a story, particularly a personal narrative, they integrate a clear and consistent perspective about the situation at hand. In this perspective, there are clear thoughts conveyed by the storyteller about the people and events around them. The concept of framing is primarily a product of the work of Gregory Lakoff, a linguist and cognitive scientist, who applied the concept to political discourse. In his book *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, Lakoff describes frames as "mental structures that shape the way we see the world." Frames dictate our goals, plans, and behavior, and in his own application of the concept, Lakoff

asserts that frames shape our policies in the sociopolitical sphere (xv). Lakoff provides a clear example of framing in *Don't Think of an Elephant* in his discussion of tax relief. Tax relief, to Lakoff, is a prime example of framing, as it demonstrates exactly how humans use language to shape and manipulate discourse. The implication of the word “relief,” in this case, implies that taxation is inherently a burden, or a pressure, on the American citizen, thus framing the concept of taxation as being a negative practice. The use of this frame in American politics has completely shifted political discourse in this direction. Likewise, there is also the framing of taxation as a duty, thus providing a positive connotation to taxation that, when used, may make audiences more accepting of taxation. However, framing is not solely applicable to politics in the literal sense. Storytelling is an artform in which the body, specifically the body of the storyteller, can engage with the world, both politically and as a form of self-expression. With the extensive debates in our current political climate regarding the autonomy of certain groups' bodies, as is the case with hot topics such as abortion and the validity of the transgender community, it is unsurprising that politics and storytelling are so strongly connected.

In the context of storytelling, especially personal narrative, which draws on the subjective personal experience of the teller in question, framing plays a highly important role. In my own story, there is an interesting case of framing, from both my perspective and Publix's perspective. As a business, Publix frames itself as a family, with each respective employee being a member of the family (Publix). This shapes how employees perceive themselves in the function of Publix as a business, placing an obligation on the employee to work harder

for the good of the family.

Family, as a concept, represents a profound sense of devotion and love. Therefore, a person would make substantial sacrifices for family, as there is a level of obligation ingrained in the very notion. When applied to business, however, this can result in a toxic environment, as these expectations might prove to be physically and emotionally cumbersome for the employee. The employee will often find themselves compelled to act on behalf of the family even if it goes against their interests as an individual, whether that is calling out when sick or taking time for themselves when needed for other reasons. To eschew the will of the family is to let them down, and no one wants to let their family, of all people, down. For that reason, the framing of Publix as a family was a significant aspect of my problem with the company, as well as serving as a prominent aspect of my story at large.

My own description of Publix in the story expresses an alternative frame, depicting the company as a self-interested corporate entity. My framing is especially apparent when I say, “There are certain aspects of retail that, when you tell other people who've never done retail about them, it kind of makes everything sound a little bit like a cult.” Furthermore, as I point out later in the narrative, some cults do indeed frame themselves as families to attract more followers. On the other hand, people may simply frame an employee's relationship with Publix as being a transactional relationship. Neither of these frames is technically incorrect, as their legitimacy is derived from the subjective observation of the circumstances surrounding the story. It is for this reason that framing is a viable consideration in storytelling practice.

Framing functions in my story in multiple ways, but I am most interested in how the embodied presence of the storyteller can assist in making one's framing compelling. There is an underlying confidence and assumption that I, as a storyteller, will be viewed by the audience as credible. In a sociological sense, frames are "carefully crafted sets of beliefs and meanings facilitating collective action by bringing together individuals and organizations who share congruent or complimentary beliefs and meanings" (Wood 251). Certainly, this is apparent in storytelling. In my own story, I convey a persona of optimism, naivete, and just a little bit of desperation as I navigate the process of seeking a job and working at Publix. This results in my becoming immersed in Publix's own framing as a family. As the story progresses, though, I become jaded, pointing out that many bad organizations, such as the Manson family and the mafia, also frame themselves as families. Ultimately, I develop my own frame, in which I call Publix a cult. In imposing my own frame, my own perception, and my own terms to describe Publix, members of the audience might find areas in which they agree with me. My story is not calling the audience to action, though it does assert that the practice of framing a business as a family facilitates less-than-ideal conditions for the American worker. This assertion was not deliberate, but it was organically included through the natural progression of my character arc in the story. There is a rhetorical aspect innately in storytelling that makes audiences leave the show and see the world through my eyes. Although there is nuance to every subject, the storyteller is given a golden opportunity to share their unique perspective, which is further bolstered by the ethos of being the sole performer on stage, hence why framing is such an invaluable tool in the storyteller's

toolbox.

III. The Ideological Square

Due to the subjective nature of storytelling, there is an additional practice at play in my story: the concept of foregrounding and backgrounding. Foregrounding and backgrounding are rhetorical terms coined by Dutch linguist Teun van Dijk. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss them under the overarching umbrella term, the ideological square. The use of the ideological square is a rhetorical practice that many people use without realizing it. When discussing a topic or issue, most notably one that can be broken down into an "Us versus Them" situation, an abundance of foregrounding and backgrounding occurs. The speaker foregrounds the good and backgrounds the bad in those they agree with (the "Us") and foregrounds the bad and backgrounds the good in those they disagree with (the "Them").

In everyday life, this practice manifests in the simple omission or highlighting of pertinent details when describing an event. Imagine a child has an argument with another child on the playground and pushes the other child over. When the guilty child goes home, their parents ask, "How was school?" If the school is not aware of the incident, then neither are the parents. When the child recounts their day, perhaps they will omit this detail entirely, backgrounding the trouble they caused. Or if they are feeling especially daring, they will mention the argument and highlight the fault of the other child, foregrounding the negative aspects of the victim and garnering sympathy from their parents. These strategies are further employed, with more tact, by news sources and politicians. Van Dijk discusses the significance of the ideological square as

it relates to politics when he provides an account of Teresa Gorman, a former member of British Parliament, arguing before the House of Commons about immigration issues in London. In her address, she states, “It is wrong that ratepayers in the London area should bear an undue proportion of the burden of expenditure that those people are causing” (“Ideology and Discourse”). Here, Gorman foregrounds the idea that London asylum seekers impose unfair burdens on the ratepaying native citizens of London while simultaneously backgrounding the motivations and benefits of the asylum seekers. Moreover, Gorman clearly establishes an “Us and Them” scenario in her use of the phrase “those people” to refer to the asylum seekers.

Such a practice can also be seen in storytelling. For example, in my critique of Publix, there are many negative aspects of the company to foreground, such as the exploitative nature of the family structure imposed by the company. However, there are several positive aspects of the company as well that would have lessened the rhetorical and comedic impact of my critique if I had included them. Therefore, I background the company’s provision of health insurance to full-time employees while foregrounding the company’s tendency to strip employees of their individuality. To use van Dijk’s terminology, there is no Them that is completely bad, but to foreground such positives in the Them in a story about my own experience would lessen my own struggles and experience with the company, thus negating the story’s value.

IV. Agency and Representation

Other important aspects of storytelling to consider beyond the rhetorical methods include the concepts of agency and

representation in storytelling. In her book *Body, Paper, Stage*, performance studies scholar Tami Spry defines agency as follows:

Agency refers to the capacity of the agent (in this case an individual) to tell her story of an event, also keeping in mind that the construction of the story is generated from the individual’s sociocultural situatedness, or how she constructs and is constructed by social systems such as race, class, gender, religion, etc. (58)

In other words, agency is the driving force that a storyteller accesses to tell their story. This directly connects with the notion of representation in storytelling as well. A story will almost invariably feature people who set events in motion as subjects or agents. In *Bleed Green*, I am the most prominent figure, but there are several examples of other people, characters if you will, as well. Often such people will have a stake in the story, moving the story forward with action and ultimately shaping the outcomes of the story. This, too, is apparent in *Bleed Green*, such as when I am compelled to quit my job after overhearing my coworkers’ discussion about an affair involving several Publix employees. It is my mission, as the storyteller, to represent the characters within their story in a manner that simultaneously serves my story while not denigrating the person in question.

There is a responsibility on the part of the storyteller to answer for the representation of people within their personal narrative, which is akin to what Spry describes in *Body, Paper, Stage* as autoethnography. Representation is a core component of storytelling, which Spry asserts when she says, “The way in which we represent people, places, cultures through writing illustrates the values, beliefs, biases, and perspectives held by the writer in this

case, the autoethnographer” (60). Technically, if one wishes to forgo morality, they can represent a person in a story however they please, but that does not make for a quality story, nor does the storyteller come across as likable or good. How a person sees others is telling of a person, and in a storytelling context, the storyteller is giving the audience a look into how they see those around them.

In *Bleed Green*, I discuss one of my coworkers, whom I inconsiderately portray throughout the story as a “short, middle-aged guy who prowled around the aisles of Publix. . . .” Several times in my narrative, I make my coworker seem pathetic and lacking in trajectory. To make matters worse, I even use his real name in my portrayal. As I reflect on the story, I see several opportunities in which I could have better represented my coworker. First, I now recognize that I should have used a pseudonym to conceal his identity. I have since added a pseudonym to the script that follows this essay to address this issue. Second, I describe him as having no family, and I recount instances in which he is clearly displeased with his life at Publix, using it for comedic effect, such as when I say, “As far as anyone could tell, John didn’t really have much going on. He still lived with his parents—that was apparent—but he didn’t really have a wife or children to speak of.” In hindsight, I should have taken a more sensitive, more honest approach in the portrayal of my coworker.

Although my coworker had been at Publix for twenty-five years prior to my arrival at the store, we both held the same entry-level position in my time there. Furthermore, upon discovering that he had begun working at Publix at age twenty-one, just as I had, I saw his life as a reflection of my own possible future, a fate I did not want.

This was one of the factors that eventually convinced me to quit Publix, as I explain in my story. Looking back, I made several mistakes in my representation of this coworker, using him as a plot device rather than a person, and this obviously falls on me. After all, such misrepresentation of characters within a story is a gross misuse of one’s agency as a storyteller.

Despite being allotted the agency necessary to tell my story about Publix, I wielded my agency poorly in some regards. I seriously regret the choices I made in my depiction of my coworker, particularly my using him as a foil rather than a person. I used my coworker as an archetype, functioning as a plot device that drove me, rather than a person with aspirations, thoughts, and feelings. As the saying goes, there are two sides to every story, and, in truth, I did not know enough about my coworker’s life outside of Publix to warrant such a poor representation of him in my story. My depiction of my coworker reflects negatively not only on him but, by extension, on me. I opted for simplicity and comedic effect rather than caring to expand upon my coworker’s life. In retrospect, I am embarrassed that I did not add nuance to my coworker and represent him in a fairer, more compelling manner.

V. Conclusion

Storytelling offers the individual a form through which they can express nearly any facet of life. Many will dedicate their lives to the mastery of the art, which I will surely do as well. However, the aspects of storytelling that I have discussed here—framing, the ideological square, and representation and agency—are often overshadowed by the basics, such as structure, delivery, and stage presence. This is striking considering how prominent the eclipsed

methods are in every story and, beyond that, in every facet of our lives. The analytical framework that I have established in this essay can be conducted on just about any form of fiction, and I would argue that it should be. To understand these concepts is to enrich one's ability to tell stories and to make a more compelling work. After considering the concepts of framing, the ideological square, and representation in the context of storytelling, I realized how prevalent the concepts are in our everyday lives. Now, I see them even in my own stories, and, with this knowledge, I will continue to incorporate and consider these ideas moving forward in my storytelling career.

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Appendix

Bleed Green Script

I approach the building, and the automatic doors slide open before me, beckoning me in in a *creepy* kind of way. I walk in, and . . . There's just something about fluorescent lights that just really sets me on edge. They paint the room in this weird, off-blue color that looks like something you'd see in a bad student film that's trying really hard to be artsy.

I make my way over to the break room, and I swear it's like they design those things to be as uncomfortable as possible! It's like they want you to go back to work or something! I go over to the mirror in the corner of the room and check myself before I have to go back out there. Green polo? Check. Black slacks and apron? Double check. Name tag? Jacob. Check. I look in the mirror and give my best customer-service smile. Man, I hate my job!

There comes a time in every young adult's life where you just, kind of, get sick of your parents' shit. Whether you just need more space, your parents don't respect your boundaries, or if you're like me, you want to spread your wings and fly or something like that. After all, it's basically inevitable that, at a certain point, you're going to end up leaving the nest and becoming your own person, an independent adult, if you will. I was a little bit behind the curve in that regard, I guess, because I was a baby bird until I was twenty-one. But if there's one thing I can say about myself, it's that I am extremely good at making important life decisions at the worst possible times. By the time I moved out, it was May of 2020. You all remember 2020, right? You know, ten years ago?

I didn't let the pandemic slow me down, though, because I wanted to taste adulthood before society as I knew it effectively collapsed. But in order to do that successfully, I needed to make preparations. I needed to be able to pay my bills, so I looked for jobs. I mean, after all, if you really think about it, there is nothing more adult than getting crushed under the great big boot of capitalism.

So, I applied to a bunch of different places. I applied to Target, I applied to Walmart, I applied to CVS—I'm not really proud of that one, but I needed a job, okay? And none of them wanted me. I like to think I'm a pretty smart guy, or at least, I'm a hard worker, so, you know, their loss! So, I applied to Costco, and I applied to Publix, and Walgreens, and none of them wanted me, either. They didn't care about my slammin' resume! They didn't care that I learned to read chapter books when I was six! Or that I am a superlative pianist, or that I won a silver medal in a fencing tournament when I was eleven, but I started crying because I lost to my arch nemesis, Ethan! They didn't care about any of that!

One day while I was in my room sulking and contemplating my life's decisions up to that point, I received a phone call, and it was from Publix! *Where shopping is a pleasure*. And they wanted me to come in for an interview! Wow! This is perfect! They wanted me! They really, really wanted me! And I was so overwhelmed by the euphoria of being desired by the hiring authority of a corporate entity that I didn't even notice that in the interview they were basically just checking to see if I had a pulse. But I did get the job . . . because I do have a pulse!

A few days later, they brought me into this super-dingy room in the back of the store and sat me down at this computer that was probably older than I was. I had to watch some training videos. I watched this video about the history of Publix, and I learned a little bit about the founder: George Jenkins, the father of Publix. But people called him Mr. George. And then, after that, I watched some videos of employees' interacting with customers, and all the employees looked really happy to be there, and all the customers were really nice. I think I could get used to this place!

The thing that they don't tell you is that none of your coworkers out there are going to be as happy as the employees in the videos. And none of the customers are going to be as nice. But I didn't care about any of that. I was bleeding green with pride to be working at Publix. I was finally a part of something! I was part of the Publix family.

But I was so busy bleeding green that I didn't even notice all the red flags around me. There are certain aspects of retail that, when you tell other people who've never done retail about them, it kind of makes everything sound a little bit like a cult. I was so hyped to be a part of the Publix family that I didn't even really think about the fact that there are plenty of groups that tend to frame themselves as families that aren't even actually that good of people. Like the Mansons, or the Lyman Family, or the mafia.

On top of that, everyone was so obsessed with George Jenkins. They called him Mr. George so lovingly. Everyone wanted to climb the corporate ladder and be the next Mr. George, and in the middle of shifts, people would ask themselves, "Oh, what

would Mr. George do?" As if Mr. George rose from the dead three days after he died.

And then there was this weird dynasty system going on in Publix. There was the overarching Publix family, but then there were families within Publix. I had entire families as my coworkers at Publix. Fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers, all working at the same Publix, all at the same time, even carpooling to work together. And then, if I didn't have to deal with that, I would be bagging groceries, and I would have customers come up to the cashier and me and say, "Oh, this Publix is so nice! It's so much nicer than my Publix, and it's even bigger than the Publix that my husband works at!" And I would just smile while I bagged the groceries when, really, I was thinking, "Lady, it's a grocery store. You can relax."

And then there was John. John was this short, middle-aged guy who prowled around the aisles of Publix, pretending to do work when he actually wasn't, and everyone knew it. And if there was one more thing about John that everyone knew, it was that John was miserable. Every day I would try and talk to John and say, "Hey, John, how you doing?" and he would just look at me and say:

[Presses finger gun to temple.]

As far as anyone could tell, John didn't really have much going on. He still lived with his parents—that was apparent—but he didn't really have a wife or children to speak of. But the thing that really bothered me about John was the fact that he started working at Publix twenty-five years before I got there, and despite being there for oh so long, he and I held the exact same position in the Publix corporate ladder. Then, on top

of that, John started working at Publix, like me, when he was twenty-one. After I learned that little fact, John became this kind of creepy mirror that reflected my own future with Publix—something that I did not want. I knew I needed to get out of there at some point; otherwise, it would consume me, too, but I bided my time a little bit.

The last straw came when I was sitting in the break room one day, scrolling on my phone and trying to savor the last few moments of freedom I had before I had to go out on the floor for eight hours. Suddenly, a coworker ran in crying, and she was followed by another coworker who came to console her. Now, I'm not usually one to listen in or anything like that, but I didn't have much better to do, you know, being at Publix, so I decided to listen in on their gossip. As it turns out, her husband is a store manager at another Publix, and he's having an affair with a woman who works at another Publix. In the meat department, if you know what I mean.

Ewwwww! This place is nasty. Everything is so . . . Ugh! I knew I didn't want to be a part of this establishment anymore. I needed to get out of here, and fast, because I didn't want my life to be anywhere near as absorbed in Publix as *these* people. So, I knew I needed to quit.

But I felt kind of bad for wanting to quit Publix. Like I was letting everyone down. Like I was betraying the Publix family or Mr. George. Everyone was so concerned with sticking to Publix because it's such a "great place to work." Why didn't I feel that way? Am I just a bad worker? Am I lazy? Am I stupid? And besides, what would I have without Publix anyway at this point? Virtually all of my waking hours for the past

few months had been spent here! I didn't have time to see family or friends.

Finally, after weeks of agonizing, I did it. I went to my manager Juan's office, and I turned in my two weeks', and he looked up at me from the desk and said, "You're such a great worker; why are you quitting?" and I just said, "I need some time for my family. It's been a rough few months. I might be back!" (I knew I wasn't actually going to be back, though; I just lied to, you know, lighten the blow a little bit.) And that was it.

On my last day working at Publix, I was talking to one of my coworkers before I left, and she asked me why I was quitting. I gave her the same spiel I gave Juan, basically just saying the same things, and after I was done, she nodded in understanding, and then she started laughing! And she said, "Oh, I thought you were quitting because of something . . . stupid, like school!"

I walked toward the automatic sliding doors, and they opened for me, beckoning me to freedom! I strode into the parking lot and turned to look at the giant green Publix sign that overlooked the entire place. . . .

I'm not trying to disparage grocery-store workers or something like that with this story. Grocery-store workers are really important. I mean, speaking from experience, they do a lot of the things that customers don't want to do. A lot of the people I worked with are hard workers. Of course, I don't have an issue with them. What I do, however, have an issue with are companies, like Publix, that, rather than, you know, paying their employees a proper wage, they'd rather instill this sense of meaning through a family structure when they're just as disposable as any other

employee. And until businesses get better about that, every day, I'm just going to keep passing Publix on my way here, or home, or anywhere else, and I'm going to look at it and say, "Yep. That's a cult."