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Olivia Marilee Warfield

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“OUR KIND OF COMMUNICATION”: RHETORICAL DISCOVERIES OF A RESONANT COMMUNICATIVE PHILOSOPHY ON MISTER ROGERS’ NEIGHBORHOOD

by

Olivia Marilee Warfield

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Major: Communication

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For Hal, Miriam, and Lauren, without whose loving support
I would not have been able to complete this project.
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Abstract

This project investigates what Mr. Fred Rogers referred to as “our kind of communication” in a 1969 Senate testimony wherein he was awarded twenty million dollars to fund continuation of his children’s educational television program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. I ask how “our kind of communication” manifests throughout the series’ thirty-three year run and then contextualize the communicative mode’s ongoing significance in the present day. I position this study as a communicative, philosophical inquiry which connects issues of pedagogy, rhetoric, epistemology, and ontology. First, I ground the study in relevant literature regarding mass media and (public) television, rhetorical televisual framing, an amended invitational rhetoric, epistemic rhetoric, and a turn toward epistemologies. Through ethical close reading in the spirit of post-qualitative inquiry, I observe four overarching patterns that create the inscape of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication.” Finally, centering resonance theory, I locate and illuminate a listening-based epistemology demonstrated by Mr. Rogers over time that promotes hope within the Western paradigm and promise for developing an ecology of knowledges.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures.................................................................................................................................................... vii  
CHAPTER ONE: “Our Kind of Communication” ......................................................................................... 1  
   Research Questions ........................................................................................................................................ 4  
   Background: Mr. Rogers, The Neighborhood, and Previous Studies.................................................... 9  
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.............................................................................................................. 15  
   Mass Media, American Culture, and (Public) Television ................................................................. 15  
   Public Television ........................................................................................................................................ 21  
   Televisual Framing as Rhetorical ............................................................................................................. 25  
   Invitational Rhetoric .................................................................................................................................. 31  
   Disciplinary Critiques of Invitational Rhetoric .................................................................................. 35  
   Epistemological and Ontological Amendments to Invitational Rhetoric ................................... 40  
   Disciplinary Discussions on Epistemic Rhetoric .............................................................................. 49  
   Epistemological and Ontological Considerations for Epistemic Rhetoric ................................... 56  
   Rhetoric as an Opening Toward Plural Epistemologies .................................................................. 61  
CHAPTER THREE: Method .......................................................................................................................... 70  
   Ethical Close Reading ............................................................................................................................. 70  
   Post-Qualitative Inquiry ......................................................................................................................... 78  
   Episode Selection for Analysis .............................................................................................................. 84  
CHAPTER FOUR: Mapping the Space of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood ........................................... 90  
   Overarching Show Structure ................................................................................................................. 91  
   Opening Theme, Entrance, and Segment Transitions ................................................................... 91  
   Monologue and Encounters ............................................................................................................... 95  
   To Make Believe and Back .................................................................................................................. 98  
   Recap and Ending Monologue ........................................................................................................ 101  
   Music and Exit ........................................................................................................................................ 102  
   Televisual Framing ............................................................................................................................... 103  
   Camera Angles, Shots, and Movement ............................................................................................ 104  
   Simplicity of Set, Costumes, and Props ............................................................................................. 109  
   The Occasional “Documentary” .................................................................................................... 112  
   Inviting Imagination through Off-Screen Space .............................................................................. 114  
   Music, Sound, and Audio .................................................................................................................. 116
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Presence of Music</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music and Sound as Voice</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Treatment of Language</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity, Open Space, and Invitational Language</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Themes in Simple Space</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our Kind of Communication”: A Meaningful Expression of Care</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: Resonant Philosophy, Invitational Epistemology, and Hope</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalating Exigencies in the Twenty-First Century</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Components of Resonance</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resonance</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestalt Comprehension (Or Perception, Intelligence, Insight)</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity, Space, and Coherence</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful Gentleness</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rogers’s Invitational Epistemology</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Centrality of Listening Space</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can We Live Together?: Hope Within the Ecology of Knowledges</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Entering the Neighborhood</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood”</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trolley Transitions</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Thematic Introductions via Item Interactions</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Make Believe</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dialogic Z-Axis Space</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Relating Through Close-Ups</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Engagement with Simple Props</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Musical Pedagogy</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Synchronous “Voices”</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Invitational Questioning</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Mr. Rogers Talks about Death</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Complexity of Love</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jeff Erlanger Shares Experience with Mr. Rogers</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Mr. Rogers Considers Garbage’s Impact</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Love, Self-Expression, and the Arts</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: “Our Kind of Communication”

*I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you!  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.  
So let's make the most of this beautiful day,  
Since we're together we might as well say,  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?  

- “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”  
Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood (1968 – 2001)

In the year 2020, a war rages on amongst human discourses, across media platforms, on television, and in interpersonal interaction; caustic, reactionary speech circulates widely and routinely. Today, scholars, educators, and others are concerned about the very form (or de-formation) of human discourses. Tribal epistemology, disinformation campaigns, the collapse of public faith and trust – all play significant roles in further dividing an already fragmented society at micro- and macro-levels. Given the current state of human communication, many call out for an alternative, different way of being, thinking, and knowing in the world that does not spread hate, discord, and dissonance. However, in such a chaotic world, occasional examples appear which ignite hope for collective communicative possibilities, and one such case still lingers in public memory long after its departure. In 2001, only eleven days before the Twin Towers fell in New York City, a beloved children’s program aired its final episode out of Pittsburgh, PA, gently closing the doors of its television home right before the American public treaded uncertainly into the precarious, rapidly changing realm of post-September 11 reality.

For decades across America, children and adults alike heard the simple notes of the song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” fill the air of their homes in downtime hours
after a long day at school (or work). A song from a program that still rings nostalgic today, sustaining over three decades of viewership in America required concerted efforts. The origin of such beloved memory stretches back to 1969 when Mr. Fred Rogers appeared before the U.S. Senate with hopes of receiving twenty million dollars of federal PBS funding to sustain his children’s television program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* (hereinafter, interchangeably referred to as “*MRN*”). Public television was on the verge of cutting funding (The Fred Rogers Company, n.d.-a). The Democratic Senator leading the proceedings, John Pastore of Rhode Island, had already sat through two prior days of hearings without awarding funds.

In the beginning of the recorded testimony, Rogers tells the self-proclaimed “tough guy” Senator Pastore that he has prepared a written philosophical statement as part of his testimonial appeal. Viewers can see the papers in his hand. However, he tells Senator Pastore that although he has a prepared statement, he would simply like to talk about its contents, implying a more informal and conversational dialogue with the Senator. Pastore’s tough guy-demeanor gradually softens in response to Rogers’s calm, slow-paced, simple appeals for the conceptual reasoning behind his television program. After a pause, Pastore, with a markedly different attitude remarks that it was the “first time [he’d] had goosebumps for the last two days,” referring to the previous days of testimonies heard from those advocating for funding. Rogers replies, “Well, I’m grateful, not only for your goosebumps, but for your interest in – our kind of communication” (American Rhetoric, n.d.). After only six minutes of testimony, Rogers is awarded the full twenty million dollars. As my study will show, Rogers’s six-minute message reflects multiple layers of meaningful value as to the nature of his “kind of communication.”
Rogers’s testimony is remarkable for its significance in revealing an intertextual relationship between his words, philosophy, television series, and cultural reputation. In retrospection, the testimony establishes a clear origin for the program’s cultural legacy. To this day, filmmakers continue reviving Mr. Rogers’s livelihood. Both the testimony and the series are portrayed in films like Won’t You Be My Neighbor? (2018) whereas A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (2019) depicts a fictional story inspired by true events as one’s man life and family are forever changed by his friendship with Mr. Rogers. The former film became the top-grossing biographical documentary of all time in the United States in July 2018, pointing to its resounding significance in the eyes of the American public (McClintock, 2018).

The “philosophical statement” referred to by Rogers in his Senate testimony appears to be related to a document entitled “Philosophy” in the Fred Rogers Archive at Saint Vincent College (Fred Rogers Center, n.d.-b). Collections of Mr. Rogers’s personal and public writings, notes, written ideas, scripts, and letters are also there. Klarén (2016) mentions a document entitled “Philosophy” referenced from a research visit to the Archive. Based on context provided in Klarén’s project, the “Philosophy” document reflects on child psychology and education for the process of program planning. This document likely provides philosophical insights surrounding MRN’s development but is restricted from public viewing; there is no accompanying rhetorical or philosophical guidance in existence to help explain the program’s present-day significance for the adults who look back so fondly on the program even, perhaps especially, in 2020. While these artifacts naturally help shape understandings of Mr. Rogers’s communicative and pedagogical philosophy, no study has yet considered a sampling of MRN episodes over
the course of its broadcast as the sole focal point for unearthing the manifestation and nature of “our kind of communication,” especially as such a communicative mode clearly remains cherished today. As Rogers frames the program’s “kind of communication” as a philosophical outlook on the world and as justification for the program’s existence, therein lies a call for *MRN*’s exploration.

**Research Questions**

The present study considers the appreciable connections between Mr. Rogers, knowledge, education, philosophy, and culture. Zelevansky (2004) ponders that Mr. Rogers’s contribution to society is likely “more a reflection of the debased culture around him than any calculated attempt on his part to act in opposition to it,” shortly thereafter referring to him as an “epistemologist and phenomenologist in a cardigan sweater” (p. 208). A biographer, Maxwell King (2015), shares that the apparent simplicity of *MRN*’s visual and auditory characteristics conceals the actuality that “every detail in it [is] the product of a tremendously careful, academically informed process.” Given these relations, the guiding research questions for this study are:

**RQ1** – How does what Mr. Rogers refers to as “our kind of communication” in his 1969 Senate testimony manifest rhetorically in episodes of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*?

**RQ2** – Given that recent films paying tribute to Mr. Rogers’s legacy have earned bold reviews like, “A balm of kindness and empathy in divisive times,” and “*This is what we need right now,*” what is the significance of Mr. Rogers’s rhetorical choices and why does this mode of communication still resonate powerfully with audiences today?
The philosophical tone of these questions is apparent, especially as they relate to issues of epistemology, mediated pedagogy, and what manifests as an issue of ontology as well. This project begins rooted in the rhetorical tradition as a mode of exploration while moving toward a discussion of plural “epistemologies” (Santos, 2014) via an opening of method growing around ethical close reading and post-qualitative inquiry (Colás, 2008; St. Pierre, 2014). I position this study as a communicative, philosophical inquiry which explores how issues of deep existential significance can be rhetorically conveyed in a sense that resonates with audiences and leads us reaching back in time for more connection with such simple communication. Ultimately, in this project, I posit that “our kind of communication” can be understood as a listening-oriented, invitational dialogue as a primary communicative mode that invokes resonance for present-day audiences. Simultaneously, this communicative mode points to an invitational epistemology originating from within a Western paradigm and provides a useful opening to conversation among the ecology of knowledges, or the plurality of ways of knowing carried by humanity. Moving toward this central discovery is the purpose of subsequent chapters. The remainder of Chapter 1 provides background on Fred Rogers, *MRN*, related works and studies, and openings in literature for the current study.

Chapter 2 contains a literature review with five sections, starting from more general areas of consideration through to the more specialized. Throughout his lifetime, Rogers often vocalized concern with television’s societal role. As *MRN* exists within the televisual realm, specifically public television, the first section reviews mass media theory, television studies, and public television, areas which often deliberate the television’s historical and contemporary purpose. The second section considers ways in
which televisual framing is inherently rhetorical. Understanding the rhetorical nature of televisual framing allows for further investigation of how this process unfolds on MRN by observation of filmic themes and movements and how such frames intentionally inlay certain messaging to shape audience response. The third section explores invitational rhetoric, its disciplinary debates, and epistemological and ontological adjustments to the original theory, which open the theory for use in the present study. The fourth section introduces epistemic rhetoric, its disciplinary debates, and its amendments, which additionally open the theory for consideration in this study before shifting to a grounding concept of epistemologies rather than the singular term “epistemology.” The fifth and final literature section introduces and further discusses the concept of “epistemologies,” or the existence of a plurality of knowledges (Santos, 2014). This theoretical turn allows broader consideration of MRN’s rhetorical forces as they unfold throughout the program’s timespan, serving as wrappings on an epistemological gift Mr. Rogers shared with his audience.

Chapter 3 details methodology for the current inquiry, which is grounded in two purposefully open approaches – ethical close reading and post-qualitative inquiry. These are appropriately “open” methodologies that uniquely interweave with an “open” kind of communication, a blended need in this study that I will elaborate and defend. After introducing the methodology, I provide an overview and rationale of selected episodes for analysis alongside a more detailed overview of MRN’s series history.

Chapter 4 maps the rhetorical spaces and forces at work in the television program, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Following a brief explanation of my research process, I examine four overarching patterns and themes that emerge across the selected MRN
episodes. These sections include discussion of the program’s routine overarching show structure, consistent use of televisual framing and form, integration of music and auditory space, and careful use of language to integrate profoundly complex subject matter into simple mediated space. Then, I discuss the manifestation of “our kind of communication” as an intimate relationship amongst these four interwoven rhetorical components.

Chapter 5 contextualizes some of the sources as well as diagnoses of modern-day felt and actual precarity stemming from the increasing influence of technocracy exacerbated by societal acceleration, fragmentation, and increasing alienation which permeates multiple societal crises – the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psychological crisis. From this contextualization, I discuss the current significance of MRN by “breaking down” the intricately interwoven elements of resonance theory in conjunction with an explanation of gestalt comprehension capacities, openness, coherence, and gentleness. Next, I unwrap the “gift of knowledge” Mr. Rogers’s bestows viewers as his rhetorical choices unveil an invitational epistemology which, through his pedagogical methods on the program, teaches viewers a healthy, relational, and contemplative way of knowing in the world that is based in dialogue, listening, and seeking to understand the self and others. In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that Mr. Rogers demonstrated one way of knowing within Western epistemologies that could prove useful in dialogue with non-Western, non-Eurocentric epistemologies within the ecology of existing knowledges. I provide thoughts from a variety of scholars from differing epistemological backgrounds to highlight the importance of keeping the concept of “knowledge” open and in communication with each other for working toward a better world for all, especially in light of system-wide diagnoses considered in this chapter.
Chapter 6 concludes this project by explaining its original inspirations, articulating its overall trajectory, and providing key conclusions and limitations. Then, I reflect on the importance of discussed philosophical concepts for modern life as invigorated by this project’s consideration of *MRN*. I finish with ideas for future research and a brief meditation on current affairs at the time of writing in connection with axiological reflections of Mr. Rogers.

Before moving further, and at risk of stating the obvious, the world and all beings in it exist in a realm far more complex than any discipline, methodology, or theories can encapsulate. In her work on the philosophy of listening, Fiumara (1995) reminds readers that dominant cognitive paradigms assume “a vast underlying rationality and consequent logocentrism, [with which] the higher spheres of education and culture… induce a climate of latent arrogance at the exorbitant cost of a detachment from the interwoven complexity and unfathomable depth of ‘reality’” (p. 45). Any knowledge that posits “to know” something ignores the significant tension that exists between subjective-objective reality; reality lies somewhere in this space, in a realm that it is difficult for words to touch, which is what makes the work of the thinkers included here so important and helpful in painting a “clearer picture.” The norms of humanist qualitative research are a narrative – a story that suggests knowledge is currently incomplete but that through a prescribed set of analytical processes, it can be. However, a narrative is just that – a story, and narratives are powerful. We tend to cut off our innately gifted sense of wonder for the insatiable quest to always know. To release oneself from the narrative that all can be known is to make way for the magic of inquiry to take place and coherent thought to flow, to accept a “principle of incompleteness” about knowledges (Santos, 2014). This is
the spirit of this inquiry; it does not have a completely distinctive start or endpoint but makes a genuine effort to hold a coherent discussion about rhetoric, philosophy, and epistemology within the scope of its interwoven themes. Centering this effort is the creative and intentional, rhetorical world of Mr. Rogers, a figure whose own sense of integrity and coherence is embedded in a life-driven value of love between and for neighbor and self, and therefore aligns with such an open mode of inquiry about the world.

**Background: Mr. Rogers, The Neighborhood, and Previous Studies**

Fred Rogers graduated from Rollins College with a music degree in 1951, at which time he began a career in television in New York (Fred Rogers Center, n.d.-a). Despite auspicious opportunities in New York, Rogers settled in Pittsburgh, PA as he got word about WQED – the city’s first public television station owned by the community (Fred Rogers Center, n.d.-a). While simultaneously studying child development, Rogers helped produce *The Children’s Corner*, where many of his ideas for music, puppets, and stories for children took root (Fred Rogers Center, n.d.-a). Throughout the 1960s, Rogers worked on various educational television programs for children before *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* first premiered February 19, 1968 on NET (National Education Television), the predecessor of PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) (Fred Rogers Productions, n.d.). In 1971, Rogers established Family Communications, Inc., which became the non-profit organization producing *MRN*. In an interview, Rogers reflected on his decision to pursue a career in television: “I went into television because I hated it so. I thought there was some way of using this fabulous instrument to be one of nurture to those who would watch and listen” (Bertram, 2019). An undoubtedly strong word for Mr.
Rogers, his use of “hate” ultimately spoke to the depth and seriousness of his view surrounding television’s noisy and erratic nature during his lifetime.

Television has historically marketed “visual excess in broadcast,” especially on “hyperactive” children’s television (Caldwell, 1995, pp. 18-19). Popular children’s programs like Captain Kangaroo and Sesame Street were produced and aired adjacently to MRN. Captain Kangaroo ran from 1955 to 1984 (Klarén, 2016) and the host-character “Captain Kangaroo” (played by Bob Keeshan) even appeared as a guest on an episode of MRN in 1970 (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). Most comparably, Sesame Street was conceived around the same time as MRN and continued production in the same time period; however, the shows “had different missions and were directed toward different audiences” (Klarén, 2016, p. 105). Coates, Pusser, and Goodman (1976) note that Sesame Street largely served to support “youngsters from a variety of backgrounds [in acquiring] simple and complex cognitive skills” (p. 138). MRN, in contrast, emphasized “social and emotional development such as co-operation, verbalizing one’s feelings, and coping with frustration” (Coates, Pusser, and Goodman, 1976, p. 140). In a comparison of MRN with Sesame Street, Zelevansky (2004) observes:

Sesame Street both mirrors pop cultural values and serves as a flashing neon sign endorsing commodified self-expression: ‘Just do it!’ Affirmations advanced by Mister Rogers… are no less unqualified, but are built on relationship, not self-love or blanket permission. Sesame Street’s pacing and editing also models an MTV quick cut, short attention span presentation of culture and thought built on hyperstimulation and noise. The problem here is not the recognition of the increasingly fragmented ways in which information and knowledge are
transmitted and mixed; the ‘sample’ is at the heart of art forms like hip-hop music and various manifestations of collage and montage. What seems lacking is any concern that unfocused motion and stimulation and the prepackaging of small bits of description (sound and image bytes) might undermine imagination and contemplative thought. (p. 202)

In this way, *MRN* was uniquely created with an uncluttered, relationship-centric format and messaging that set it apart from other simultaneously screened children’s television programming in the mid- to late-twentieth century. “Our kind of communication” represented an authorial phrasing which designates Mr. Rogers as a true auteur. Grant (2008) explains that the now-common auteur designation was once actually a radical idea in its introduction; inherent to the concept is the idea that “some [creators] may express an individual vision, [or] a worldview, over a series of films [or television episodes] with stylistic and thematic consistency” (Grant, 2008, p. 1). Mr. Rogers directly connected his intentionality of creation, production, and overarching vision for *MRN* to his guiding principles surrounding the nature and purpose of television. Gravely concerned about what was broadcast across the airwaves, Rogers sought to create space within the medium which provided a reprieve from more dominating forms of “bombardment” (American Rhetoric, n.d.). In his own writings, he ruminated on this outlook:

> The child at the television set brings to his or her watching and listening their whole being – everything they’ve been through: all the joys, all the sadnesses, all the fears. All of that comes with them as they watch our work on television, just as all of that comes with them as they go to day care or nursery school or first grade or law school! (Rogers, 1984, pp. 13-14)
Mr. Rogers expressed concern for the integrity of each person viewing his program, as he saw a clear connection between the child watching and the adult that they inevitably become; the child is an integral part of the adult for life. We cannot fragment ourselves from the feelings experienced by our inner-child and our fundamental relations to all others and, Rogers suggested, we should not desire to try. He continued:

In our Orwellian age more and more children are being exposed to fancier and fancier machinery. Many schools are using computers in their children’s daily routines. No matter how helpful they are as tools… they don’t begin to compare in significance to the teacher/child relationship which is human and mutual. A computer can help you learn to spell *hug*, but it can never know the risk or the joy of actually giving or receiving one. (Rogers, 1984, p. 17, emphasis in original)

In 1984, Rogers was clearly wary of technology displacing the need for human connection in teaching, learning, and living. He alluded to the fragmentation and disconnection generated by machinery through the significance, feeling-experience, and meaning of a hug. Rogers mentioned that adults who wrote him letters and messages shared with him that viewing *MRN* caused them to “come away with a renewed sense of their own self-worth” (Rogers, 2001, p. 72), a significant indication of the precious pieces of self that are corrupted or lost during the trudge forth into adulthood. As Rogers noted further, “The world is not a kind place. That’s something all children learn for themselves, whether we want them to or not, but it’s something they really need our help to understand” (Bertram, 2019). In the world of overstimulating, hyperactive children’s television, Mr. Rogers quietly, consistently reminded viewers: “What is mentionable is manageable” (Kris, n.d.).
Given the program’s established significance and uniqueness, authors have already granted Mr. Rogers and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* attention in various writings. Academic works, spanning across decades, focus specifically on the program’s effect on its youngest viewers, children (Cantor, Sparks, & Hoffner, 1988; Coates, Pusser, & Goodman, 1976; Sharapan, 2007). Other works center on highly specified programmatic aspects to understand the multiplicity of unique production choices, which lead to its twentieth century distinctiveness. Daniel Murray’s (2007) dissertation focuses specifically on the *Neighborhood*’s “Mister Rogers Talks about Learning” five-episode series in order to connect Rogers’s “humanizing pedagogy” with viewers’ ability to incorporate such teachings into their daily lives in an ever-increasingly complex world. King and Lindey (2019) discuss the “Caring for the Environment” episode series from 1990 and notice how Mr. Rogers presents the then-impending (and ever-present) environmental crisis as an opportunity to prepare for a new social order rather than falling under the intensely weighted prospect of “environmental apocalypticism.” One study even examines the effect the program has on teachers of young children who were shown episodes of *MRN* and then asked to evaluate how their interactions with children changed after a series of viewings, with the author conclusively asserting that *MRN* have a mandated place in teacher trainings (Marazon, 1994).

The Neighborhood Archive contains a listing of multiple books and publications focused around the Mr. Rogers universe (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-b). Many are for children, some are biographical, and others point to a legacy left behind. Mohr and Mohr (2019) compile a sizable volume entitled *Mister Rogers and Philosophy* with reflections from thirty philosophers on various aspects of the “*Neighborhood*
phenomenon.” Chapters range from a wide variety of lofty concepts that arise from viewing the program: Rogers’s seeming Socratic communication, his non-philosophical exploration of personalism, the program’s underlying message of interconnectedness and relationality amongst all humans, Rogers’s enactment of the “ethics of care,” and the role of wonder in the *Neighborhood*.

Clearly, a multitude of aspects surrounding *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* are found worthy of a closer look. A number of academic works attune more specifically to rhetorical aspects of the program, such as its intentional use of language (Danielson, 2015), fantasy theme analyses of news coverage on Rogers before and after his death (Bishop, 2003; Perry and Roesch, 2004, respectively), and the intergenerational, dialogic communication ethics at work in the show’s viewer mail segment (Klarén, 2017). In Klarén’s 2016 dissertation, she explores the complexity of thought behind *MRN* and the ethics of care embedded within the program to attend to affective, pedagogical needs of children and adults. Her work examines speeches, notes, scripts, letters, and the first year of programming in order to consider the “ethical emotionality” carefully laid into televisual communication (Klarén, 2016). At this point, it is clear there is ample space to discuss the philosophical ruminations underpinning *MRN*’s creation. Though aspects of Klarén’s (2016) work echo a related interest in the show’s rhetorical motions, this project aims to place Mr. Rogers’s mention of a “philosophical statement” (American Rhetoric, n.d.) and a broader time-arc of televised programming in conversation with differing modes of inquiry, thought, and philosophy.
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

This project explores multiple literature areas before turning to look fully at episodes of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. First, I consider a brief history of television as an influential aspect of American culture, especially in the contrast between commercialized and public television as mass media has evolved from the 1940s and onward. Next, I explore the rhetorical nature of televisual framing as production modes and filmic frames can be intentionally used to instill certain perception and messaging. Then, I introduce and discuss invitational rhetoric. Fourth, I introduce and discuss the theory of epistemic rhetoric as nested in rhetorical studies. Finally, I build a bridge between understanding epistemic rhetoric as a creative tool and the preferred term “epistemologies.” This provides a route for understanding knowledge as multiple and incomplete, rather than as one dominant epistemology, especially as such situating of epistemologies paves the way for the unmistakable pluralities of existence. A sensitivity to epistemologies ultimately proves useful for forthcoming consideration of Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication as one Western epistemology to be posed in hopeful dialogue with other epistemologies both within and beyond a plurality of ways of knowing the world.

Mass Media, American Culture, and (Public) Television

In this section, I provide a brief overview of discourse and debate that developed over the incorporation and evolution of mass media and television into society. Then, I consider the history and development of public television as the realm in which *MRN* was created and flourished and one that stood in stark contrast to commercialized television that was commonly considered a product created for “mass appeal” (Hogan, 1990, p. 72).
Television has become a pronounced component of American culture since its origin. Since its invention in the early twentieth century, television repeatedly sparked concern regarding its role in culture and society at large. Newcomb (1974) argued that television, more than any other popular art, has the most “confusion as to [its] purpose and definition. No one seems to know just what the medium is, and the estimates range from the prime impetus of massive cultural change to the narcotizing trap of American society” (p. 1). What once seemed a novel, blank slate has since birthed multiple uses and genres in the past century. Understanding television’s evolution and increased socio-cultural and political influence is important for consideration of a program’s fit or contrast to the status quo over time. This is especially relevant for a program like MRN, which remained relatively consistent in multiple aspects of programming, even alongside societal (and television’s) evolution around it in the decades between the 1960s and the earliest 2000s.

Early mass communication scholarship contained an almost dizzying array of debate, which lacked a singularity of focus in argument and significance, often stemming from the background and expertise of the scholar in focus. According to Hirsch (1982), in television’s relatively short history, the multiplicity of study on its effects “seem to conflict with each other… partly from observers considering entirely different aspects of television’s role in society and then offering broad generalizations about it, based on whichever specific aspects of the topic they see as most important” (pp. 281-282). In the early 1900s, some scholars deliberated the effects of reproducibility and technology on art. Though artwork has always technically been reproducible by others who witness a work of art or a craft, the introduction of lithography and, subsequently, photography led
to an unprecedented era of reproductive possibilities (Benjamin, 1936/2008). Modes of human perception have naturally shifted over time just as “the entire mode of existence of human collectives [change] over long historical periods”; in this way, the medium in which perception occurs “is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (Benjamin, 1936/2008, p. 23). The evolution of human perception into the televisual realm reflected (and still reflects) humanity’s shift in collective consciousness and expression.

Concern arose about the power influence embedded in mass media, its ubiquitous societal influence and effect on critical thinking, and a perceived diminishing of widespread cultural tastes. Benjamin (1936/2008) anxiously considered the influence of a privileged minority owning and exploiting the majority of opportunities in the new film industry, comparing film capital to fascism, and arguing that “the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat” (p. 34). In this way, Benjamin saw usefulness in self-exploration for the masses should they be able to enter the curious realm allowed by film. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) feared that the spread of mass media would lead to an “assault” on perception making way for the growth of “an unthinking conformism” (p. 97). This thought paralleled the ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) who believed that the so-called “culture industry” was simply a way to dull the masses into accepting the status quo and its capitalistic constraints placed on lived realities by power-holding media producers. Media scholars have grappled with the nature and underlying value of mass communication instruments for almost a century now. Despite these ponderings, no one proposition can definitively describe the entire epistemological and axiological underpinnings of the medium as much as they can ascertain significant questions for ongoing consideration, especially in thinking about
individual programs that have appeared over the dynamic last century of the medium’s existence and as the nature of organizations and networks controlling televised airwaves shift in makeup and governance.

The introduction of reproducible media technology catalyzed discussion about its implications for societal values and human morality, to which many arrived at differing conclusions. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) observed that without controls, mass media was most likely a creator of conflict and societal illness. Benjamin (1936/2008) additionally argued that the lack of technological reproducibility in ancient societies limited the underlying values of their artwork to only themes of the “eternal,” and that the then-current state of society and technology allowed film to be “the artwork most capable of improvement… [in] its radical renunciation of eternal value” (p. 28). Scholars not only wondered about whether film and mass-produced art like photography were considered “art” but what the “character” of art could be or would become given its change; film stirred up more debate than that of photography (Benjamin, 1936/2008). Reflecting on the thoughts of so-called optimistic “visionaries” who predicted television’s utopian promise, Newcomb (1974) mentioned Thomas H. Hutchinson’s 1946 book *Here Is Television: Your Window to the World*. In it, Hutchinson described television as one of the greatest communication inventions ever created by humanity and asserted that it would “develop friendly neighbors [and] bring understanding and peace on earth” (Hutchinson, 1946, as cited in Newcomb, 1974, p. 2). Despite chaotic predictions, many others maintained a sense of idealism, a vision which some television creators never completely lost.
Some considered television’s new modes of perception a window to worlds beyond simple transmissive communication. Newcomb (1974) reflected on the work of a prominent media theorist writing, “For McLuhan, the key to television is that it restores mosaic perception. It is not uniform, repeatable, fragmented, or linear” (p. 6) and in this way, aids viewers in seeing parts on a TV screen in connection with a larger whole reality. Furthermore, McLuhan thought that television could change “the ways in which human beings think about themselves and their relation to the world they live in,” leading to a form of “synesthesia” in which there is a sense of unity between reality and imagination, a feat that he called previously “impossible” for Western artists and thinkers (Newcomb, 1974, pp. 7-8). Ultimately, Newcomb (1974) decided that television rests open, a vessel to be filled, and what takes shape depends on a multiplicity of surrounding factors. Novak (1977/1982) additionally considered television with a described method “beloved of philosophers, theologians, [and] cultural critics,” calling television a “molder of the soul’s geography” which “builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectations… much in the same way that school lessons slowly, over the years, tutor the unformed mind and teach it ‘how to think’” (p. 336). However, by the 1960s, Dow (2004) noted that “entertainment network television ignored social and political tumult as escapist situation comedies began to rule the airwaves” (p. 57). Distraction and divergence in form and purpose abounded.

Indeed, television posed a philosophical quandary as some scholars have posited the medium’s potential for inspiring societal unity while others yet viewed television as a sower of evolving fragmentation. Chesebro (1978/1982) asserted an overarching view that the “relationships among communication, values, and popular television series are
complex; no single study is likely to reveal all of the dynamic intricacies among these three systems” (p. 9). Fiske and Hartley (1978) considered the study of television in light of earlier critical attempts to analyze it using the dominant values of literacy as the guidepost for evaluation. Television studies became an exemplifier of limiting “rearview-mirrorism,” or the exploration of the medium’s potential “in terms of the medium it is in the process of supplanting” – in this case, literary criticism as a result of over 500 years of print-dominated media (Fiske and Hartley, 1978, p. 15). As many scholars denounced television for its lack of sophistication in abandoning literary logic, Novak (1977/1982) wrote, “The culture of television celebrates to an extraordinary degree two mythic strains in the American character: the lawless and the irreverent” (p. 348). In its window to lawless and irreverent worlds, television, perhaps unconsciously:

> simulates a dream state, where all freedoms associated with savagery flourish without histrionics. We have no name for this state, for it did not exist before television… But whatever its name, it is a state of freedom – apolitical, though it admits politics, asocial, though it depends on social life – a celebration of pure irresponsibility. (Rosenblatt, 1976/1982, pp. 383-384)

Furthermore, televisual immersion was seen as increasing societal fragmentation as “we sit alone in our separate houses dazzled by the freedoms within the medium and the ferocious self-reliance of the medium. Our memories go, too, for the experience of television is itself unmemorable” (Rosenblatt, 1976/1982, p. 384). These television scholars projected television as an amusing diversion from lived reality.

Still, others pressed the medium’s liberating potential despite its existence in a hyper-capitalist society. Kellner (1979/1982) posited that “emancipatory popular culture”
through television could prompt people to see the need for change while breaking mediated stereotypes and highlighting the “inadequacy of rigid conceptions that prevent insight into the complexities of changes of social life… and at its best, [could suggest] that another way of life is possible” (p. 409). Despite television’s capitalist drive, Caldwell (1995) emphasized that “outsiders can marshal television skills to counter program and resist the dominant media” (p. x).

The background on television thus far highlights the expansive, complex nature of mass media and television scholarship. Caldwell (1995) calms readers’ sense of inundation at the knowledge and background on the televisual industry noting, “[C]oming to grips with the complexity, scale, and operations of [the industry] can be debilitating” (p. ix). Television’s users, influencers, producers, creators, directors, and (especially) funders have indeed changed drastically in the industry overall. Kellner (1979/1982) expressed that the increasing influence of corporate sponsorships have prohibited the potentially emancipatory social-realist forms that occasionally appeared throughout the eras of American television history. Caldwell (1995) further argued that the 1990s brought a completely re-theorized aesthetic on television as performative style became “the subject, the signified” of the medium as a result of economic crisis in the 1980s and heightened competition (p. 5). However, despite the eruption of excessive style in television’s evolution, other forms simultaneously stood in contrast to the dominant mode – public television.

Public Television

The contemporary public television system developed from what had previously been a “loose confederation” of educational TV stations created in the 1950s and 60s
Public television was birthed by the Public Television Act of 1967, which established federal support for a “new system of broadcasting [which] would be decentralized to allow for a high degree of local autonomy within each broadcasting market area” and was meant to counteract the centralizing, money-driven force of commercial broadcasting (Hogan, 1990, p. 72). The Carnegie Commission, the organizational body responsible for the proposal, described its value-driven purpose as the following:

If we were to sum up our proposal with all the brevity at our command, we would say that what we recommend is freedom. We seek freedom from the constraints, however necessary in their context, of commercial television. We seek for educational television freedom from the pressures of inadequate funds. We seek for the artist, the technician, the journalist, the scholar, and the public servant freedom to create, freedom to innovate, freedom to be heard in this most far-reaching medium. We seek for the citizen freedom to view, to see programs that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies him. (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 99, as cited in Hogan, 1990)

Ultimately, both the Senate and house enacted this legislation in a surprisingly swift manner, and it was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in November 1967 under the banner of his “Great Society” policy initiatives. In the name of enriching “man’s spirit,” (Hogan, 1990), in March 1968, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) registered as a nonprofit corporation, and by 1969, the CPB and the Ford Foundation granted $250,000 each to establish a landline link between 150 public television stations. In May 1969, Mr. Rogers’s aforementioned Senate testimony took
place and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was created by the CPB in November of the same year (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, n.d.). Hogan (1990) investigated the rhetoric of public officials and commissions advocating for public television, observing their repeated comparison against commercial television. Some officials, like Senator Cotton of the Communications Subcommittee, supported creation of public television and consubstantiated its societal role with the role of museums as facets of preserving public culture and education, all in service of the American public and not as a U.S. government agency.

Despite its resounding approval and quick development, public television faced major shifts in funding structures alongside the growth of cable and satellite services which created competition (Stavitsky, 1998). It has also been subject to assaults from political factions over the course of its history, beginning almost immediately after its inception, bouncing back and forth in allocated funding along with partisan shifts between federal administrations. As Stavitsky (1998) noted, media became driven by funders’ directives, and, “In the case of commercial broadcasters, this results in fealty… to advertisers. With public media, funders have been concerned… with the social, cultural and political impacts of program content” on top of financial concerns (p. 40). In the 1990s, PBS experienced continued funding fluctuations and an impetus to market itself more competitively to evoke a sense of entrepreneurship for survival; they engaged in partnerships with major corporations like AOL and Barnes & Noble (Chan-Olmsted, 2002). As commercial cable networks like The Discovery Networks, A&E, and The History Channel began offering their own versions of preschool and other children’s programming, some argued such outgrowths led to “identity confusion and diminished
the purpose of public television” despite its status as the most distinctive brand in America second only to Disney in 1995 (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002, p. 300). In the larger context of evolving capitalism, PBS had to begin considering concepts like brand management, counterintuitively to the values by which it was inspired and endowed.

Public television, in its inception, was built with facets that almost eliminated it multiple times over its fifty-plus year history. The organization’s Board of Directors was originally supposed to be composed of a nonpartisan group that would serve as a barrier from political influence; however, the Board became composed of presidential appointees (Avery, 2007). This created turmoil for public television’s existence from Nixon all the way to the current Trump administration. As Avery (2007) noted, “Four decades of evidence clearly suggests that public broadcasting fares better during Democratic administrations than during Republican administrations” (p. 362). Despite structural difficulties, one study found that public television’s reputation revolves around its “quality” and “trustworthiness” in image (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002). Though the mediated realm has not been spared in its neoliberal commercialization of experience, such manifestations on television and the Internet “only reinforce the need for the kind of citizen-oriented, noncommercial media that public broadcasting can be” (Hoynes, 2002, p. 35). Avery (2007) underscored the amazement that accompanies the persistence of public broadcasting against the commercialization of life, increasing media concentration, and deregulation of industry: “One need not be a scholar of public broadcasting to know that the ensuing years brought forth a series of events that made [the] lofty Great Society rhetoric seem almost ludicrous” (p. 358) and the fact that public television became law at all is astonishing.
Against the backdrop of excessive, untamed television-at-large and the balancing force of public television, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* carried on consistently alongside the tumultuous tidal waves of the television industry. Even within the distinctive realm of public television, *MRN* stood out as a unique community amongst the realm of other children’s programs. A blank canvas, a window to framed forms (some familiar and some new), a destroyer of intellect, or a bringer of utopian peace – as television has faced a vast array of theorizing, analysis, and speculation, one truth remains that what manifests upon its screen owes much credit to its creators’ intentionality, values, and philosophy surrounding the medium itself.

**Televisual Framing as Rhetorical**

Televisual form and framing are inherently rhetorical; they must be intentionally considered by a creator(s) in order to effectively, in their view, encase their work for audience reception. The television set’s physical boundaries are vital aspects of the medium which can be used artfully to enhance or shape the message(s) within and throughout. Filmic modes are wildly dynamic and flexible. Caldwell (1995) argues that in order to understand television style and narrative thoroughly, one must first acknowledge the “manufactured” nature of television (p. 7, emphasis in original). This intentional nature manifests through aspects like camera use, angle, setting, program speed, and movement through a program’s physical spaces; in this conceptualization, messages are encoded and decoded with purpose. In this section, I will consider the rhetorical nature of televisual framing, regarding both sensory and technical aspects of filming as constituted by creators’ intentional camera use to create the worlds that are presented within the confines of the television set. Much scholarship on the nature of rhetorical framing
centers on news media coverage, televised and otherwise, so in reviewing such literature, I focus on authors’ discussions of framing as rhetorical and not necessarily on their selected analytical artifacts.

Though visual rhetoric can be considered both theoretical and methodological, it is worth consideration herein as a component of televisual framing. Visual aspects of communication have not always been considered legitimate objects of study within the rhetorical tradition. Around the 1970s, rhetorical scholars were expanding their horizons on their discipline’s boundaries as they “were increasingly aware of the complexities of the world around them” (Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008, p. 5). Especially in activist movements, scholars saw that rhetorical theory was useful for beginning to understand injustice, especially as social movements were taking place before the public eye on television. Olson, Finnegan, & Hope (2008) emphasized the complexity of studying visual rhetorical elements in an expansive culture that values what is seen, writing that visual rhetoric scholarship:

may not invoke the rhetorical tradition explicitly, [but] is frequently ‘rhetorically conscious,’; that is, it recognizes that visual images, artifacts, and performances are always situated in complex circumstances of viewing, interpreting, and consuming. Visual rhetoric scholarship frequently draws on the work of important transdisciplinary thinkers who explored the broad implications of our cultural experiences in terms that resonate with an interest in visual culture. (p. 9)

Clearly, what is seen is important, but media frames comprise much more than the visual. Carter (2013) notes, “When one considers the art of persuasion as a combination of context and language, one can see that the art of rhetoric relies heavily on framing” (p. 6).
Ott and Aoki (2002), citing the work of McPhail, explain that frames are fundamentally linked to human consciousness and therefore shape our relationships with the world and others, and in this way, they contain an ideological function. Carter (2013) emphasizes the importance of both the organization and persistence of frames, asserting that frames are more than “just the sum of the parts… They add up to something bigger than an individual story… and can be organized around larger themes that can influence the interpretation of individual events” (p. 4). Furthermore, frames are powerful when they appear consistently over time. Quoting the work of Reese (2001), Carter (2013) underscores the power of routinized frames in how they become “second-nature,” adding, “This resistance to change, indicated by such a routine, suggests in functional terms that we’ve stumbled upon a structure that is satisfying some important need. The more persistent the frame, the more likely it deserves examination” (p. 5). This explains why repetitive media frames, like those seen on the news (though these change over time as well), are so often examined. This notion also helps us understand why it is important to study successful, long-standing media forms and frames for the underlying need they are created to address. In addition to their social rotation, frames “must have resonance for both those producing a message and those receiving it… Implicit in understanding how frames construct reality is that they leave out as much or more than what they include” (Carter, 2013, p. 11). On television, capturing moving images is considerable, intentional work as it must be done to carry messaging to the satisfaction of the creator and the audience.

The visual and the verbal work mutually within the camera; each is an interwoven aspect of a whole entity. Media frames are not completely severed from the literary
tradition, which considers the manifestation of language alongside other more sensory-associated elements. Ott and Aoki (2002) write that, like storytelling:

Frame analysis looks to see how a situation or event is named/defined, and how that naming shapes public opinion. It accomplishes this… by highlighting… *selectivity* (what is included and excluded in the story?), *partiality* (what is emphasized and downplayed in the story?), and *structure* (how does the story formally play out?). (p. 485)

These same processes exist in pieces of literature. In a similar regard, what appears on the screen to the eyes, to the ears, into the imagination and the way this is done carries meaning and purpose while inviting certain interpretations. Timberg (1981/1982), reflecting on the power of items on screen in soap operas, notices the way in which “conventional objects – telephone, doorbell, surgical mask – become invested with magical significance, helping or hindering the soap characters’ quest” (p. 147). In a more involved case, Dow (2004) considers documentarian Marlene Sanders’s 1970s production of the series “Women’s Liberation,” created intentionally to shift public image of the second-wave feminist movement that was unfolding at that time; she explains how Sanders made filmic rhetorical choices that were intended to alter public perception of feminism and take out the “shock” of social change. To Dow (2014), this is done through “form, framing, and refutation” and ultimately exemplifies how the documentary form as a type of “dominant media” can “naturalize particular narratives about the possibilities for and meanings of social change” (Dow, 2004, p. 53). Dow (2004) further considers Sanders’s intentional use of narration and the ideological and political aspects which she chooses to emphasize in opening and closing commentaries. In this way, the issues she
spotlighted during opening and closing sequences serve as framing strategies to support her purpose of stabilizing popular views on feminism. She also weighs Sanders’s positioning of the second-wave feminist movement within broader activist culture at the time and how such contextualization affected message framing. The chronological order in which concepts and narratives are presented are intentional and significant, much in the same way that similar features are laid into the pages of a book.

Growing beyond the literary tradition, scholarship increasingly considers physical modes of filming as rhetorically embedded processes, loaded with their own creations of meaning. Even some early scholars consider the crucial role of the camera. The camera and its intentional use by filmmakers and producers vitally create meaning and message “with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing and object” (Benjamin, 1936/2008, p. 37). Here, Benjamin considers how the camera works as a window to the world that it presents, and that every movement in its use influences the message it shapes. The passage’s later invocation of an “optical unconscious” underscores the presence of deeper thought within the visual frame, a persuasion, an intentionally embedded communication. Timberg (1981/1982) reflects on the words of Gronbeck (1979) who described the rhetorical dimension of television as lying “at the boundary between poetics and rhetoric” (p. 133). Pierce and Kaufman (2012) specifically inquire how audiences become positioned to characters through the use of camera angles. Timberg (1981/1982) wonders how he came to view characters with specific emotional reactions in his viewing of soap operas on TV; Timberg (1981/1982) writes:
I found my point of view shaped most powerfully not by words but by visual images and sounds. I suspect that these nonverbal, non-literary forms of communication have kept many critics from understanding the rhetoric of soap opera – a rhetoric based on specific camera and sound conventions that structure the viewer’s experience. (p. 133)

Clearly, technical modes of filming can be inherently rhetorical as much as more sensory, traditionally literary elements like a plotline, language use, and character development, as the two are interwoven. Pierce and Kaufman (2012), for instance, specify the consideration of “rhetor-selected” camera angles and colors and how they “indicate to us how filmmakers invite meaning creation… thereby visually suggesting a scene’s preferred mood, tone, or overall feel” (p. 36). Opening televisual analysis to comprehensive consideration of its forms and frames leads us to deeper understandings of television’s power to carry messages and shape viewer perceptions.

We derive ideas, meanings, and understandings of the world from media and in the televisual realm, this occurs through frames; in this way, frames contain philosophical statements. Drake (2016) suggests, “Only by opening up questions of ontology and epistemology… can we understand the particularity of onscreen performance… and how it is meaningful” (p. 6). Dow (2004) notes in her study on “Women’s Liberation” that Sanders’s voice, as the documentarian, is the lone voice that addresses the camera and viewers, and in that way, her voice “retains epistemic privilege” (p. 60). Television, and the myriad ways in which it can be used, can lead viewers toward ways of knowing. The connection here presents itself: televisual frames are rhetorical and televisual frames are epistemological (and can be pedagogical as a bridge to a way of knowing). Before
moving into the realm of epistemic rhetoric, I consider the notion of invitational rhetoric, a realm worth inclusion in a study of someone whose mantra cast out an invitation to viewers: “Please, won’t you be my neighbor?”

Invitational Rhetoric

To ground a discussion of rhetoric, I will first introduce a useful view on the term’s complex historicity. In *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* (2004), Wayne Booth defines “rhetoric” as:

*the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another; effects ethical (including everything about the character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic), and intellectual (including every academic field). It is the entire range of our use of ‘signs’ for communicating, effectively or sloppily, ethically or immorally. At its worst, it is our most harmful miseducator – except for violence. But at its best – when we learn to listen to the ‘other,’ then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue – it is our primary resource for avoiding violence and building community.* (pp. xi-xii, emphasis in original)

This definition of rhetoric is a good starting point for a discussion of invitational rhetoric, as it maintains many of the same communicative hopes for genuine dialogue and building community. Booth (2004) poses that the traditional question “What makes effective persuasion?” be expanded to “How can we distinguish, in every human domain, the good from the bad forms of persuasion or discussion or communication?” (p. xii). With this question in mind, we may turn to the theory at hand. In this section, I will review invitational rhetoric in its original theorization and address its most common critiques.
Then, I will consider epistemological and ontological amendments to the original theory which leave it more “open” to aid in observation of invitational rhetorical modes as they present themselves in filmic and language choices on MRN. Invitational rhetoric can be considered an example of epistemic rhetoric, and therefore serves as a link before turning to discussion of epistemic rhetoric and epistemologies. If it is accepted that certain rhetorical modes can point to an opening toward a truth or knowledge (as will be discussed further surrounding epistemic rhetoric), then understanding invitational rhetoric is crucial to underscore how the mode works as a kind of epistemic rhetoric, and ultimately promotes the discernment of an invitational epistemology resting throughout MRN’s televisual space.

Invitational rhetoric was originally theorized by Foss and Griffin (1995) to shift understanding of rhetoric as a rigid persuasive tool into a dialogic “invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. It constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 569). Invitational rhetoric, based in feminist thought and theory, holds the view that traditional rhetoric based on persuasion is one steeped in patriarchal “values of competition and domination” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 570). Beyond these central principles, Foss and Griffin (1995) see connections between patriarchal values of change, ego, knowledge, language, manipulation, and domination within traditional rhetorical theory. Acknowledging multiple definitions of the word “feminism,” Foss and Griffin (1995) unite the theory around what they cite as central fundamental feminist principles of “equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (p. 4). Regarding the principle of immanent value, the
theory holds that all living beings are equal, “unique and [a] necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus [have] value” (p. 4). Their goal in the creation of the theory is posed: “to expand the array of communicative options available to all rhetors and to provide an impetus for more focused… efforts to describe and assess rhetoric in all of its manifestations” (p. 5). Rhetors who communicate with invitational rhetoric view their audience in a relationship of “equality, respect, and appreciation” and approach them with a sense of “openness,” which is accepting of an audience’s positionality and subjectivity brought to interaction with the rhetor; in short, such rhetoric contains a sense of acceptance for the audience in whatever state or station they might currently be at in the ongoing movements of life (Foss and Griffin, 1995, p. 6). Additionally, rhetors consider the viewpoint of an audience or interactant as valuable to the rhetor’s own viewpoint and understanding; a mutual connection exists between the two, and in this way, the rhetor seeks to protect that connection. However, the authors note, “This does not mean invitational rhetoric always is free of pain… there may be a wrenching loose of ideas as assumptions and positions are questioned as a result of an interaction, a process that may be uncomfortable,” but can ultimately lead to transformation and a garnering of new perspectives as a result of cooperative, care-centered communication (p. 6). Herein lies the central tenants of invitational rhetoric as originally theorized.

Foss and Griffin (1995) expand on core tenants by explaining communicative modes available to invitational rhetors and how invitational rhetoric might manifest observably. Foss and Griffin (1995) pose two communicative options through two “primary rhetorical forms” for those using invitational rhetoric: “One is offering perspectives, a mode by which rhetors put forward for consideration their perspectives;
the second is the creation of external conditions that allow others to present their perspectives in an atmosphere of respect and equality” (p. 7). In the former, the rhetor preserves the gift of space for careful consideration of a perspective without judgment or instantaneous reaction. Quoting the work of Tracy (1987), Foss and Griffin (1995) share: “To attend to the other as other, the different as different, is also to understand the different as possible” (p. 7, emphasis in original). In this way, the multiplicity of ways of being human are given open doorways to which others can enter in opportunities for understanding, perhaps through the sharing of narratives or open dialogue. To preserve space for understanding to grow, Foss and Griffin (1995) propose that three “external conditions” must be maintained between rhetor and audience – “safety, value, and freedom” (p. 10). When rhetoric creates an atmosphere of safety, it makes room for coherence to form in perception, as opposed to rhetoric that threatens a sense of order and might send one running back to the throes of intellectual or emotional safety in “familiar ways of thinking” (p. 11). When value is embedded in interaction, reciprocity between rhetor and audience leads audiences to feel “rhetors care about them, understand their ideas, and allow them to contribute in significant ways to the interaction” (p. 12). Even in disagreement, the respect and value for each other remains intact between rhetor and audience. In this regard, invitational rhetoric creates space for interaction that is based in desire for mutual understanding, safety, value, and respect for each other’s humanity.

Overall, Foss and Griffin (1995) see invitational rhetoric as contributing to efforts for those who wish to “develop models for cooperative, nonadversarial, and ethical communication” (p. 15). Invitational rhetoric can serve as a catalyst for transformation in the way that “it does not engage [the normative] system on its own terms, using
arguments developed from the system’s framework or orientation” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 17). Given invitational rhetoric’s core tenants, the theory carries a host of critical debate and conversation. However, invitational rhetoric, within the scope of this project and once amended of its core criticisms, can be useful alongside a discussion of epistemic rhetoric and epistemologies.

Disciplinary Critiques of Invitational Rhetoric

As Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) observe, critics have, in some cases, been too totalizing about the nature of invitational rhetoric. Citing fundamental criticisms from Pollock, Artz, Frey, Pearce, Murphy, and Dow that support for invitational rhetoric is support for the claim that all persuasion is violent and therefore unacceptable, the authors respond:

First, all scholarship is based on the tenets of previous theory. In order to build new theory, scholars draw on the most provocative aspects of certain theories while rejecting other aspects; the result is (hopefully) additional perspectives that enrich or amend the ‘old.’ To argue that scholarship must support a preexisting theory in its entirety, if it is to use any aspect of that theory, is an untenable claim. (Bone, Griffin, and Schulz, 2008, pp. 437-438)

Here, Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) emphasize that invitational rhetoric cannot be read as encompassing universally negative assumptions about the nature of rhetoric and persuasion. They underscore that new theories must be based partially off preceding theories but that they cannot always consider or incorporate them with all original underpinnings intact. In further response to the previous criticism, Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) assert:
Rather than arguing that all persuasion is violent, the theory of invitational rhetoric suggests two things – some persuasive rhetoric is violent (and the implications of this are worthy of further exploration) and rhetoric could profitably be defined as more complex than solely persuasive communication. To argue that all rhetoric is always and only persuasive and persuasion is always and only defined as attempts to change others not only circumscribes our understanding of persuasion, but it also functions to stifle important conversations about the complexity of this nuanced and powerful form of interaction. It also erases other viable forms of rhetoric. (p. 439)

Including invitational rhetoric in an amended form that works within the scope of this project, just as Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) suggest in their response, allows for contemplation of the complexity of communicative forms in ways to which other rhetorical theories do not necessarily remain open. The theory still is imperfect, and as rooted in feminist thought and theory, is open to other critiques by Indigenous scholars (among others) who criticize whitestream feminism’s reinforcement of domination, in its centering of patriarchy as a source of oppression rather than projects of colonization (Grande, 2004; Tuck, 2004). Considered within the scope of this project, I acknowledge invitational rhetoric’s shortcomings but still see some of its theoretical components as useful in working towards discussion about rhetorical modes and language choices that help to invite others to broader understandings, or knowledges.

As detailed, invitational rhetoric was originally posed as an alternative to traditional modes in rhetorical study based in feminist thought and theory. It is not
without faults. Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) provide a concise description of common critiques of invitational rhetoric including arguments:

that the association between persuasion and violence is unacceptable (Pollock, Artz, Frey, Pearce, and Murphy; Dow “Feminism, Difference”; Dow “Feminism, Power”), that Foss and Griffin unrealistically advocate that invitational rhetoric be used in all situations (Cloud et al.), that the theory is gender-specific (Condit, Mathison, and Bruner), or grounded in essentialist principles (Bruner et al.), that invitational rhetoric lacks any notion of agency (Fulkerson, Lozano-Reich, and Mathison), and/or that it actually is persuasion in disguise (Cloud and Fulkerson).

(p. 435)

Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) address the components of these critiques and respond with solutions or counterpoints that serve as revisions of invitational rhetoric. Subsequently, they provide empirical examples of invitational rhetoric “at work in the world in simple and straightforward as well as complex and elaborate ways” (p. 435) through the examples of one speech, one visual text, a private forum and a public forum (p. 449). I will briefly discuss the central critiques and the solution for each. The first critique – that invitational rhetoric assumes all persuasion is violent – was addressed in the introduction to this section. As mentioned, some persuasion indeed is violent, and others are not, and taking an all-or-nothing approach to the matter eliminates potential conversations about the complexity of potential in rhetorical forms.

The second critique states that Foss and Griffin (1995) view invitational rhetoric as an appropriate mode in all interactions (Bone, Griffin, & Schulz, 2008, p. 438). However, Foss and Griffin (1995) are clear in their original work that invitational rhetoric
is simply “an option, not ‘an ideal’ for which rhetors should strive, nor ‘should or can [it] be used in all situations” (Bone, Griffin, & Schulz, 2008, p. 440). There are multiple complex life situations in which invitational rhetoric would not be an appropriate orientation, but it was never stated that it could or should be. As Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) elaborate:

In some situations, no amount of persuading or inviting is going to be useful, and to assume otherwise places undue responsibility and accountability on the rhetor and the type of communication used. It also privileges persuasion as the only successful communicative option, which is patently absurd: the historical record is rich with examples of successful communication in extreme situations that do not meet the criteria for persuasive communication. (p. 441)

To state that invitation is posited as the ideal rhetorical mode is to overburden both the concept and the rhetor; it is simply one of many useful rhetorical modes. Jumping to the other criticism which regards persuasion, some called invitational rhetoric “persuasion in disguise” (p. 447). However, persuasion is not the only goal or desire that a rhetor can have. For example, some simply want to be heard or have listeners display receptivity to their message. This half of the criticisms are concerned with the nature of persuasion as considered in invitational rhetoric.

The remaining half of criticisms revolve around “disagreements about feminist rhetorical theory” (Bone, Griffin, and Schulz, 2008, p. 438), which includes suggestions that invitational rhetoric is “gender-specific” (p. 441), “grounded in essentialist principles” (p. 443), or “lacks agency” (p. 445). In response, Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) clarify that in terms of gender, “patriarchy,” as used in the original theory is meant
to contextualize the "social system in which we tend to function, and not the radical separation of gendered activities" (p. 442, emphasis in original). Addressing claims of essentialism, the authors note that the issue involves "the complex nature of definitions and their relationship to some ‘essence,’" and in doing so, scholars face the risk of "being accused of essentializing… and of highlighting ‘that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person of thing’" (p. 444). However, they argue that definitions are necessary for clarity purposes in theorizing, and they add that limiting “rhetoric” to the realm of persuasion is to narrow it down to a “most irreducible and unchanging essence” (p. 444). Furthermore, invitational rhetoric makes room for scholars to consider how taken-for-granted definitions of “rhetoric” are, especially as, according to Fuss (as quoted in Bone, Griffin, and Schulz, 2008), they are “the effects of complicated discursive practices” (p. 444) and that other realms of scholarship like Afrocentrism and Native American and Indigenous Studies are posing thought that urges contemplation on the constraints of “rhetoric” as it inhabits complex discursive spaces. In other words, proponents of invitational rhetoric believe the term should be defined beyond a deployment of persuasion alone in order to more wholly acknowledge the complexity of human communication. The last concern considers agency, and it seems to be another definitional concern, as one critic (Fulkerson) asserts that “there is no agency when no effort to change others exists” (Bone, Griffin, & Schulz, 2008, p. 445, emphasis in original). However, the response to such concern holds:

[A]gency occurs when invitational rhetors work to create an environment suitable for [safe, valued] relationships in situations where they may not already exist.
When they do exist prior to the interaction, invitational rhetors work to ensure the
environment continues so that those relationships might continue to be present throughout the interaction. (p. 446)

Restated, agency rests with the rhetor to shape a communicative environment and in an audience’s capacity to react to or to consider a message from whatever standpoint or orientation at which they reside, and regardless of reaction, the integrity of a safe environment for interaction and relationship persists.

Chávez (2015) considers the overall criticisms of invitational rhetoric in its “theory of agency” and “white middle-class, U.S.-centric, and heterosexual bias” in its conception of feminism. However, they ultimately decide that none of the critiques render the theory “worthy of complete dismissal” because the theory fundamentally sheds light on the ethical flaws within rhetoric’s traditional conceptualizations and “show how there are other ways of being in the rhetorical world” (pp. 169-170). Chávez (2015) neatly summarizes: “Invitational rhetoric at its core offers a systemic critique and an alternative framework… Thus, invitational rhetoric intervenes, not by asking to be included in that public sphere, but by suggesting an alternative to its modalities” (pp. 169-170). With these understandings of invitational rhetoric, its criticisms, and responses to such criticisms, we can consider epistemological and ontological amendments made to the original theory in order to further resolve some of its noted limitations.

Epistemological and Ontological Amendments to Invitational Rhetoric

Scholars who see potential in invitational rhetoric’s capacities have worked to release the theory from epistemological and ontological incongruences, which help resolve some original concerns and aid in painting a picture of the theory’s complexity in its potential and applicability to communicative life. Ryan and Natalle (2001) realign
invitational rhetoric’s epistemological foundation by connecting the theory to the study of philosophical hermeneutics and standpoint theory in order to open the theory for broader use and consideration. The authors see “a major contradiction” between emphasis on one’s subjectivity and the concept of “true dialogue” in the way the theory aligns “immanent value (all humans have inherent worth) and self-determination (all humans have the autonomous capacity to direct themselves)” (p. 71). The authors ask: “How can any new understanding between speaker and listener be reached if the self is the center of knowledge and external influences are seen as attacks on self-determination and human value?” to which is answered, “It can’t, [but] invitational rhetoric suggests that the change related to offering and yielding is qualitatively or morally different from the change related to traditional persuasion” (Ryan & Natalle, 2001, p. 72). Herein lies a tension between objectivity and subjectivity, and Ryan and Natalle (2001) include Code’s (1991) “model of knowing that is based in the interrelatedness of objectivity and subjectivity,” because the space between the two perceptual modes is an area in which understanding of both self and others can grow (p. 72). In other words, both subjectivity (autonomy) and objectivity (interdependence) are important as “contextual and relational” links as developing understanding within the self “depends on connections to other people” (Ryan & Natalle, 2001, p. 73). This relationship is what makes invitational rhetoric more viable as a communicative mode.

Philosophical hermeneutics revolves around reaching for understandings, the continual questioning of our world. Assessing and re-assessing a text or thought as an ever-ongoing process of building upon one’s sense of meanings brings an “interpreter closer to understanding, although exact understanding of the text can never be reached
because the text is always understood through the reader’s historicity juxtaposed with the text’s historicity” (Ryan & Natalle, 2001, p. 74). Crucius (1991), as quoted in Ryan and Natalle (2001), enlivens this idea with an appreciative thought:

Our horizons do not fuse in the sense of complete identity; if I become the other, I lose the other's friendly opposition, which prevents me from becoming too hopelessly myself. Rather our horizons fuse in the sense of a mutual enlargement of horizons, which still remain different. (p. 75)

Meaning-creation and wholeness rest in the tension between parts of an interaction. Integrity and space for understanding are created in the rhetorical transformation that can occur through sharing and genuine conversation. Ultimately, Ryan and Natalle’s (2001) expansion of invitational rhetoric “highlights the dual necessity of understanding self and other and being able to articulate a point of view that has the potential to transcend difference in deep and humane ways” (p. 77). In this space, fully realizing the idea that “You’re not me” in communicating with others is vitally important, and the authors emphasize: “We cannot underscore enough how such a seemingly obvious conclusion is missing from much of the communication we have observed in our daily lives, both in public and private contexts” (p. 77). Connecting invitational rhetoric with philosophical hermeneutics and standpoint theory creates space for appreciating the role of understanding in a rhetorical mode. In relation, Booth (2004) proposes the term “rhetorology” as a practice of what he calls “listening-rhetoric,” which hopes that both sides in a discussion will arrive at the common “ground they share,” and takes notice that many terms across disciplines share characteristics with his rhetorology: “hermeneutics, dialogics, problematology, social knowledge, and even ‘philosophy of discourse,’”
sometimes without even seeing the interrelatedness between concepts (p. 10). Booth’s (2004) sense of rhetoric and Ryan and Natalie’s (2001) attendance to epistemological revision of invitational rhetoric are useful amendments for the purpose of this study.

Invitational rhetoric is also in need of brief ontological attention, as epistemology and ontology cannot be severed (St. Pierre, 2014). Addressing ontology in invitational rhetoric is a main concern for Stroud (2005), who comments that Ryan and Natalie’s (2001) epistemological amendments are “admirable,” but Stroud further opens the conversation to “ethical and metaphysical justification” (p. 151). He emphasizes that the existence of inherent differences between beings does not automatically follow with the idea that all are deserving of intrinsic respect and that addressing this ontological component would be valuable for invitational rhetoric in its “practical application” (p. 151). In Stroud’s (2005) words: “The [ontological] orientation speakers hold toward ethical obligations of speech, the justification of such obligations, and the metaphysical description of the speaking realm are all important factors in the practice of rhetoric” (p. 147). Fundamentally, a rhetor’s communicative choices are indicative of conscious or unconscious ethics and ethical implications, and one’s ontological orientation to reality and communication matter in discussions of rhetoric.

For some, a discussion of ontology would naturally lend itself to a consideration of religion or a sense of spirituality as is often endowed a consideration of the nature of being and being in relation to other beings. Given this connection, Stroud (2005) proposes some of the foundational ontological orientation of the Bhagavad Gita as useful in consideration of rhetorical practice. Stroud (2005) poses that even if one does not uphold its metaphysical tenants “constitutively,” it can serve as a “regulative orientation
that guides… in approaching attachment to the results of speaking in society, the value of speaking qua means, and the worth of the other interactants,” and in this way its principles can uplift invitational rhetoric’s proposition of inherent value in others (p. 156, emphasis in original). Stroud is not advising for the sudden adoption of Hinduism but does encourage an appreciation of some of its ontological components as an ethical, just way of viewing one’s relations to the world and others while simultaneously releasing some of the ego-attachment and pressure that thrives in a neoliberal, marketized, hyper-individuated society. In a simple form, this ontological grounding sees all people and beings as connected, related to each other, and advocates that one should see oneself reflected in all others; pure autonomy is an illusion. Stroud (2005) suggests that we benefit from the *Bhagavad Gita*’s narrative in the way it can assist conceptions of rhetoric especially as it provides a communicative orientation that is not typical within “western notions” (p. 157). Stroud (2005) goes on to clarify that he does not mean that this orientation is “demonstrably superior to other orientations,” but that it is useful in that it allows for the ontological tempering of both the persuasion-centered and the invitational views of rhetoric. Though such a novel ontological orientation can be used to regulate impulses toward seeing individuals as irreducibly separate and as valuing the desired ends of their actions as an ultimate goal, it is also important as it explicitly provides metaphysical and ethical justifications for invitational rhetoric’s structures of openness. (p. 157)

critiques move invitational rhetorical theory as originally discussed into a useful position for leading to deeper understandings of rhetorical choices on MRN.

Despite invitational rhetoric’s ideological and philosophical incongruences in its original theorization, with epistemological and ontological reframing, many of the theory’s original criticisms are amended or qualified such that the theory remains useful within the scope of this project. In full consideration of debates and discussion surrounding invitational rhetoric as explored, components of invitational rhetoric present as windows to understanding the interconnectedness of beings and each being’s inherent value. Therefore, invitational rhetoric can lead to discussion of rhetoric’s capacity for opening awareness and appreciation for the existence of a multiplicity of understandings, or knowledges that coexist in this world. Ryan and Natalle (2001) address the apparent “radicality” embedded within invitational rhetoric in that the theory no longer sees rhetoric “in a democracy as a tool of truth-seeking,” but rather presently as a resource that can “serve a multivocal society to seek peaceful understanding and to accommodate a range of truths” (p. 70, emphasis added). Furthermore, in reviewing invitational rhetoric literature, I discovered multiple passages and sentiments that lend themselves well to illustrating the theory’s connections to understanding awareness of multiple knowledges, or epistemologies. I will include some of these indications here, as they are a useful bridge before turning to a discussion of the communication discipline’s debate surrounding epistemic rhetoric so that we may more fully turn to a discussion of epistemologies as a preferred theoretical foundation for this inquiry.

The conceptualization of communication and its surrounding disciplinary definitions, especially as that assigned to “rhetoric” as a dominantly persuasive mode of
influence, has historically led to “processes of influence [being] seen as constitutive of communicative practice; this definition, however, leads to some troubling results in that it precludes the use of differing value systems and approaches to communication” (Stroud, 2005, p. 148). Such practice creates boundaries on what is considered knowledge and valid communication; in short, space is needed. Quoting Palczewski (1996), Stroud (2005) paraphrases: “Existing approaches to argument and speaking often do not need to be abandoned; instead they need to be amended to allow for alternate views and voices to be experienced” (p. 152). Even within their original theory, Foss and Griffin (1995) quote Holmberg (1977), noting that their conception of invitational rhetoric “aims at converting experience ‘to one of the many views which are indeterminately possible’” (p. 16). They suggest that invitational rhetoric opens up communicative possibilities so that the audience is more engaged in contributing and creating ideas, means of presenting ideas are not inherently limited to whatever is “most persuasive,” and “the ideas that can be considered multiply” (p. 16). Ryan and Natalle (2001) pose that their epistemological shifting to “standpoint hermeneutical rhetoric… is as much as a result of understanding as it is argument” (p. 78). Furthermore:

Understanding one's standpoint through dialogue leads to rhetoric's epistemic function of (socially) constructing knowledge. In this case, rhetoric does not lead to truth; rather argument and understanding through shared horizons leads to a series of truths that are necessary for both the subjective world of individuals and the objective world of social relationships. (Ryan & Natalle, 2001, p. 78, emphasis added)
Here, again, we see invocation of a range of truths, a series of truths, a multiplicity. Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) conclude their response to invitational rhetoric critiques by underscoring that a rhetor’s concern for relationships amongst a multiplicity of individuals and perspectives can aid in understanding each other through invitational rhetoric. Quoting Hauser (1999), they note that civility amongst rhetors allows for the realization that each person “belong[s] to several, perhaps many, overlapping discursive arenas in which [they] experience the polyphony of concurrent conversations… that rub against one another” (pp. 447-448, emphasis added). Polyphony here invokes a musical term that indicates the coexistence of melodies and harmonies to create a resounding whole of multiple parts. When we accept the existence of a multilogue, we become open to others, reflexive of ourselves, and aware of other epistemologies that are not our own but are also not not our own if one accepts that the autonomous self is an illusion. Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) add: “Participation in this multilogue informs us about the fit between our understanding of the world and the understandings of others with whom we inhabit that world” (p. 448). Many of these statements indicate the existence of a broadened communicative realm with a plurality of voices reaching in understanding toward each other and the self. Hence, invitational rhetoric serves as a useful bridge to discussion of epistemologies. As Bone, Griffin, and Schulz (2008) support:

[I]nvitational rhetoric suggests that, at times, a profound understanding of the reasons other people believe and behave in the ways they do is a most productive endeavor and that a profound understanding of other people might inform our own choices in important ways… [W]hen we speak from a place of invitation… we cannot pretend that we journey alone, that others are unworthy or without
voice, or that our view is the only ‘right’ view. The theory of invitational rhetoric speaks to the complexity of rhetoric and choices rhetors make as they use symbols to create and respond to messages. It calls attention to the nature of change and the role of humans in creating change and asks scholars to consider the ethics of change; to ask ourselves, ‘At what point do I know what is best for another?’ (p. 457)

Similar interconnected themes emerge amongst these scholars’ ruminations over time: the multiplicity of ideas and knowledges, rhetoric’s epistemic capacities for pedagogy and knowledge, the intermingling space of opportunity between the subjective and objective components of reality, polyphony, multilogue – all ideas which speak to a plurality reflective of the nature of existence in a complex world.

Invitational rhetoric is but one open door to a broader realm of understanding. For this inquiry, invitational rhetoric is useful when considering its ability to rhetorically create coherence among rhetors and audiences, and removed of its original epistemological limitations that indicate universality about reality or knowledge. In sum, these investigated onto-epistemological amendments, in simple terms, pull invitational rhetoric from smaller detail-focused critiques and assert that, overall, invitational rhetoric is a communicative mode in which rhetors and others reach toward each other for mutual, listening-based, dialogic understanding. The amendments undergird a theoretical foundation which asserts that subjective and objective reality are interwoven, and therefore knowledge is constituted between self and other (or world). Furthermore, thought must be continually revisited and reassessed to continually bring one’s interpretations of a thing, idea, or knowledge toward coherent integrity, which requires
listening – then listening again, and again. The ontological amendment supports that all human and nonhuman beings are intricately interconnected and that this awareness can broaden traditional conceptions of rhetorical theory, allowing for a plurality of understandings of the world to not only co-exist but to beneficially interact.

**Disciplinary Discussions on Epistemic Rhetoric**

Scholarship on invitational rhetoric, as demonstrated, introduces multiple mentions of epistemological and ontological considerations, hinting at invitational rhetoric’s capacity (once its critiques are amended) to lead to broader understandings of the world, one’s self, and others with whom one journeys on this planet; herein lies a bridge to a potential understanding of rhetoric as a way to perceive of multiple epistemologies, or a plurality of knowledges. Within this section, I will review the communication-based disciplinary debate surrounding rhetoric as epistemic, which is a useful starting point for considering rhetoric’s creative capacities for leading to the construction of knowledge or knowledge claims. Then, I consider a “coherentist approach” to epistemic rhetoric (McPhail, 1996) as a fruitful bridge before shifting to thought that more directly centers on a notion of epistemologies, which creates room to discuss the existence of a multiplicity of knowledges.

Epistemic rhetoric as a disciplinary concept has circulated in much debate since its original proposal. Epistemic rhetoric was first posed within the communication discipline in 1967, in Robert L Scott’s “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,488). Scott was concerned about “treating truth as prior and substantial, as if it was external to any rhetorical act situated in a specific time and space” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). Scott contemplated the relation between “contingency and uncertainty” and the
notion of “truth,” and ultimately worked in his original essay to “foster a special kind of sensibility that would attune us to how implicated we really are in shaping social reality, in ways that tend to exceed our conscious planning and purposive decision making” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). Scott proposed “to un hinge traditional conceptions of intentionality and replace them with a more fluent understanding of how we participate in social processes that will reveal the truth about who we are” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489, emphasis in original). This primary essay wrestled with the relationship between “the mental and the material,” and Scott did not conclude that the two worlds are interrelated; instead, he suggested that “neither the human mind, in general, nor any moral idea(l)s, in particular, can approach the world from a ‘pure’ ontologically neutral domain” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). Truth, for Scott, is “practice-oriented” and “emphasizes the dynamic materiality of thinking” in a way that truth is not just something sitting “inside” someone’s mind, but is rather embedded in the ways “in which meaning springs from social interaction, as it gets generated and transferred between us” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). At the simplest level, Scott’s proposition for the conception of epistemic rhetoric posed rhetoric as “a way of knowing and being” (p. 1, 489).

The essay sparked “ripple effects” within the discipline in continued discussion and critique. A major critique was that it lacks “concrete application” and some (like Brummett and Farrell) said that Scott’s proposition contained “a performative contradiction of sorts whereby universal truth claims are declared suspect, while this declaration itself assumes an air of universal validity that can no longer be grounded in anything” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). With an opening to relativism, some critics found fault in the underlying notion that “the only thing we can know for certain is that nobody
knows anything for certain” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,489). Furthermore, the theory does not provide “an action plan,” which some critics thought rendered it “toothless” as a critical endeavor (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,490).

Since these primary criticisms, others have deliberated Scott’s original essay with a focus on the idea of socially relevant knowledge. Some (like Foss and Gill, 1987) drew connections between the thoughts of Scott and Foucault, both of whom have been charged “with self-defeating relativism,” while sharing concern about the ethics of “history-bound communication” and “shared suspicion of any universalist claim to timeless or absolute truth” (p. 1,490). Ultimately, Scott considered epistemic rhetoric (as a critical practice) a window “to open new vistas for social co-existence rather than [to] replace one regime or dogma with the next,” but he underscored that the potential within epistemic rhetoric “is very different from proffering rules that, if properly applied, promise to give us a neatly ordered utopia of our choice” (Izumi, 2017, p. 1,491). For Scott, more generally, this meant (and still means) that one’s intentionality of and orientation to communication matters, as these factors shape a rhetor’s capacity to communicate new or alternative ways for knowing and being part of society.

Some have argued that common problems in discussions of epistemic rhetoric revolve around the differing orientations that one can take to the conversation. Brummett (1979) viewed epistemic rhetoric as the declaration of an inherent “relationship between knowledge and discourse, between how people know and how they communicate,” which by extension poses a relationship “between reality, or what there is to know, and discourse,” and therein lies the theory’s “metaphysical implications” (p. 1). Mentioning the word “knowledge” alone is enough to cause heated dispute. Foss and Gill (1987)
called Scott’s original essay “prolegomenous at two levels of scholarly concern,” and defined the discussion at its “metatheoretical level” in the way that the debates often revolved around “ontological questions… masked by taxonomic disputes” (p. 384). Brummett (1979) clearly named these three primary taxonomic disputes, which are part of the reason for lively debate around epistemic rhetoric – its methodological meaning, its sociological meaning, and its ontological meaning. Brummett (1979) called the third, the ontological, the “most radical of three,” but also considered it the approach for his own work (p. 4). The central concern in the ontological approach to epistemic rhetoric posited that there is a physical reality, and it is always:

apprehended through the constructs of meanings. Reality is in every particular a blend of the physical and the meaningful. People never have and never will have anything to do with a reality unalloyed by meaning; indeed, people have no way of knowing whether such a reality exists or not. But meaning is a thing created and shared in discourse, particularly rhetoric; so reality is a thing created and shared in discourse. Reality is multiple, polymorphous, diverse. Realities differ as social groups assign different meanings to experience. So the view of truth implied by the ontological view is a relative one. There may exist different, even contradictory truths because there may exist contradictory realities. (Brummett, 1979, p. 4)

Ultimately, Brummett (1979) believed the discussion was most fruitful when scholars are all speaking to the metaphysical component. This ontological approach to epistemic rhetoric still views that all human activity is “in some way rhetorically shaped and… rhetorically influential on others” (Brummett, 1979, p. 4, emphasis added). Leaving
epistemic rhetoric’s boundaries open to its broad applicability keeps the theory relevant for studying specific cases that may arise. Most problems surrounding discussions of epistemic rhetoric arise from people approaching the conversation from differing orientations, like those identified by Brummett in 1979, and often without conscious acknowledgement of doing so.

Over a decade later, Brummett (1990) remarked that epistemic rhetoric as a theory was not applied enough for disciplinary survival. Ultimately, and in relevance to the current study, Brummett (1990) asserted that studying rhetorical epistemology becomes a grounded study of communication “in the moment of methodological commitment when someone sits down with a transcript of discourse and attempts to explain it” (p. 71). However, despite Brummett’s such exacting comments on what epistemic rhetoric must “do,” Scott (1990) lamented the explosive disputes around rhetorical epistemology, theory, and practice. Scott (1990) critiqued Brummett’s own tangled taxonomic conundrum in his assertion that epistemic rhetoric should be comparable to Burkean or fantasy theme analyses as consistently testable theories, writing, “The epistemic claim is not a recipe for criticism but rather a point of view that stands behind criticism and that may or may not be brought forward explicitly in the course of a particular piece of criticism” (p. 300). In this way, invocation of epistemic rhetoric in a study could have varying manifestations and references in a way that does not mirror traditional rhetorical criticism.

Issues of knowledge as a definitive state of certainty often arose in debates on epistemic rhetoric. Harpine (2004) reflected on the ways in which discussions of “certainty” have been slippery in epistemic rhetoric arguments, with authors sliding back
and forth from subjective and objective viewpoints on certainty without clearly stating so or perhaps doing so unconsciously. Reflecting on the multiple responses to his original proposition, Scott (1990) considered the relationship between “knowing” and “certainty” by example of people answering the question, “What makes you think so?” with “I don’t think so, I know so.” In this example, Scott remarked, “I argue that the twentieth century answer to the [common philosophical] seventeenth century question ‘How can I be certain?’ is that one cannot” (p. 302). Scott (1990) described the constant existence of uncertainty, and that, “In such a world, rhetoric has a genuine role,” contrasting it with a “world of certainty” in which rhetoric could only be artificial (p. 302). The point is that rhetoric as a bridge to knowledge cannot be a quest for knowledge as certainty. Cherwitz and Darwin (1995) noted that even dissatisfaction with Scott’s original essay on epistemic rhetoric does not rule out the obvious “important connection between epistemology and symbolic influence” (p. 203). “Doing” epistemology is not a matter of choice or preference. Cherwitz and Darwin (1995) emphasized: “[M]aking and assessing epistemic claims is an inescapable feature of rhetorical discourse,” and furthermore, “To speak or to write is to contemplate simultaneously what is and can be known” (p. 203).

Deliberating on the possibilities of knowledge, Harpine (2004) reflected on Scott’s original essay and subsequent writings:

Scott’s real purpose is to complain against subjective certainty. He argues that people falsely claim certainty when they are not entitled to do so... He recognizes the contingent, value-laden quality of rhetorical discourse. He celebrates this as a good thing to have in our uncertain universe. In a later essay, Scott states: ‘Many
of our human failings in becoming and remaining civilized grow out of the false consciousness of certainty.’ (p. 21, emphasis in original)

In this way, there must be space for uncertainty in arguments – for the admission that one can never be certain one is correct. Rhetoric and epistemology are inherently connected, as rhetoric shapes what is and can be known within and among epistemological communities. This notion still does not indicate the existence of one objective, universal truth rooted in certainty.

Taking into account the suggestion that epistemic rhetoric needed “middle level” theoretical applications to real world artifacts, some scholars embarked on such an approach. Foss and Gill (1987) included Foucault’s concept of discursive formations and their structuring units (“discursive practices, rules, roles, power, and knowledge”) to unearth how rhetoric holds epistemic function (p. 387). In this study, the authors did not focus on “the workings of the individual mind-brain, the self as the creator of discourse, or the criteria for true knowledge, the current foci of rhetoric-as-epistemic theory builders” (Foss & Gill, 1987, p. 386). They considered, instead, how knowledge(s) are constituted through shared discursive practices, and arrive at the conclusion that knowledge is “whatever is considered to be truth in a discursive formation,” suggesting a multiplicity of discursive formations in existence, not one alone (Foss & Gill, 1987, p. 390). Ultimately, Foss and Gill stated that “discursive practices are equal to knowledge” and that therefore, “knowledge has an impact on the form and content of the discursive practices” (1987, p. 390). To demonstrate, Foss and Gill (1987) analyzed Disneyland (California) and Disney World (Florida) using Foucault’s units of discursive formations combined with their defined notion of epistemic rhetoric in order to reveal how rhetorical
processes can “create knowledge” (p. 392). They selected Disney properties because these areas prove to be places with a powerful system of discursive acts and formations “that result in clearly specified knowledge or truth of a particular kind” while also remaining confined within park boundaries, and in such a way, remain distinct from “other knowledges outside of and apart from [them]” (Foss & Gill, 1987, p. 32). In their analysis, Foss and Gill (1987) found that the “highest truth in the park resides in what is clean, synthetic, good, and fun” and that the discursive practices within the park leave “little room to question the knowledge of the body of discourse that is Disneyland” (p. 396). Disneyland is distinct from the outside world around it, yet it still exists in relation to it, and certainly contains many comparisons and contrasts to the outer discursive formations and knowledges beyond its boundaries. However, what Foucault’s ideas add to epistemic rhetoric is that there are identifiable processes by which “rhetoric creates knowledge” in focusing on communicative acts and intentions themselves (Foss & Gill, 1987, p. 398). For Foucault, discourse is what exists, and discourse can reveal rhetorical epistemology’s lived presences.

Epistemological and Ontological Considerations for Epistemic Rhetoric

Epistemic rhetoric does not necessarily need “amending” in the same sense as invitational rhetoric but does fare better with additional concentrated attention devoted to some of its recurring epistemological and ontological threads. Bineham (1990) noted that both “intellectuals and non-intellectuals” alike often hold an assumption that the world can be divided between “the mental and the physical,” but that this “mind-body problem” actually grew out of Descartes’s influence (p. 55); Descartes attempted to make “the mind” the singular source of all inquiry. Stemming from this legacy of thought, Bineham
(1990) clarified central issues in the way that disciplinary scholars approach “rhetoric, knowledge or truth, and reality,” because they all suffer from “Cartesian Anxiety” (p. 44). This anxiety stems from:

[the] assumption that only two options are available for those who inquire into matters of knowledge and action: either some ultimate ground for knowledge and action exists, some objective and ahistorical foundation against which claims to know can be measured and the utility of actions ascertained, or we are beset by relativistic skepticism and are unable to speak of knowledge or ‘justified’ action in any meaningful sense. We are enveloped, in the latter case, by a moral and intellectual chaos that stems from an ever-expanding plurality of positions.

(Bineham, 1990, p. 44, emphasis in original)

Herein, Bineham (1990) depicted the “grand and seductive Either/Or” that Cartesian dualism presents as it manifests within the ongoing tug-of-war between objectivism and relativism (Bernstein, 1985, as quoted in Bineham, 1990, p. 56). This pervasive legacy still affects the development of research questions, “the definitions… and terminologies of contemporary philosophy in general,” and especially the evolution of “epistemic rhetoric literature” (Bineham, 1990, p. 56). Despite its prevalent influence, Bineham (1990) noted that “Cartesian Anxiety is not universal” for each philosopher or epistemologist “within the Western intellectual tradition,” but did wish to emphasize that the dualistic paradigm of thought holds remarkably powerful influence “with a force unparalleled by other paradigms” (p. 56). Bineham (1990) concluded, similarly to Foss and Gill (1987), that “knowledge is judged by the degree of social consensus achieved within specific communities or epistemic courts, which… constantly change over time”
and therefore does not align with a sense of “objective reality” (p. 57). Furthermore, Bineham (1990) underscored the usefulness of epistemic rhetoric in conjunction with philosophical hermeneutics, echoing discussions of Ryan and Natalle (2001) in their amendments to invitational rhetoric. In the case of epistemic rhetoric, hermeneutics removes the need for a metaphysical grounding or essence to arrive at “final agreement” as it “denies the battles between subjectivity and objectivity and between idealism and empiricism” (Bineham, 1990, p. 58). The discussion surrounding epistemic rhetoric and the various insights that have arisen as a result are best positioned to be useful when “issues endemic to Cartesian Anxiety” are fruitfully navigated, leading to a more coherent approach to epistemic rhetoric.

A “coherentist” approach to rhetorical epistemology directly addresses Cartesian Anxiety within the disciplinary debate. McPhail (1996) takes such an endeavor to writing. He identifies, like Bineham (1990), the “either/or” dilemma in the original proposition of epistemic rhetoric and how this leads to “a false dichotomy between relativism and essentialism, between dualistic and monistic truth, and ultimately… between rhetoric and spirituality” (p. 53). Such theoretical opposition upholds division and fragmentation against a more open potentiality of understandings. Like similar discussions of ontology, McPhail (1996) sees the need for a “unitive” approach that bridges divides within “dualistic conceptualizations of language, life, and method” (p. 53). Intellectual and philosophical fragmentation contribute to the confusion and paradoxes that arise in such an intense scholarly debate about the connection of knowledge to rhetoric. In this way, a “coherentist” approach addresses such fragmentation as it “calls into question the separateness of… reality” (McPhail, 1996, p.
McPhail (1996) details coherence as a long-standing philosophical concept, which has an important function throughout disciplinary debates surrounding “the nature of epistemic justification” in rhetoric (p. 54). The introduction of coherence creates openings for a broader range of discourses, or in the sense of Foucault (Foss and Griffin, 1987), knowledges. It is important to attend to the concepts embedded in a philosophical concept of coherence:

Theoretically, coherence emphasizes interconnectedness and wholeness, and coherence theorists celebrate relations among contents of belief states which represent an emergence into a circular whole. Coherence theorists question the assertion that there is sufficient justificatory power in self-evident beliefs to account for all other beliefs. Self-evident beliefs assume a world composed of separate and distinct entities that exist independent of each other and can thus be evaluated from, and correspond to, some fixed point of reference. (McPhail, 1996, p. 54)

This expression underscores the idea that doxa and episteme are parts of the same whole, naturally interconnected and related to each other. One cannot exist without the other and each becomes constituted against the unsettled boundaries of the other. As Nelson (1993) corroborates, “My claim is that the knowing we do as individuals is derivative, that your knowing or mine depends on our knowing, for some ‘we’” (p. 124). In other words, meaning and ways of knowing are constituted within the space between subjectivity and objectivity, as they are interconnected.

Similar concern and treatment should be provided to the intellectual realm as is given the spiritual realm. In the world, there are multiple manifestations of spiritualties,
some which believe in a conception of God(s) and others which do not. Strictly applying an “either/or” dualism to this aspect of reality, as such a force exists in much scholarship, is to “limit the spiritual paths and possibilities open to human beings in favor of one fixed, totalizing perspective” (McPhail, 1996, p. 56). Dualistic limitations not only ignore the complexity of “empirical reality,” but also contain “profound and potentially frightening” moral implications (McPhail, 1996, p. 56). The intellectual realm can be granted this same concern in perceiving it as “a transcendent cognitive ground of existence of which we are all a part” (McPhail, 1996, p. 55), a realm where doxa and episteme intertwine. Aware of potential charges of relativism, McPhail (1996) asserts that coherence theorists “emphasize truth as a process” and are primarily concerned with “how we come to know what we believe to be justified truth, not simply what is true for you or me, but what is true for a community of believers whose system of beliefs maintains a holistic continuity and relatedness” (p. 56). Overall, a coherentist approach provides a way to consider “the diversity of perspectives that characterize human symbolic and sacred existence” and in that way allow for a “move beyond the ‘essential contestedness’ of ideas and activities, beyond singular and fixed definitions of phenomena, and instead approach them through perspectives that attempt to integrate seemingly disparate views” (McPhail, 1996, p. 59). Echoing Scott’s landmark work in 1967, McPhail (1996) emphasizes an original point:

Rhetoric is, like truth or spirituality, more than a single phenomenon fixed forever by an essentially unchanging reality. It is an active process that offers opportunities for expanding and transforming our understanding of social, symbolic and spiritual realities. It is also a potential vehicle for achieving a
coherent moral framework in which the sacred and the secular might find more common ground, in which the word and the Way might become one, and still be many. (p. 59)

This passage speaks to the unbounded potential of rhetoric when opened to its multiplicity of definitions and manifestations in language, symbolism, and spiritual realities. Viewing rhetoric in this broader scope leaves the door open for the existence of multiple forms of knowledges, not only in awareness of them but for empathetic understanding and appreciation of them to grow, as we continually constitute our own beliefs and knowledges in natural relation to others.

Epistemic rhetoric is useful within the realm of this inquiry in the ontological sense that “reality is multiple, polymorphous, [and] diverse” (Brummett, 1979, p. 4). In short, discourse and the way we communicate does affect how we arrive at knowledges and can be used to create coherence between rhetors and audiences, as further evidenced by invitational rhetoric. Assuming the coherent approach by accepting the interrelated nature of things and the productive tension between subjectivity and objectivity, rhetoric serves epistemological functions, and in certain communicative modes can guide to a series of knowledges.

**Rhetoric as an Opening Toward Plural Epistemologies**

Epistemic rhetoric has been so energetically throttled in back-and-forth disciplinary discussion, even being pronounced “dead” via a frustrated eulogy of sorts (Brummett, 1990), that it is worthwhile to shift toward a different orientation in thinking about uses of rhetoric to point toward a possible range of truths, or epistemologies. The use of the term “epistemologies” suggests the overarching existence of a plurality of
knowledges, with an inherent “principle of incompleteness” as part of their nature (Santos, 2014, p. 297). In this section, I review openings in literature that move toward understanding knowledge as polyphonic and multiple before considering the concept of epistemologies, (post-) abyssal thought, and the principle of incompleteness surrounding all knowledges.

Scholars writing within disciplinary journals and other publications have indicated the need to view knowledge as plural. However, it is important to consider such a perceptual shift to epistemologies without co-opting the approach as just another disciplinary norm, especially as it was theorized by a non-Western scholar concerned with global issues of cognitive injustice and colonization (Santos, 2014). Kellner (1979/1982) considered the elusive nature of dominant, hegemonic ideologies embedded across theories, which are especially insidious as such theoretical ideology can present as often powerful, influential ways of knowing that might suggest themselves as “the” way of knowing. Kellner (1979/1982) observed:

The combination of rational theory with images and slogans makes ideology compelling and powerful. Ideology roots its myths in theories while its theories generate myths and supply a rationale for social domination (if the ideology attains hegemony). Thus, ideologies have both ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ appeal, as they combine rhetoric and logic, concepts and symbols, clear argumentation and manipulation. Most theories of ideology have failed to analyze properly the apparatus that produces and transmits ideology. (p. 388)

Traditional rhetorical scholarship, as can be seen especially in debates surrounding invitational and epistemic rhetoric, is built upon structures which maintain this seeming
“battlefield” for theoretical superiority. Within this structure lies the foundation for hegemonic ideologies of ideology and knowledge, shaping doxa and episteme, and often presenting hegemonic literature as “the right” take on a topic or issue.

Some scholars have addressed this ideological formation about knowledge and communication more directly in subsequent years. Reflecting on the history of rhetorical scholarship, Karma Chávez (2015) writes that rhetoric must break from its historical tradition “not in order that Rhetoric may become a more inclusive discipline but so that it may become something entirely different: a discipline constituted through non-normative, non-citizen, non-Western perspectives and ways of knowing and being” (p. 163). Chávez (2015) reflects on their own career as a professor of rhetoric and ruminates on the common knowledge of the “field’s canon,” and how anything that is “not Eurocentric” is “marginal” (p. 170). Chávez (2015) continues, asking what would happen if “we could reframe our relationship to our disciplinary history and to the canon altogether by acknowledging the narratives that predominate as well as what that dominance implies?” (p. 170). Chávez (2015) posits that inclusion in the rhetorical tradition is, in part, a question of citizenship, and that as such, it “is a product of modern state development and also of the colonial creation of national borders” (p. 165). In this assertion, Chávez (2015) argues that “delimiting the political as the realm of (various kinds of) citizens” inhibits the legitimation and inclusion of “lives, experiences, and practices of numerous collectives and individuals who have always engaged in practices that are justifiably called rhetorical and political” even though they do not conform to hegemonic, dominating norms (p. 165, emphasis in original). Ultimately, Chávez (2015) sees the consideration of “alternative ontologies and epistemologies” as necessary in releasing the
normative structures of rhetoric (p. 166). It is within this view that a shift can fruitfully be made to consider widening approaches to knowledge.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) makes a strong case for consideration of the existence of plural epistemologies, especially contextualized within the Western intellectual paradigm. Santos (2014) interrogates the intellectual constraints placed upon what constitutes “knowledge,” which becomes a normative, fragmenting force that ultimately spreads across the Global North and South. This is the foundation for global cognitive injustice, since one claim of universality, truth, or knowledge from the Western paradigm becomes superimposed in dominance over other ways of knowing and being in the world. Santos’s (2014) work *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* is “an epistemological break” from the realm of Eurocentric criticism. Santos (2014) uses the work of the Frankfurt school (like Horkheimer and Adorno) as an exemplifier of ways in which Western understandings fail “to account for the emancipatory struggles of our time” in the way that such scholarship “shares with the bourgeois thinking it criticizes the same epistemological foundations that suppress the cognitive dimension of social injustice” (p. 9) This approach to knowledge is the same that leads to Western knowledge being portrayed as universal for all human beings. Eurocentric theory views itself as “vanguard” in the way it “excels in knowing about, explaining, and guiding” – words with dominating connotations – as opposed to Santos’s (2014) proposed “knowing with, understanding, facilitating, sharing, and walking alongside” (p. 9). Scholars within the Western tradition reviewed in this study resonantly indicate such a need for broadened understandings and room for other ways of knowing, even within discussions of rhetorical theory (Bineham, 1990; Booth, 2004; Bone, Griffin,
A move toward plural epistemologies stems from decolonial theory and thinkers, like Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo (in addition to Santos, among many others). Barreto (2014) summarizes the pivotal work of Santos as a move towards “new paradigms of thought” (p. 396). As echoed by critiques discussed herein within the Western paradigm, Barreto (2014) writes:

[I]n the tradition of the dominant European subjectivism from René Descartes and Immanuel Kant to Edmund Husserl – and in analytical philosophy – the investigation of the relations between the subject and the object is motivated by breaking the attachments of consciousness to the world and searching for objectivity. (p. 396)

Fragmentation in thought and theory contributes to global cognitive injustice and shuts down valid ways of knowing and being in the world; the sustained disciplinary opposition between subjectivity and objectivity furthers this divide.

Modern Western epistemology has been driven by “abyssal thinking,” which creates distinct divides between “knowledge elaborated in the North and in the South” (Barreto, 2014, p. 396). Santos (2014) uses the “abyss” as a metaphor to argue that “Western thinking organizes the production and validation of knowledge along the lines of a precipice” (Barreto, 2014, p. 401). Instead, Santos provides a proposition for “post-abyssal thinking,” which withdraws Western theory’s claims “to universality and the monopoly of truth” (Barreto, 2014, p. 405). In this mode, there is no possibility for completely universal theory. Barreto (2014) suggests that part of this effort towards post-
abyssal thinking include “critique advanced from outside the West” as he encourages thinkers from within the “Western locus of enunciation to ‘situate [their] epistemological perspective on the [history and] social experience of the other side of the line’” (p. 405). Therein lies relevance of such an epistemological shift in the present inquiry, as work from thinkers with more direct ties to the Global South are included in this study, as this project exists in both thought-worlds, though it should be understood at this point that these worlds are naturally interrelated.

The heart of centering multiple epistemologies is “a dialogical dynamic, as they are built in the inclusive atmosphere of the ‘infinite experiences of the world’ in which a ‘plurality of heterogeneous knowledges’ inhabit or converge” (Barreto, 2014, p. 406). Moreover, it is vital to note that this theoretical turn is not meant to dispose of or completely divorce from Western thinking. This “hermeneutical” turn hopes to retain Western thinking alongside and in thinking with non-Western scholars in order to rid Western thought of its “abyssal ballast,” creating space for dialogue (Barreto, 2014, p. 406). Here, Santos (2014) presents the concept “ecology of knowledge,” which aims to displace “the monoculture of the dominant epistemology of the North” to make space for genuine multi-dimensional and directional intercultural dialogues toward knowledges (Barreto, 2014, p. 406). Turning toward a perception of epistemologies opens doors to new paradigms of thought that can exist in relation with broader, more encompassing “ecologies of knowledge.” This approach to knowledge is “richer… more diverse… [and] fertile,” (Barreto, 2014, p. 422) which allows for novel connections to be made across geopolitical boundaries, theoretical lines, and disciplines while simultaneously attempting to address issues of cognitive injustice.
The ecologies of knowledge (sometimes referred to as “plurality of knowledges,” or “multiple knowledges” or “epistemologies”) are directly embedded with a principle of incompleteness. No single knowledge exists which can possibly encapsulate all potential “interventions in the world,” and therefore, all knowledges are incomplete (Santos, 2014, p. 314). Acknowledging such incompleteness in ecologies does not, again, require the dismissal of traditional disciplinary scientific knowledge. However, the “principle of incompleteness of all knowledges is the precondition for epistemological dialogues and debates among different knowledges” (Santos, 2014, p. 298). Understanding this premise is to understand that “[a]ll knowledges have internal and external limits,” and hegemonic Western knowledge has historically recognized only its internal limits – those which posit that anything currently unknown can come to be known through the same kinds and processes of knowledge (Santos, 2014, p. 298). Addressing external limits is to acknowledge that not everything can be known through Western paradigms of thought alone. The hope in understanding the existence of ecologies of knowledge is to “create a new kind of [pragmatic] relation” which provides equal opportunity to various knowledges “in ever broader epistemological arguments” as thinkers move toward “building ‘another possible world,’” or one that is “more just and democratic… [and] balanced in its relations with nature” (Santos, 2014, p. 299). To clarify, this does not mean that all knowledges or arguments are valid but rather creates space for “pragmatic discussion among alternative, valid criteria without immediately disqualifying whatever does not fit the epistemological canon of modern science” (Santos, 2014, p. 299).

Invoking a term that appears multiple times within the present study, diatopical “hermeneutics,” Santos (2014) asserts that our epistemological goal should not be to
“achieve completeness” as this is not possible but rather to “raise the consciousness of reciprocal incompleteness… by engaging in the dialogue… with one foot in one culture and the other in another,” (p. 344). This is the positioning of the present inquiry, as MRN demonstrates an epistemological perspective from within the Western paradigm, which is already oriented toward openness and listening and is therefore suitable for dialogue within the larger ecologies of knowledge. Acknowledging the “relativity of cultures” is not equivalent to adopting philosophical relativism (Santos, 2014, p. 344). As such, a theoretical shifting toward plural epistemologies opens the present study in the way that rhetorical communicative choices lead to a certain way of knowing within a larger web of multiple ways of knowing the world. This move also aims to shed epistemic rhetoric of its disciplinary, traditional, paradigmatic weights, which confine broad, widely useful concepts like “rhetoric” and “knowledge” to the tangled paper trail of journal publications’ denotations. In studying the philosophy and epistemology of a resounding pacifist whose guiding principles always circled back to loving thy neighbor and thyself, it is ethical to recognize ways in which the treatment of knowledges and ways of being have been left loveless – without safety, inherent value, and freedom to engage toward awareness of reciprocal incompleteness.

Contextualized with a deeper understanding around the often-erratic prophecies originating from mass media and television scholarship, a discussion of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood comes into clearer perspective. Scholars and creators alike bring their own onto-epistemological and axiological angles to the work they contribute to the medium. Moreover, a historic overview of American public television’s origins, purpose, and designated values further specifies MRN’s relation to American television audiences as it
stands in contrast to more common commercialized forms. Distinct from other children’s television programs, this PBS program’s consistent, specific use of televisual framing points to a profoundly intentional, underlying rhetorical consciousness. Understanding this rhetorical consciousness is assisted by an amended invitational rhetoric – a dialogic, listening-based, open rhetorical mode of communication which is demonstrated by Mr. Rogers. Additionally, invitational rhetoric accommodates the existence of a plurality of understandings and knowledges, thus acting as a type of epistemic rhetoric. Therefore, invitational rhetoric allows socially created and supported knowledges to manifest from discourse or other communicative action. A turn toward understanding “epistemologies” as plural rather than a universal or wholly objective “epistemology” sets a precedent for forthcoming consideration of a “Mr. Rogers epistemology,” one way of knowing within a much larger ecology of knowledges. With this theoretical grounding in place, I turn to methodological considerations.
CHAPTER THREE: Method

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and a cultural transformation – and... scientists don’t know how to do that.

- James Gustave Speth
  Environmental Lawyer and Advocate

The quote that introduces this section speaks to the failures of positivist science to address axiological threats to human existence. Indeed, “selfishness, greed, and apathy” cannot be approached by such a positivist study as these forces exist within the fundamental discursive structures of our society. Therein lies the importance of research inquiry’s openness in its capacity to address such menacing philosophical issues. The issues that Mr. Rogers dealt with in the Neighborhood were often relatives of these societal ills and to be able to consider how he addressed them, from an intellectual viewpoint, is no small task. At first glance, this project seems to lend itself neatly to a close reading of episodes alongside consideration of its form and framing via its mediated format. However, I pose the term “ethical close reading” to better represent my chosen methodological approach, which allows for a unique consideration of rhetorical choices on MRN. In this chapter, I provide an overview of ethical close reading as an intentionally open method, a consideration of post-qualitative inquiry as it relates to the overall nature of this project, and a description of selected episodes for analysis.

Ethical Close Reading

Close reading (sometimes called “close textual analysis”) “investigates the relationship between the internal workings of a discourse in order to discover what makes
a particular text function persuasively” (De Castilla, n.d., p. 136). Close reading works to unearth the underlying “tools” that create a text’s style and rhetorical effects, additionally allowing any “hidden themes” to arise. Brummett (2010) considers close reading “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings” (p. 3). He adds that there is no clear distinction between a reading and a close reading and that the more “care and deliberation one takes, the more one studies the words, images, actions, objects, and other components of what one is reading, the more one is closely reading” (p. 9). Brummett (2010) further considers close reading as a way to reveal “meanings that are shared but not universally and also meanings that are known but not articulated” (p. 17, emphasis in original). In this sort of knowing-unknowing inquiry, Brummett (2010) explains that such questioning is naturally “epistemological,” and therefore considers “ways of arriving at knowledge,” and that as such epistemologies are always “based on teaching and plausibility” (p. 18, emphasis in original). Close reading is inherently creative as one who uses such techniques is open to organize their observations from multiple readings (De Castilla, n.d., p. 137). Note-taking is a recommended technique of close reading, which I did upon watching selected episodes, and I additionally invited a “co-viewer” who kindly added insights alongside my observations to enrich and diversify analytical findings.

Historically, close reading has been considered part of the “New Criticism” and has considered three primary traits of a text: the rhetor, their audience, and the text’s message in pursuit of examining the “internal traits of the text” (De Castilla, n.d., p. 136). Colás (2008) deconstructs close reading’s historical definition to redefine it, pulling it apart from the context of the “New Criticism” especially given its “most explicit
methodological formulations,” which “bracketed off the poetic text from any extra-
textual concerns” (p. 189). In his essay “Toward an Ethics of Close Reading in the Age of
Neo-Liberalism,” Santiago Colás (2008) suggests a reclaiming of close reading as a
methodological approach by considering the practice’s ethical openings; Colás
exemplifies the practice through his own reading of Uruguayan writer Felisberto
Hernández’s fictional works. He begins by introducing one story’s narration, which
reads:

I’ll also have to write many things I know very little about; it even strikes me that
impenetrability is intrinsic to them. Perhaps when we think we know them we
stop knowing that we don’t know them, because their existence is inevitably
obscure, and that must be one of their qualities. (Colás, 2008, p. 172)

This selected passage guides the rest of his close reading. Colás wishes to detach the art
of doing close reading from the “strongly politicized culture of the late 1960s and early
1970s” as the act became associated with being “stifling and reactionary” (p. 190). Also
tracing close reading’s historical use, Khan and Hassan (2018) explain how the method
started in academic spaces of England, moved to the United States, and eventually
became a key component of a flourishing discipline in its “advocated focus on the
linguistic and rhetorical devices of… selected textual pieces” (p. 55). They also state that
advocates for the method in its conception were restrictive on methodological boundaries
and its potential uses, calling the method (in its origin) “narrow, limiting, and colonizing”
(p. 55). In this way, the close reading method, like many other concepts discussed
(rhetoric, epistemology, knowledge, truth, etc.), have become bound up in the
labyrinthine realm of history and four corners of physical pages, and thus needs to be re-opened.

Close reading has fortunately evolved to become more open-ended and allows an observer to notice traits and patterns which make themselves apparent (De Castilla, n.d.). De Castilla (n.d.) further notes that conceptualizing the influence of texts is inherently linked to rhetoric, which while historically considered “the art of persuasion (specifically of the written word),” has a meaning which can vary widely depending on the medium in which it exists (De Castilla, n.d.), an idea which reflects previous discussion of rhetoric within the realm of this project. As Khan and Hassan (2018) suggest, close reading has “great potential” across varying genres and allows one to access a text in a manner “potentially vast enough to open new worlds of meanings” (p. 55). Keeping the close reading method open and “on the table” is especially important in light of the idea that thinkers should have methods that allow for them to be “cautious towards knowledge” and that “[guide]… also towards its new heights and dimensions” (Khan & Hassan, 2018, p. 55).

I consider Colás’s (2008) conception of close reading as relevant and kindred to my own use of the “method,” which requires a more detailed understanding here. Colás wishes to consider close reading as evocative of having “friendship with the text (philo + logos)” and further attempts to “draw out the ethics of such a friendship” (2008, p. 190). Colás (2008) suggests that when there is “friendship” with a text, we are allowed the ability of “disclosure, through contemplation, of unknowing” (p. 190). In other words, we can acknowledge, and even celebrate, what we do not know. Colás (2008) calls the practice of close reading “an exploration” and in doing so, it is also “an unfolding of what
we do not know in texts (and, figuratively speaking, in things) and therefore also as a
cultivation of what I will call unknowing relating” (p. 173). In this sentiment, Colás
reminds readers that we cannot know everything, and it is important not to claim that we
can or do, as part of our sense of knowledge is constituted by being in relation with
that/those which we cannot know. In analyzing the fiction of writer Felisberto Hernández,
Colás (2008) describes the use of narration to create a sense of the relatedness of things
as they “blend into each other,” observing:

Ultimately, the combined dynamics dissolve the categories [into] each other, to
create a fictional world in which we can only really use the terms ‘subject’ and
‘object’ to designate something like Platonic ideals, terminal states, or poles that
never actually exist as such in that fictional world and so do not help us to make
sense of that world. Everything that does exist in that world—Being, in short—
rather floats and shifts somewhere in a hazy intermediate zone between those only
abstractly existent end-points. (p. 176)

In Felisberto’s work, the relationship between subjects and objects is complex and
ambiguous, and the narrator seems confused, “disoriented and discouraged,” but the
author does so, wishing to evoke the sense of the experience of “relating without
knowing” (Colás, 2008, p. 181). Colás elaborates that when he refers to “knowing,” he
means the

idea of knowledge implied in philosophy by the ‘correspondence theory’ of truth,
whereby we may be said ‘to know’ something when we have formed in our minds
an idea of an object or state of affairs in reality that adequately represents that
object or state of affairs as it actually exists outside of our mind. (pp. 181-182)
Colás (2008) believes this is part of the author’s intentionality in the way that the narration works counter to the correspondence theory of knowledge, because he shows that once “an object ceases to be an object (and so, strictly speaking, cannot be known), [it] doesn’t mean that it becomes nothing, nor that it can no longer be engaged or related to” (pp. 183-184). In other words, this seemingly ambiguous state can also be productive and does not have to be confined within a clear linguistic space. Colás sees close reading as both contemplative and theoretical practices – “both of which have long suffered (at times self-inflicted) accusations of being out of touch with or even closed to life” – but are best understood when considered “immanent practices of unknowing engagement with life” (p. 192) with space for wonder. This is to accept the interconnectedness of things, beings, texts, all. Close reading in immanence, which, again, can be viewed as both theoretical (in the sense of de Man and Heidegger) or contemplative (in the sense of Deleuze and Agamben), must view a text as transcending its “illusory borders,” which are not absolute or “sacrosanct” (Colás, 2008, p. 192); a book (or any “text”) is “an assemblage” or “multiplicity” (p. 193). Viewing a text in this sense “would be open, contiguous with the world around it—a swatch in the fabric of the world, which is not necessarily (or only) the world in which it was produced but rather also the world in which it [circulates today]” (Colás, 2008, p. 193). This kind of reading is an “attempt to free life (pure immanence; contemplation; theory; unknowing relating) from the personal, which is to say from the transcendent categories of subject and object” (Colás, 2008, p. 196). Close reading, much in the way it is described by other authors writing from a traditional disciplinary perspective, should be a mindful, experiential practice. However, mindfulness practices are very involved processes that can take a lifetime to develop and
evolve. Colás (2008) explains his own mindful practice of “sink[ing] into the complexity of the present,” as he
develop[s] a powerful… awareness of the rich web of material, temporal relations that constitute reality in each unfolding moment. This experience often leads to a heightened sense of ambiguity, as the fully attended-to fact of the present moment exceeds the fixed, fast categories I habitually use to organize and separate the stuff of the world. This sustained encounter with ambiguity then occasions, among other effects, a profound uncertainty and doubt. (p. 201)

While certainly observations arise in this practice of close reading, there is also an awareness of the complexity of observations within the realm of the larger surrounding world. It admits that certain aspects cannot be known and has an accompanying sense of doubt. Colás, who, as a scholar, is concerned with the lived political realities in Latin America, admits that this mode of thinking does nothing in the realm of “extra-academic activities we might undertake” to make active political change. Instead, he asserts that “as academics we have a privileged space in which to think,” and “that to do so is in itself an ethical and political act,” and thirdly that “close reading [in the way he describes and practices]… can be an aid to such thinking” (2008, p. 205, emphasis in original). The age of neo-liberalism “and its attendant literary and cultural products… however familiar some may appear,” (pp. 205-206) are cause for intellectual concern. Colás (2008) is confident in assessment that this age is unique and that it requires continually evolving modes of thought to exist in response to new challenges and market-driven outgrowths of thought. He writes that in such an age, “hastily applying familiar concepts – in other
words, by thinking we know – we tend to forget, as Felisberto cautions, that and what we don’t know” (pp. 205-206, emphasis in original).

In sum, close reading, in the spirit of how it is described here, opens up room for evolving capacities of thought that are not overly stifled by methodological limitations. Colás (2008) summarizes such a sentiment:

The point of the relations of unknowing established within the dark tunnel [in the story] or of an ethics of close reading, of contemplation or of theory seems to me to be to suspend our familiar organs of perception and with them our habitual categories of thought and our mystifications long enough to experience the present differently, freshly, as possibility and difference rather than as the repetition of the already familiar. (p. 206)

In line with this sentiment, I read MRN as open to earlier theoretical discussions provided herein and with a sense of space for theoretical contemplation of selected episodes’ communicative significance, trusting and accepting what a genuine attempt at mindful close reading stirs in observation and discussion. Colás (2008) clearly articulates such an ethical approach to close reading in a way that attempts to separate the theoretical and contemplative methodological practice from its weighted historical usage. This way, the process can be seen as an opening towards viewing of a text, which understands a text’s interrelatedness to the world around it through time, and allows a sense of unknowing relating to the text, with space to not “know” everything that can be explicitly stated about a text as an object of knowledge. Surely, any knowledge extending from this inquiry is naturally incomplete, but an ethical close reading holds methodology open to allow patterns and themes to emerge naturally in observation.
**Post-Qualitative Inquiry**

In this section, I introduce the concept of post-qualitative inquiry and how it is of significance for the scope and ongoing thought-work of this project, within its pages and beyond. First, I include a sampling of sentiments from Communication scholars whose remarks, however unknowingly at the time, indicate the “releasing” potential of such a mode of inquiry without naming their orientation as “post-qualitative.” Then, I detail the guiding concepts of post-qualitative inquiry and its relation to this study.

Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland (1994) discuss the operationalization of professionalism in the academy and how it “hallows the discovery of knowledge and thus encourages scientism” and therefore forces both the social sciences and humanities to co-opt mannerisms of positivism “to gain scientific status – and thereby strengthen their disciplinary status,” ultimately subjecting modes of inquiry to the worldview that scientism fosters (p. 23). The authors quote Henry McGuckin, who encouraged those within the communication discipline to “heed with real conviction one another’s contribution to what is ultimately a single purpose” (Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994, p. 29). Nothstine et al. (1994) take note of overarching constraints placed on inquiry based on societal values surrounding approaches to knowledge, despite the interconnectedness of all inquiry. They continue that this is a result of “political necessity,” because of science’s “installation as the premier, if not the sole, epistemology of modernity,” which places theory as the ultimate goal of criticism, and judgment, which seems naturally connected to criticism, to a “secondary and often quite expendable goal” (p. 32). Borrowing questions directly from Wander and Jenkins, Nothstine et. al (1994) go on to pose the following scenario:
Let us suppose that a critic honestly became emotionally involved with his subject – that he found it important down to the very ground of his being. Are we to tell him to write about it as though he were not so interested; are we to suggest that he write about something less involving? Are we, in other words, to request the critic, for professional purposes, either to lie about or to ignore what to him is vitally important? (pp. 44-45)

They conclude that the answer within the disciplinary setting, at the time of writing, is, “Yes,” and as a result, they assert that “the possibility for critics and their criticism to serve as a genuine source of knowledge, power, or ethics in a public culture is diminished almost to zero” (pp. 44-45). This is especially unfortunate as the nature of communicative inquiry is one that sees the power of communication to affect such vibrant life processes as the arousal of emotions, the evolution of “the direction, intensity, and salience” of one’s beliefs, the nurturing of ideas, and in sparking one or many to action (Nothstine et. al, 1994). The authors here express frustration and even concern about the risk of publishing their thoughts on the constraints of inquiry within the contemporary academic system.

Traditional qualitative (and rhetorical) research can limit productive streams of thought. In her work on the possibilities and philosophy of listening, Fiumara (1995) asserts, “Even an extended theoretical propensity to a methodology of the question can be undermined by a ‘logical’ frame incapable of opening itself to a more radical mode of listening” (p. 38). The well-known process of choosing theory and method to apply to a research question can shut out knowledge with its procedural boundaries, sustaining the precipice lines of abyssal thought.
As the problem suggests, there is inherent fragmentation in the philosophical onto-epistemological underpinnings of research in academia at large, especially in qualitative research. For this reason, I invoke McPhail’s (1996) phrase regarding a “coherent approach to inquiry,” as one that “seeks out and emphasizes similarities and integrates seemingly separate phenomena to illustrate their connectedness and interdependence” (p. 59). There is a need for onto-epistemological alignment in inquiry.

As a transitionary thought, Brummett (2010), in his explanation of the close reading process, states that the method is possible “without explicit theories and methods,” as “Some people can do a close reading naturally, intuitively” (p. 28). It is such a sentiment regarding the fluidity of methodology that is an appropriate avenue to a consideration of post-qualitative inquiry.

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2014), a qualitative-based social science researcher for over twenty years, describes an ongoing struggle with the “incommensurability between postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism and other approaches” that she collectively refers to as “the ‘posts’ and ‘conventional humanist qualitative methodology’” (p. 2). A central concept of post-qualitative inquiry is that qualitative inquiries are sometimes susceptible to epistemological and ontological incompatibilities in selections of theories and methods that contain fundamental ideological misalignments. She argues that, over the course of her academic experience, methodology, epistemology, and ontology cannot be separated “lest [research] become mechanized and instrumented and reduced to methods, process, and technique” (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 3). To exemplify what she sees as this central issue, she considers a qualitative interview-based study that uses Foucault’s “archaeology” as a theoretical
grounding and how this study would be inherently dissonant in its onto-epistemological commitments; Foucault, in the theory, underscores his “lack of interest in ‘the speaking subject,’” and therein lies a philosophical inconsistency (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 3). She also draws attention to the parallel use of critical, interpretive, and phenomenological terminology arising within still “positivist structuring concepts” (p. 6). She draws a historical timeline of hegemonic modes of inquiry, starting with the positivist quantitative focus in the World War II era which led to ethical chaos (atomic bombs; “scientific” experimentation on human beings), into the radical shift towards “liberating” qualitative methods, and the pervasive contemporary turn back into a positivist mode. In an interview, St. Pierre expresses concern regarding the current U.S. qualitative methodology landscape in its “turn back to positivism with normalized and formalized practices” and encourages “researchers to constantly question the prevailing truths and the traditions they have learned too well” (Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015, p. 15).

St. Pierre (2014) critiques, while not completely throwing out, qualitative inquiry by inserting Foucault’s view of critique, which states that critique cannot say what is right or wrong, but it can question “the undergirding assumptions of [such] practices” (Eaton, 2016). Ultimately, post-qualitative inquiry decenters and disrupts conventional qualitative inquiry’s “privileging of the human and the epistemological” (Eaton, 2016). This approach to inquiry does not condemn conventional qualitative methods but looks to broaden them for inquiry with philosophical coherence, which expands intellectual considerations to make room for the ontological and epistemological as integrally related concepts that should undergird future inquiry. St. Pierre (2014) takes care to reiterate multiple times that humanist qualitative methodology is not erroneous or useless and does
not wish to abandon it completely; she simply wishes to address the latent incommensurability in its assumptions about inquiry.

Post-qualitative inquiry suggests a different practical approach to the research process. St. Pierre (2014) reports that she encourages her students to “begin with the epistemological and ontological commitments of the analysis… and use it to think about whatever they’re interested in thinking about” (p. 10, emphasis in original). In simpler terms, she restates that she asks her students what they are already doing and want to think more about as they have read and studied. She remarks:

The first thing I want them to do is read, read, read and then ‘do’ the next thing that makes sense and to keep doing the next things and then all that doing is a methodology – that is, if they still must cling to the idea of methodology.

(Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015, p. 16)

Because of onto-epistemological incongruences and as part of the so-called “ontological turn” in research, St. Pierre (2014) suggests that a study keep its theory and method open as suggested by the subject or issue being inquired, allowing for an artifact or concept to suggest its own method for study as a study unfolds. In this regard, and as a student in the Communication discipline, I pose close reading as an inherently open starting point or methodological realm for the study of MRN while allowing analysis, observation, and experience of selected episodes to give rise to significant patterns as they emerge in the process. The theoretical areas explored previously herein serve as guiding posts for observation.

Inherent interconnectedness exists between Colás’s (2008) approach to close reading as an open practice for relating to a text and St. Pierre’s (2014) thinking-through
post inquiry; both are inherently open and aware of the limitations of knowledges or of applying a cookie-cutter process to a question and what that does to the ont-epistemological alignments of an unfolding argument. Both thinkers, Colás and St. Pierre, trace their intellectual roots back to the readings of Deleuze. St. Pierre’s approach to inquiry also resonates with the ontological discussions posed by other scholars herein (Bineham, 1990; McPhail, 1996, Stroud, 2005).

In addressing the mention of post-qualitative inquiry in this study, St. Pierre suggests an enlightening sentiment. When asked about the nature of research, and if students should “learn the basics before [they] deconstruct them,” St. Pierre responds:

[M]uch qualitative research has now become quite positivist and turned into some kind of formalized, systemic process that doesn’t serve us well in this new kind of work we’re trying to do – this work we’re calling the new empiricism, new materialism, post qualitative, post humanism, and so on. The word research is so heavy with meaning that I’ve stopped using it in my teaching and now use the word inquiry, which I think is more open. If I use the word research, my students immediately want to jump right into research methodology. And about learning the basics, red lights always begin flashing when I hear the word basic – basic for whom? Who gets to decide what’s basic, necessary, foundational, etc.? Anything that’s considered basic is disciplinary, normalizing, and very limiting – it’s a construction by those in power who want to control what happens. (Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015, p. 19)

St. Pierre encourages students to do their work and “provide the rationale for [the] work,” but ultimately to “do your work” (Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015, p. 20, emphasis in
original); be true to the self. In light of this sentiment and to break from convention, briefly, I become increasingly aware of my own use of language in encountering thoughts of Derrida such as quoted by St. Pierre, “[W]hen you use a concept you bring with it the entire structure in which it is thinkable” (Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015, p. 15). I am especially self-conscious of such language use and how it cannot exist without such ontological misalignments of the type St. Pierre describes based on the components I bring into this inquiry. In all, I am aware of the potentiality for epistemological, ontological, and methodological misalignments within this study but am positing this inquiry as a move towards coherence. Because of the liminal space between qualitative and post-qualitative inquiry, I pull literature from multiple thought worlds as they are all parts of a coherent world of inquiry and hopefully can ultimately be seen as working towards a plurality of knowledges. The thinkers included in this work come from multiple paradigms, which can even be seen as different worlds, in a sense. I have reviewed literature with useful thoughts and arguments from Eurocentric, Western thinkers whose underlying philosophical and ethical underpinnings might not completely blend with those included by non-Western thinkers introduced herein. My goal in doing so is to include the multiplicity of voices that exist in research as they move towards coherence together within a plurality of knowledges and present hopeful opportunity for dialogue among epistemologies.

**Episode Selection for Analysis**

Six episodes of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* are selected and discussed in this project based upon thorough review of the program’s active production and runtime from 1968 to 2001. The first and last episodes of the program mark the beginning and end
points for consideration, with four intervening episodes from the decades in-between – the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In this way, the selected episodes form a linear timeline from the original air date to the end, as it was, at one time (in 1997), the longest-airing children’s television program in American history (Billboard, 1998). Against a background of social, economic, and cultural changes in the American landscape in the twentieth century, MRN continued to air albeit with a shifting frequency of episodes aired annually. Despite challenges faced by public television over the course of its history, MRN persisted in creating and broadcasting episodes for thirty-three years. Alongside its more light-hearted episodes that dealt with issues like gift-giving (Eps. 1721-1725) and imaginary friends (Eps. 1646-1650), Mr. Rogers continually included episodes that addressed deeper issues like assassination, competition, nuclear war, divorce, and work (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a).

The first year that the program aired (1968) was also the year with the most episodes at a total of 130; between 1969 and 1975, sixty-five episodes were aired each year (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). However, Mr. Rogers and his crew reported fatigue from high production frequency, resulting in a hiatus between 1976 and 1979, after which time the show returned (Sims, 2018). The so-called “first series” of the program comprised the episodes aired between 1968 and 1975. Beginning in 1979, new episodes of MRN appeared on television in August; however, episodes from the first series continued airing in conjunction with newly released “second series” episodes across networks (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). From 1976 forward, each year only saw between five and fifteen new episodes aired, and each series of episodes post-hiatus came with an overarching designated theme, such as “Mr. Rogers Goes to School,” the
theme of the only five episodes aired in 1979 (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). The only exception to the five to fifteen frequency was 1982 when twenty new episodes were released (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). Detailed viewership records and ratings for the course of MRN are difficult to locate. PBS Kids notes that all of its programs are “fed and air” nationally just like Jeopardy!, so local stations air the programs whenever and at whatever frequency they choose; for this reason, PBS Kids measurements are accumulated with multiple local telecasts counting as “a single, national telecast” (Sponsorship Group for Public Television, n.d.). An archived article from The Boston Globe notes that MRN episodes still averaged about 1.4 million viewers each week in 2008 across the nation, but that PBS removed MRN from its Nielsen ratings after this time (Diaz, 2009).

In all, over 895 episodes of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood were created, alongside special episodes and features hosted by Mr. Rogers (The Neighborhood Archive, n.d.-a). In 2008, about sixty percent of 355 PBS member stations still carried MRN, and the same year, the number shrunk drastically as stations expressed a desire for updated programming (Schmadeke, 2008). In response, thousands of people formed a group to speak out against the show’s departure from television, with one father, Chris Ware, commenting, “The show is fundamentally about clumsy, awkward, uncomfortable real life, and it’s one of the last places on television where children can see it honestly reflected… With very little camera editing on the program, it also ‘feels’ more real” (Schmadeke, 2008). Family Communications’ COO, Kevin Morrison, celebrated the show’s lengthy run despite the lack of new episodes for seven years after its end. He commented, “You just have to recognize inevitably the fact that this is an old program
and appeals less and less to the market” (Schmadeke, 2008). To this day, occasional reruns of the series continue to air on network television on weekend mornings, in much less frequency as in the period between 2001 and 2008 after the show ceased production in 2001 (TV Guide, n.d.).

Mr. Rogers maintained the integrity of a central principle over the course of the program’s run: “What is mentionable is manageable” (Kris, n.d., emphasis added). As will be explored further, this sentiment is of paramount importance to Mr. Rogers’s communicative philosophy. This principle guided the content and thematic choices for episodes, especially as episodes frequently confronted difficult feelings, interactions, and life crises. The show’s coherence spans far beyond the episodes contained within this study. As Timberg (1981/1982) reflected on his study of soap operas, he wrote that he had seen many more episodes than he selected for study, but that he ultimately believed it would not have mattered which episodes he picked, as the same forms appear from day to month after month of viewing. That is the power and presence of rhetorical framing as a conduit of message contained within the screen. Timberg’s study (1981/1982) provided no in-depth discussion of method, but immediately moved from introduction into analysis of selected soap opera episodes, allowing the patterns of rhetorical framing – scene dissolutions, close-ups, and abrupt screen black-outs – to take center stage.

The current inquiry considers six selected episodes spanning from the first episode to the last episode of the program, a timeline that stretches from 1968 to 2001. Between the first and last episodes are four selected intermediate episodes, which aired in 1970, 1973, 1981, and 1990, respectively. In this way, the episode selection over the program’s production paints a picture of the integrity and overarching thematic continuity
of the series. Though an exponential number of episode combinations could have been selected for the four middle episodes, they were selected with additional consideration for their variety in subject-matter, especially as each one deals with significant philosophical questions as presented to children. These episodes address complex human questions and issues with a resonant simplicity that lingers with audiences today. Mr. Rogers helped children and adults understand how to best interact with and relate to the people around us, grapple with some of life’s most substantial questions, and appreciate the world upon which all these interactions and contemplations unfold. The following episodes are included in this study for consideration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>#0001</td>
<td>The First Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>#1101</td>
<td>Death of a Goldfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>#1309</td>
<td>What is Love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>#1478</td>
<td>A Boy in a Wheelchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>#1617</td>
<td>A Visit to a Recycling Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>#1765</td>
<td>Mr. Rogers Celebrates the Arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each episode is between twenty-eight and thirty minutes long. As evidenced by episode titles alone, Mr. Rogers clearly addresses several of life’s central concerns – death, love, relations with others, the health of our planet, and our appreciation of beauty and expression. Therefore, the selected episodes provide an opportunity to explore Mr. Rogers’s rhetorical choices over *MRN*’s run on television. In this way, we can consider what Drake (2016) calls the “accumulated performance,” or the experiences that arise in “living with” a long-running series and coming to know characters with “close
familiarity” over time (p. 16). By coding transcriptions with the explored rhetorical theories in mind and moving into multiple close readings of the episodes’ spoken and unspoken features, space opens, in the spirit of post-qualitative inquiry, to consider the nature of “our kind of communication.”
CHAPTER FOUR: Mapping the Space of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*

*Here is my secret. It is very simple. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

- Antoine de Saint Exupéry
  *The Little Prince* (1943)

Using an open, ethical close reading method inspired by Colás (2008) and in the spirit of post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2014), I viewed each selected episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* at least three times. I transcribed each episode with notes over viewings, collected screenshots, and discussed my observations with a co-viewer. Transcription notes ranged from general reflection to more specific coding using codes like “framing,” “invitational,” and “discourse/knowledge.” These selected codes correspond to the theoretical openings discussed through literature in areas concerning rhetorical framing, invitational rhetoric, and epistemic rhetoric. Other “codes” arose naturally as aspects of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication” became clearer in viewing; some of these codes included “segment pattern,” “music/audio,” “language” and “question.” Throughout the analytical process, I observed four comprehensive categories which appeared consistently over the selected episode timeline and aid in understanding “our kind of communication” as it manifested throughout the spaces of *MRN*. With the permission of Fred Rogers Productions, I have also included screenshots from each episode at relevant intervals to assist in more vivid illustration of the described concepts.

In the following analysis, I explore four primary elements which consistently appear across *MRN* episodes: the program’s routine overarching segment and plot structure, its deliberate televisual rhetorical framing, gentle embodiment of music and sound, and careful yet simple treatment of language to address complex, philosophical
themes. Even upon preliminary review, it becomes quickly apparent that Mr. Rogers crafted the show with contemplative concern for the program’s integrity (no matter how long its ultimate run), its sense of pedagogical and epistemological coherence, and its maintenance of simple, open televisual spaces for viewers’ ongoing emotional reflection.

**Overarching Show Structure**

Over the years, each episode’s structure remains relatively consistent with minor deviations between episodes. The movement, plot, and action of each episode elapses through a predictable, comforting routine (although subject matter and interactions change) so much so that a viewer comes to expect it. The routine becomes increasingly apparent over multiple viewings. A slow transition always precedes the opening theme (which is always the same), followed by a “dialogic” monologue with viewers, interaction with neighbors or items, a visit to the Neighborhood of Make Believe (herein after interchangeably referred to as “NMB”), more neighborly connections, a recapping dialogue-monologue, and a farewell song preceding Mr. Rogers’s final exit. Occasionally, these segments switch order with one another but never drastically far off from the established routine. In the following section, I consider each of these overarching segments that become well-established over the course of viewing *MRN* with attention to patterns that also arise within segments, as the show’s structure lays the firm foundation for Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication.”

**Opening Theme, Entrance, and Segment Transitions**

Without exception, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* always starts slowly. Even before seeing Mr. Rogers’s entrance, viewers watch a slow pan across the modeled Neighborhood and into the walls of the home. In most selected episodes, Picture Picture
(a framed image on the wall which is often used to display slides or short videos) is visible with a simple greeting or displayed image. A stoplight rests directly adjacent with the yellow light flashing as we wait for Mr. Rogers to enter, symbolically encouraging viewers to “slow down” and prepare for time in the home with their television neighbor. *Figure 1* below illustrates this opening as it appears over time.

![Figure 1. Entering the Neighborhood](image)

*Figure 1. Entering the Neighborhood*

*Note. MRN’s opening scene, featuring Picture Picture and a flashing yellow stoplight (left to right: 1970, 1973, 1990, and 2001, respectively).*

The camera then pans to the front door; each episode begins with Mr. Rogers entering his “television home” while singing “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” exchanging glances with the camera while trading his coat for a casual sweater from the entry closet, taking time to adjust the sweater carefully, and sitting to switch from “busy” working shoes into relaxed sneakers for the house. “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” sings a consistent celebration of each day, an appreciation for each individual viewer, and an invitation for time spent in thought and conversation together. Its repeated tone,
cadence, and melody calms the listener and prepares them to think about the ideas Mr. Rogers has brought with him that day. *Figure 2* displays stills from Mr. Rogers’s entry accompanied by this song over time.

![Figure 2. “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood”](image)


In every shot, Mr. Rogers represents a safe barrier between the banister and the front door to the outside “adult” world or the closet that contains his “outside” coats. The expositional process follows Mr. Rogers carefully and fosters slowing down, getting comfortable, and feeling safe with a song that emphasizes such an invitation from the beginning every time.

The opening theme and Mr. Rogers’s entrance are in themselves periods of transition – from the day at school, whatever “bombardment” was on television immediately prior to *MRN*, or scurrying thoughts that accompany increasingly fast-paced life even for children. However, what becomes apparent is that smooth and slow transitions *between* segments are just as important as starting off slow. The transitioning
space between each of the following segments is relatively measured and calm – no sudden camera shifts or startling sounds. In many cases, transitions are carried by a phone ringing or the doorbell signaling a neighborly arrival, sounds not uncommon of daily experiences in a home. The show’s entire overarching structure is a routine movement through slow transitions into and out of segments. While this takes multiple forms, a prime recurring example is the Trolley’s arrival into the living room as it “talks” with Mr. Rogers before carrying the audience into the Neighborhood of Make Believe. Figure 3 below depicts interactions between Mr. Rogers and the anthropomorphized Trolley as it arrives for the transitioning space.

Figure 3. Trolley Transitions


The show’s exposition sets the tone and pace for its remainder. Slowness in transition and movement throughout MRN’s segment spaces is integral to the kind of communication Mr. Rogers wished to relay. A monologue and bit of “action” consistently follows the peaceful ease into each episode.


Monologue and Encounters

In every episode, after settling into his at-home attire and disposition, Mr. Rogers addresses viewers by asking questions or sharing an item he has brought for the audience. He always asks a question, which relates back to the viewer’s lived experience in some way and is often connected to a broader topic of significance that interweaves throughout the episode in multiple forms. He either continues discussion related to the item, or then proceeds to interact with a neighbor who calls or comes to visit the home. For example, in the 1968 episode, he asks, “Do you ever change your shoes when you come home from some place?” shortly followed by, “How are you doing with your tying?” He takes time to look at his shoes before walking viewers to his porch to see his “new swing” (new, in that this was the first episode in a new television setting and home) and shows the audience how a ladder works while checking some wiring on the porch set. He uses the time outside to talk about change before wandering back into the house and looking at other aspects of his television home that have changed in his “new” iteration of “Mr. Rogers” the television host. The doorbell rings, and Mr. Rogers holds a brief conversation with Mr. McFeely, the owner of Speedy Delivery service, who, according to Mr. Rogers, “seems to be always on the go.” In this episode, time is spent with both items (shoes, a ladder, a swing, wiring) and human neighbors (Mr. McFeely and Mrs. Russellite).

In “Death of a Goldfish” (1970), Mr. Rogers brings a simple wooden pentagon shape to share with the audience. He counts the sides and then takes viewers over to Picture Picture to watch the short “film for today” about fish. This gentle video serves as a transition to Mr. Rogers feeding his own fish in the living room aquarium before he
spots a dead fish at the bottom of his own tank. Several minutes elapse as he looks at the fish, attempts to revive it, and decides that there is no saving it and it must be buried. He uses the time to further reminisce about his pet dog from his childhood, Mitsy, whose death, he admits, he struggled with deeply when young. This pensive interaction time with the dead fish fills all the monologue space before the daily visit to Make Believe.

The remaining episodes follow a similar formula, though the characters and objects vary. The third selection, “What is Love?” (1973), features Mr. Rogers describing a list of the “speedy deliveries” he has been helping with that day as a favor to the McFeely family. He is slightly confused about one of the deliveries for Elsie Neal and attempts to call her house. At first, he dials the wrong number and uses the opportunity to demonstrate how to handle an accidental phone call. He notes that he wants to get his deliveries “just right” because of his love for the McFeelys. Then, it’s time for Make Believe. In “A Boy in a Wheelchair,” he begins by introducing the audience to some blocks with which he builds a miniature garage for a model electric car and model airplane. This moment is used to preview Mr. Rogers out in his neighborhood exploring the production of electric cars before test-driving one and returning home for Make Believe. In “A Visit to a Recycling Center,” Mr. Rogers brings a bag of cans and bottles to be recycled before departing with Mr. McFeely to the neighborhood’s recycling center to witness the process. In the final episode, “Mr. Rogers Celebrates the Arts,” the audience sees multiple children’s pictures of the Neighborhood Trolley that have been sent in to Mr. Rogers. Viewers watch a montage of people showing love for others through various actions before Mr. McFeely arrives with a gift. He has prepared a videotape with a collection of artists demonstrating their skills to a peaceful, musical
background, which the pair view on Picture Picture. Shortly after Mr. McFeely leaves, it’s time for Make Believe.

The space between the opening theme and the visit to Make Believe composes the show’s “rising action,” if it could be referred to as such. The pace steadily increases as the audience interacts with Mr. Rogers and one of the neighbors, an object for consideration brought by Mr. Rogers, or an idea that echoes throughout the episode. These objects are featured with close-up camera shots that enliven the idea Mr. Rogers is presenting, allowing for a dialogue to develop between Mr. Rogers and the audience originating from the item. For example, the garage built for the toy airplane and the model electric car brings the topic of sustainable energy and caring for the environment to life in a delicate, whimsical manner at first that gradually builds to its larger, real life manifestation around the neighborhood. Likewise, the bag of recyclables is a simple, singular introduction to the discussion of caring for the planet and environment. Audiences witness the bag’s journey from the home all the way through to their destination in a large block of compacted recycling, which will ultimately be reused. The audience, then, can connect their own home’s recycling habits to their items’ real-world journey once it leaves the household, emphasizing the relation each viewer has to the environment via the recycling process and the responsibility to maintain that care through ongoing recycling practice. Lastly, each child’s unique Trolley creation serves as a simple introduction to the entire realm of self- and community-expression that is honored in Mr. McFeely’s Picture Picture video gift, which then echoes a celebration of aesthetic appreciation throughout the episode’s remainder. *Figure 4* below demonstrates Mr.
Rogers’s introduction of a tangible object or item that reflects the theme or an important idea that reverberates throughout each episode or latter half of selected episodes.

Figure 4. Thematic Introductions via Item Interactions


Clearly, this segment of the show is pivotal in carrying the routine plotline “forward” and in establishing the major resounding theme for each episode. This segment always leads toward the visit to Make Believe and does so in a predictable formulaic manner, which only slightly varies by the subject-matter at hand and subsequent object- or neighbor-interactions that help to slowly illuminate the topic (or interwoven topics) to the audience. After the audience is primed by Mr. Rogers’s monologue and interactions, he sets the tone for the Neighborhood of Make Believe before the Trolley transports viewers there.

To Make Believe and Back

Visits to the Neighborhood of Make Believe (NMB) always arrive in the approximate middle of each episode. Mr. Rogers summons the Trolley to his living room
as he reminds the audience what happened in Make Believe in the previous episode. The Trolley serves as a mediator between “worlds” – the adult-world of Mr. Rogers stationed in the living room and the more childlike, imaginative Make Believe realm. Both Mr. Rogers and citizens of the NMB can interact with the Trolley, but Mr. Rogers never appears in Make Believe. This division preserves the integrity of both thought- and feeling-worlds – that of the adult and the child – both are safe, necessary, and fundamentally good in Mr. Rogers’s domain. Furthermore, the separation of Mr. Rogers’s world and Make Believe reifies the importance of being able to both be serious and play about complex matters.

Following patterns that occur in Mr. Rogers’s space, the NMB regularly features some recurring characters alongside some who appear less often. Though the typical idea of “Make Believe” might spark thoughts of unpredictability, sporadic thought, and an “anything can happen” atmosphere, in MRN’s Make Believe space, recurring characters undergird a sense of familiarity, consistency, and safety. Against the comforts of dependable neighbors like Lady Aberlin, Lady Elaine, Daniel Tiger, and King Friday, space opens to play with the serious ideas and themes that are introduced in Mr. Rogers’s “adult” world.

The NMB serves multiple purposes – primarily, it highlights the importance of relationship and community in communication, to connect, converse, and solve problems together. Additionally, it serves as a simple “play” space to further explore the day’s episodic theme that coincides with a child’s innate sense of curiosity and amusement through imagination. This is the segment’s key role in the Neighborhood at large; it is a space in which complex themes can unfold in even more secure scenarios protected by
the shield of pretending and imagination which normalizes these mental processes’ use for healthy emotional coping skills. In a forthcoming section, I further consider the NMB’s role in dealing with complex subject matter in a simplistic space. Figure 5 features stills from the NMB in each selected episode. Many of the program’s recurring characters appear, including Joe Negri, X the Owl, Henrietta Pussycat, Lady Aberlin, King Friday, Prince Tuesday, Mayor Maggie, and Neighbor Aber. In each scene, citizens in the NMB are living out scenarios related to the overarching episode theme, and these scenes are typically the most conversation-heavy portions of each episode, taking up the most space within written transcriptions.

Figure 5. Make Believe

In a traditional “plot diagram,” a story’s elements typically move through exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution with a sharp rise before the climax and steep drop off afterwards, creating a sort of “pyramid” shaped action. On MRN, the plot diagram is more horizontal and “flat,” without a steep rise and fall of
intense twists and turns; it is a gentle walk across a low-incline neighborhood sidewalk rather than a jarring mountainside hike. Playtime in the NMB is the “height” of action which invariably and smoothly transitions via Trolley back into Mr. Rogers’s living room.

*Recap and Ending Monologue*

*MRN* follows very slight “falling action” after the Trolley escorts the audience back into Mr. Rogers’s living room. At this point, Mr. Rogers either entertains another moment of object or human interaction or moves to recap the major points of the episode into a pre-conclusion monologue. Sometimes there is a brief aside, a visit to somewhere else, or an idea introduced via one last interactive sequence. For example, in the 1968 episode, after returning from Make Believe, Mr. Rogers takes viewers to visit with his neighbor, Mrs. Russellite, who shares her vast lampshade collection with “everyone” (Mr. Rogers and the audience). They discuss her collection before Mr. Rogers returns home and delivers a quick “dialogic” monologue before saying goodbye. In “Death of a Goldfish,” Mr. Rogers decides that the pentagon he introduced in the beginning of the show could serve as a grave marker for his deceased pet fish. His neighbor Bob strolls by and offers to help as they work together to create a post for the gravesite using Mr. Rogers’s toolbox. In “What is Love?” Mr. Rogers finishes his speedy deliveries for the day by visiting Elsie Neal, who is at work in her costume shop. He discusses costume-making with Elsie as they both try on various masks around the shop. Each episode follows suit as Mr. Rogers brings the program back into his television home or around the neighborhood for one last interaction or shared thought. The setting elapses and
reconnects in a complete circle through the show as each episode begins in the home and is brought back into the home before it is time for the day’s farewell.

Music and Exit

Before each conclusion, Mr. Rogers shares at least one sentence that recaptures or reframes one of the major themes under consideration during the episode. This sentiment consistently leads into a song that closes the program but leaves a promise for visiting time again the next day (or week). In the first two selected episodes, Mr. Rogers sings “Tomorrow,” which extends well-wishes for the intervening time before Mr. Rogers will greet the audience again – another day with time together, which he refers to as “our day.” In the remaining four selections, he sings “It’s Such a Good Feeling,” which expresses joy about being alive, growing emotionally, greeting each day with enthusiasm, and an esteeming of the friendly television host-and-viewer relationship that Mr. Rogers cultivates in each program – “It’s such a good feeling / A very good feeling / The feeling you know that we’re friends.” In this way, music greets and bids farewell to the audience, bringing a sense of “open closure.” The audience is left with sentiments to consider from Mr. Rogers’s recap or ending monologue, which typically reopen again when the theme is once again picked up for continuation the next day. As will be considered further in the following chapter, music plays an important role in supporting Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication. Mr. Rogers often expresses gratitude or appreciation for the uniqueness of each viewer. For example, in one episode, he says, “You always make each day a special day for me. You know how. By just your being yourself. Just the way you feel.” In another, this varies only slightly to “You always make each day such a special day. You know how – by just your being here. There’s only one person in the whole world
like you and people can like you exactly as you are.” Mr. Rogers departs through the front door, back out into the “adult” world through the neighborhood. While the exit music lingers, credits roll over a peaceful camera pan across the model of Mr. Rogers’s television neighborhood, with information about the cast and production crew as well as program funding.

The show’s overarching plot structure never drastically alters from the routine “walk” described herein. Despite an occasional switch between already-adjacent segments, each show leads viewers through the same story pattern and approaches each complex chosen subject-matter from the soothing predictability of this time-honored established trajectory, as evidenced. Having considered the show’s overall architecture, we can now fruitfully turn to a discussion of televisual framing and how filmic aspects of MRN’s production contribute rhetorically in navigating through neighborhood spaces.

**Televisual Framing**

As explored in literature, televisual frames are inherently rhetorical, intentionally used to shape a program’s messaging, and persistent televisual framing over time affects a program’s overall reception. It is worth recalling one of Mr. Rogers’s central principles: “What is mentionable is manageable.” Televisual frames assist in the communication of meaning, and in this case, they allow openness for anything the viewer might question as “mentionable” to be brought to life onscreen on a safe path toward “management.” Just as each episode segment fulfills a purpose in service of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication,” so does the way in which televisual frames are used to cushion the program’s gentle construction, ongoing flow, and open, dialogic spaces. Televisual framing elements include camera angles and movement, setting, form, and overall
navigation of the televisual space, each contributing to the camera’s “linguistic,” communicative nature. In the following section, I analyze Mr. Rogers’s intentional use of filmic features like camera angles and movement, simple setting and props, occasional insertion of documentary form, and imaginative use of off-screen space as essential components of his “kind of communication.”

**Camera Angles, Shots, and Movement**

*Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* does not use a wide variety of camera angles, shots, or movements in any episode. Whenever people are onscreen, angles are usually direct and face-level, especially when Mr. Rogers is the only person in the shot. The majority of camera shots are either medium- or wide-shots with the very occasional close-up. Medium shots are often used when he is conversing with a neighbor, and the conversation that unfolds during these shots are such that the viewer is included as if standing in conversation with the others onscreen. Camera movement remains slow and controlled between segments and spaces. In all, camera angles, shots, and movement are used intentionally to uphold the slow, dialogic character of Mr. Rogers’s preferred communicative mode. The choice to use angles, shots, and movement intentionally are significant aspects of rhetorical framing, which support the calm, gentle character of the show’s smooth rhetorical movement.

During segments in which Mr. Rogers is the only character onscreen, he makes consistent use of the visual z-axis, which relates to the filmic perception of depth by utilizing backward and forward space (D. Goodman, personal communication). Mr. Rogers routinely uses forward-looking z-axis space to sustain the dialogic space between himself as host and viewers sitting before the television. This camera angle, supported by
his use of careful dialogue, is inherently invitational (or relational) as it upholds an invisible, open line of communication between viewers tuning in and Mr. Rogers, seemingly imitating that which might be seen in a present-day video-based conversation between two (or a few more) people albeit with an additional air of enhanced formality. *Figure 6* below features two examples of Mr. Rogers using z-axis space to instill a sense of direct conversation and connection.

![Figure 6: Dialogic Z-Axis Space](image)

*Figure 6. Dialogic Z-Axis Space*

*Note.* Mr. Rogers look directly into the camera as if maintaining eye contact and personal conversation with program viewers (left to right: 1973, 2001).

Camera angles like this are used consistently during the opening segment with his monologue and again before his concluding remarks and exit. The conversational angle does not disappear when others enter the shot. Conversing characters are still often featured with a medium shot where they can be seen close enough as if the viewer is an additional participant in the conversation.

Camera shots on *MRN* are rhetorically embedded with a certain character and tone of their own. Medium shots, like those seen in *Figure 6*, are most often used when Mr. Rogers is addressing the audience, or when viewers are “participating with” characters in conversation. Typically, full body shots are not used when one person alone is speaking. The medium shot is relaxed, informal, and fosters relationship in its space. The medium shot additionally supports each episode’s routine movement. For example, as Mr. Rogers
sings “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” while changing into his sweater and sneakers, there are multiple instances in which the audience is unable to see his shoes as he changes. Yet, the audience always knows they are there as they slip in and out of actual view. There is a sense of comfort and reliability in this movement and framing - even what cannot always be seen is known to still remain. Viewers do not have to watch every step of Mr. Rogers’s changing shoes to trust that he is finishing tying up his laces.

Occasionally, a wide, full-body shot is included, usually when Mr. Rogers is taking part in some activity while speaking. For example, in “Death of a Goldfish,” Mr. Rogers and his neighbor Bob are pictured within a wide shot as they work together to build a grave marker for the fish and walk together to place the marker on its resting location. In “A Boy in a Wheelchair,” Mr. Rogers creates a model airplane hangar and electric car garage out of wooden blocks. As he talks about the building and places the items in their space, his full body sits in the shot. Wide shots create more distance between the speaker and viewer, yet remain relaxed and casual, allowing for the items at play and in consideration in the scene to become part of the conversation as well.

Notably, MRN does not include many close-up shots. Whenever there are close-ups, they are focused on objects and never on characters’ faces. As people naturally relate with ease to other people and characters, close-up shots serve as a way to enhance relationality between viewer and objects which Mr. Rogers wishes for the audience to consider more wholly. Previously discussed examples are displayed in Figure 4, where Mr. Rogers holds items like the model electric car and airplane hangar in close view. Mr. Rogers encourages viewers to seriously consider what is more readily and more often relegated to “object” by presenting items closely with the camera. Figure 7 below
provides some examples of the relationship harbored by reflective use of close-up camera shots.

![Figure 7. Relating Through Close-Ups](image)

*Note.* Viewers can see close-up shots of a dead fish at the bottom of Mr. Rogers’s aquarium and artwork created by Lady Elaine Fairchilde in Make Believe, respectively (left to right: 1970, 2001).

Non-human “characters” are brought into relation with viewers with these close-up shots. In these examples, children are being invited to consider complex topics like death, community, relationships, and artistic expression. The camera angles and shots at work herein sustain this open, considerate dialogue between host and viewer, where an idea or theme is posed and safe space is visually maintained for audience thought, reflection, and possible reaction.

Another noteworthy use of camera and space parallels the treatment of subject-matter at large on the program. In the episode, “A Visit to a Recycling Center,” Mr. Rogers and Mr. McFeely speak with Bob at the recycling center about the glass recycling process. The characters take time to talk about dangers of standing near the machine, walk a safe distance away from it, and then the camera switches to a compressed view of the action through a telephoto lens (D. Goodman, personal communication). This compresses the space between Mr. Rogers, Mr. McFeely, and the audience as they watch the glass get crushed, so that the process still appears up close to the screen. However, we
know they are standing a safe distance away from it as they watch. This scene serves as a visual metaphor for how other complex subject-matters are treated throughout the series. The neighborhood serves as safe open space that still manages to take a close look at serious matters, which are deserving of contemplation. Mr. Rogers and company are able to present potentially harmful and traumatic subject matter but from a safe distance as to not harm listeners. The structure upon which the show is built along with its other rhetorical movements explored herein are the compression lens that allow viewers to get up close without getting glass in their eyes. Clearly, the intentional use of camera angles and shots on MRN play a significant role in navigating rhetorical neighborhood space in a way that addresses viewers directly–comforting, guiding, and asking them to consider some subjects closely when needed.

In addition to intentional persistence of camera angle and shots, camera movement works in conjunction in framing and navigating neighborhood spaces. Camera movement is consistently slow or walking speed. Often movements between segments feature a slow pan or follow Mr. Rogers at his walking pace between areas of the home, as if the viewer is walking alongside him through the house. Slow camera panning across scenes of the neighborhood model with gentle, cheerful background piano music both open into and close out of each episode. Camera movements on MRN are never fast-paced with quick cuts between people or scenes. All in all, there is low variation in camera use throughout the series’ timeline, as observable in these episode selections. Such choices reduce the noise and “bombardment” of each scene and segment, allowing for focus to be placed on relationships with items, characters, and topics brought to life
through a quiet background with limited distraction. Mr. Rogers uses the camera as a tool to bring focus and attunement rather than empty amusement or distraction.

_Simplicity of Set, Costumes, and Props_

Multiple viewings of the selected episodes underscore the program’s simple setting, costumes, and props. While this aspect might partially be due to a limited budget as opposed to that of large networks producing children’s television programs, _MRN’s_ aesthetic simplicity nevertheless seems fitting as the show centers emotional pedagogy in an uncluttered space. For example, Mr. Rogers’s neighborhood home is uncrowded, organized, and the host walks through it with ease as the camera follows along in each episode. The space does not change drastically over time. In fact, the entire first episode uses the new program’s setting as an opportunity to discuss life changes and how they can be both unsettling and uncomfortable yet also a channel for new, healthy growth. In contrast to Mr. Rogers’s house (primarily the living room and kitchen is seen), Make Believe offers a more whimsical setting with a wider variety of color schemes adorning buildings, surroundings, and costumes. However, despite the more “playful” space, the calming, still mise-en-scène remains consistent over the selected episodes. Several fixtures remain the same, like King Friday’s Castle, X the Owl and Henrietta Pussycat’s treehouses, and Lady Elaine’s Museum-Go-Round home. At Mr. Rogers’s house or in Make Believe, the setting serves as a mostly muted background against which meaningful conversation can take place. Outside of these primary settings, Mr. Rogers occasionally visits a place around the neighborhood (like the recycling center or the costume shop), and these are points at which the show focuses on understanding a
process or task on a larger scale. No matter the episode setting, every scene cultivates the consistently calm atmosphere that Mr. Rogers promotes through his words and actions.

Costumes on _MRN_ never appear more complicated than what could be seen at a local community theatre – handmade, simple, low-budget, yet still “entertaining” and imagination-stimulating. Mr. Rogers wears a dress shirt and tie with coordinated pants and always changes into one of the casual sweaters from his entryway closet and comfortable shoes for time spent in the television home. One particularly interesting aspect of Mr. Rogers’s “costume” is related to his expositional changing-clothes routine. Looking closely at Mr. Rogers’s shirt and tie, viewers can spot his secured lapel microphone. In each episode, Mr. Rogers adjusts his sweater – either his sleeves and collar or his zipper. Beginning in later episodes (“What is Love?” from this inquiry’s selections), he consistently zips the sweater up near the top before bringing it back down to rest below where the microphone sits. Upon closer examination, we can see Mr. Rogers pulling the sweater away from his body as he zips the sweater up and back down to avoid hitting the microphone, which could relay some uncomfortably loud noise to the onset sound crew (D. Goodman, personal communication). It is noteworthy that he would continue to take this performative action over time despite the extra care required to mind the sound equipment; it suggests this interaction with his clothing is integral to the opening process. It is perhaps a symbolic way to lead viewers through the transition into the program and the slowing down that comes with it – the process of getting comfortable, settling in. Make Believe is where the community, “homegrown” theater aura manifests in costumes. Recurring female characters like Lady Aberlin often wear long, simple dresses and recurring men typically wear a casual equivalent. People dressed
in “nonhuman” costumes (like Bob Dog in “Death of a Goldfish” or Robert Troll in “What is Love?”) are very clearly still human, and lengths are not taken to fully disguise them. This adds to the “play” feel of the costumes, something one might witness live and with which they therefore may feel more directly involved.

Props are often like those pictured in Figures 4 and 7 – those brought to viewer attention with a close-up shot, usually household objects often overlooked in daily life. *MRN* characters spend a considerable amount of time interacting with simple props and discussing them. For example, the first episode (1968) features Mr. Rogers visiting with his neighbor Mrs. Russellite, who shares her unique lampshade collection with him. Viewers quickly learn that Mrs. Russellite enjoys wearing the lampshades on her head and watch her try many of them on alongside Mr. Rogers. *Figure 8* shows one such moment from the first episode.

![Figure 8. Engagement with Simple Props](image)

*Figure 8. Engagement with Simple Props*

*Note.* Mrs. Russellite shares her collection of lampshades, which she also enjoys wearing, with Mr. Rogers and viewers (1968).

Surely, these props are simultaneously inexpensive to obtain and simple demonstrators of imaginative use. Mr. Rogers encounters a similar interaction with his neighbor Elsie Neal in “What is Love?” as he visits with her in the costume shop before completing his speedy deliveries for the day. They both take turns trying on various masks, helping each other put them on as they look through the shop. In “Mr. Rogers Celebrates the Arts,”
Mr. Rogers makes a point about perception and expression with only a small collection of children’s drawings, which he displays to the camera. Then, of course, the program presents another nod to simplicity, embodied by recurring hand puppet characters, whose unmoving faces are animated by Mr. Rogers’s altered voices and movement while he sits nested underneath the NMB’s human-sized settings.

Altogether, MRN’s physical setting and design-scape seem as though they could be easily recreated in any community television studio, and that contributes to its communal, homespun aesthetic. The program’s combined ongoing use of uncomplicated, modest setting, costumes, and props are meaningful aspects of the show’s quiet rhetorical foundation.

The Occasional “Documentary”

Occasionally, MRN temporarily parts with concerns surrounding emotional pedagogy and investigates worldly inner workings by adapting a documentary format. This takes place either through Mr. Rogers presenting a feature on Picture Picture or by one of his Neighborhood visits. Via documentary form, Mr. Rogers invites users to observe some aspect of reality from an explicitly pedagogical perspective. Mr. Rogers establishes this aspect of MRN even in the first episode where he greets Picture Picture while walking around his new television home, personifying the frame in passing saying, “Hi, Picture Picture! You’re a fine one.” In “Death of a Goldfish,” Mr. Rogers shows a clip of fish swimming around on Picture Picture to introduce the discussion of death before he finds one of his own fish dead in his aquarium. In the final episode (2001), Mr. Rogers and Mr. McFeely screen Mr. McFeely’s gifted videotape on Picture Picture, where viewers watch a several minute montage depicting various artists and their skill.
Beyond Picture Picture, Mr. Rogers occasionally ventures out into the neighborhood to learn about some process or idea. Visiting the costume shop, the local electric car manufacturer, and the recycling center, he learns, alongside viewers, about what goes on in each place with the help of a neighbor who explains their work or craft. Though the documentary form, whether through Picture Picture or Mr. Rogers himself, invites an “objective” view at some unfamiliar process or idea, Mr. Rogers ties the documentary topic in with a deeper matter, often related to the emotional theme for the episode. When Mr. Rogers views costumes with Elsie Neal (in “What is Love?”), he ties thinking about masks and costumes in with discussions about creativity, children’s and adult’s ability for skilled work, acknowledgement that some skills in life are naturally difficult, the importance of practice and patience, and admiration for artistry. In “A Boy in a Wheelchair,” Mr. Rogers visits the electric car manufacturer, helps put an electric car together, and test drives a vehicle with a neighbor named Paul. Mr. Rogers uses the time to connect ideas about childhood curiosity and how interests can grow into careers. He asks another employee, “Wayne, when you were a little boy, were you interested in cars?”, an out-of-place question were this “documentary” outside of MRN, where all aspects of life – even car manufacturing – are treated and taught with emotional integrity. This documentary outing provides an early introduction to useful electric technology, which helps the environment, before later helping viewers understand how the same technology can also power human mobility.

Mr. Rogers invites the audience to listen to Jeff Erlanger, who uses what Mr. Rogers calls “a very fancy machine” (his electric wheelchair), as they talk about his experience learning to use the wheelchair, his feelings about his experience, and how he
handles such feelings. In this episode, Mr. Rogers connects a model electric car and airplane and a brief documentary-view into electric car production with a teaching and listening moment about bodily ability, experience, and emotions with Jeff; on MRN, these topics are naturally interrelated. These discussions all occur in an episode from the “Divorce” series, and Mr. Rogers connects Prince Tuesday’s parental concerns in Make Believe with that of Jeff Erlanger’s real-world experience, commenting that though their “worries” are different, Jeff benefits from being able to talk about his aloud in contrast to Tuesday’s restrained emotional expression.

The occasional insertion of documentary form about seemingly emotionless subject-matter is uniquely used by Mr. Rogers to connect “unfeeling” topics to emotional pedagogical opportunities. MRN is a space to learn about the world’s material processes, but they are not severed from the vivid emotional realm, and both are given space to interrelate throughout the flow of each episode, assisted by Mr. Rogers’s connecting language and questions he poses as he “experiences alongside” fellow neighbors and his television viewers.

*Inviting Imagination through Off-Screen Space*

As discussed within his personal writings, Mr. Rogers ruminated on the entire self that children bring before the television screen with special concern for their emotional integrity and trajectory into adulthood. In part, the emotional pedagogical work inspired by the show happens through acts of imagination. The space between onscreen characters and the viewer sitting before the television is treated as a seemingly “magical” space where the invited imaginative transformation takes place. The treatment of off-screen space is rhetorical in its encouragement of fostering inventive, empathetic, engaged yet
protected mental and emotional space. Several programmatic aspects contribute to this activation of off-screen space for viewers: consistent use of the camera’s z-axis for host-viewer dialogue, the way transitions are carried out between the show’s primary segments, the arrival and departure of Trolley, and Mr. Rogers’s language use.

Principally, Mr. Rogers does not carry out or perform imagination-work for the audience. Instead, the show’s layout and rhetorical choices ask each viewer to connect the worlds that appear on the show through this off-screen “magic.” This is especially apparent before each visit to the NMB. For example, the Trolley always moves along x-axis visual space, yet it becomes a symbol of an entire 360-degree transformation of physical, mental, and emotional setting (D. Goodman, personal communication). Language assists this transformation with which the viewer can cooperate. In the first episode as the Trolley arrives, Mr. Rogers asks, “Would you take us into the Neighborhood of Make Believe?” and looks ahead into the camera before further asking, “Are you ready to go?” to viewers. With a brief pause, he declares, “Okay, on we go and in we go to Make Believe!” The Trolley rolls away and the viewer sustains the other end of this imaginative request by participating along with the hypothetical scenario they are about to view. Another example arises in the way that human characters in the NMB interact with puppet characters to stimulate imaginative space. For example, in “Death of a Goldfish,” the puppet Dr. Bill Platypus asks for Lady Aberlin’s help in using his medical tools to examine the Trolley to ensure that the Trolley isn’t “dead.” Decades later in the final episode, before the Neighborhood’s arts festival, puppet Cornflake S. Pecially requests Mayor Maggie’s help to lift the cover from the chair he created for the event.
This way, the viewer’s imaginative capacities are engaged in the off-screen space which brings the plot, transitions, and characters to life.

*MRN*’s televisual framing is a powerful facet of “our kind of communication.” It is the filmic space upon and through which issues of emotional pedagogy can play out uncluttered and without distraction. The props, the setting, the front door which is never locked – everything is left intentionally open, creating a relational televisual frame in conversation with viewers. Indeed, intentional use of camera view and movement, setting and design, variation in form, and use of off-screen space interweave uniquely for the purposes of Mr. Rogers’s rhetorical approach.

**Music, Sound, and Audio**

Music fills the spaces of the *Neighborhood*. Music and song play a vitally important role on *MRN*, and melodic sounds occasionally take the place of character or object “voice.” A lifelong musician, Mr. Rogers believed music had a natural role in the Neighborhood as a way of addressing and dealing with feelings. The show’s music was always played live in the studio while musicians viewed a television monitor, and Mr. Rogers worked with Musical Director Johnny Costa to create the program’s musical themes (Fred Rogers Productions, n.d.-b). Commonly used instruments included the piano, bass, drums, celesta, synthesizer, and whistles. The music was often a mix between classical and jazz, and some critiqued the show’s music for being potentially “too complex” or “high-minded” for children (Dupre, 2019, 8:55). However, Mr. Rogers and his fellow like-minded musicians believed that children could appreciate the music, and that its inclusion was essential to the program. Mr. Rogers said of music: “It seems to me that music has always been at the root of who I am and what I do” (Dupre, 2019,
In a show focused on emotional development and education, music plays a meaningful role in summarizing and embellishing the main themes in each episode. In this section, I examine the interwoven music and use of sound as voice which occurs throughout *MRN*.

*The Presence of Music*

At least three songs are included in every episode of *MRN*, including the opening theme and goodbye song. Music at the open and close serve more than just slow transitions into and out of the *Neighborhood* from the viewer’s world. The lyrics in “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” extend an invitation for viewers to spend time in quiet thought and observation with Mr. Rogers. The closing song, often “It’s Such a Good Feeling,” leaves on a promise that Mr. Rogers will return and there will be more time for thinking and talking during the next day or week. It is a celebration of life, learning, and emotional growth, which circularly sets the tone and expectation for episodes to come.

Episodes regularly feature a song unique to the day’s emotional theme. In the first episode, Mr. Rogers moves from talking about feelings around growing and changing to remind the audience (through song) “I Like You As You Are,” where he emphasizes to viewers that he “wouldn’t want to change [them] or even rearrange [them].” A message of universal acceptance commonly recurs throughout *MRN*, an honored theme for which Mr. Rogers became well-known. In fact, in “What is Love?” Mr. Rogers sings “You Are Special,” which contains a similar theme of acceptance and a celebration of uniqueness. “A Boy in a Wheelchair” features Mr. Rogers singing “It’s You I Like” alongside Jeff Erlanger, yet another melodious reminder that each person is different, physically and emotionally worthy of love and acceptance, and is a vital part of the world. Mr. Rogers
sings “I’m Proud of You” in the final episode, a song that emphasizes the importance of emotional self-expression with oneself and with others. No matter where a person is in such a perceptual process, the song reminds the viewer that they are already enough, and that they should be as proud of themselves as Mr. Rogers consistently is.

Music unifies; it is versatile in ability to encapsulate a myriad of emotions in one form. In “Death of a Goldfish,” after talking about death and loss and after building and planting a grave marker with his neighbor, a lone Mr. Rogers returns indoors and sings “Some Things I Don’t Understand.” The following is an excerpt from the song:

Some things are scary and sad.
Sometimes I even get bad when I’m mad.
Sometimes I even get glad.

Why does a dog have to bark?
Why does an elephant die?
Why can’t we play all the time in park?

In simple phrasing, the song covers a variety of emotions (from scared to mad to sad to glad) regarding a multitude of scenarios with mixed degrees of emotional weight (a dog’s bark can be startling, an animal’s death is tragic, and sometimes life must be serious). In this way, each song’s substance resonates with language and conversation which unfold episodically. Notably, MRN songs contain simple lyrics that could just as easily be written in a storybook or in a dialogic admission to a friend; they simply happen to be set to song. Mr. Rogers sings such words while looking into the camera or with neighbors like Mr. McFeely and Jeff Erlanger onscreen. In “What is Love?” Mr. Rogers tells Debbie Neal on the phone that he was “just singing with his friend” when she returns his call. Often, when Mr. Rogers is talking to viewers or performing some activity, calming
and gentle piano music plays in the background. *Figure 9* features Mr. Rogers in moments of song over the years.

![Figure 9. Musical Pedagogy Note. In each picture, Mr. Rogers is either presently singing or talking about singing songs (left to right: 1968, 1970, 1973, 1981, 2001).]

Song and singing carry emotional and pedagogical work, reifying lessons and themes within each episode of *MRN*. Lyrics are gentle, straightforward, and remain in the mind after the program ends. Musical refrains are undoubtedly intentional within the pedagogical and emotional concern that the musical Mr. Rogers implanted in his safe haven for children. Music plays an even more subtle role as sound comes in forms beyond traditional song in each episode.

*Music and Sound as Voice*

Across episodes, musical tones embody vocal characteristics. This phenomenon appears onscreen most often as bells and dinging sounds standing in for someone’s voice on the other end of a telephone and the Trolley’s “talking” voice as it speaks with Mr. Rogers and NMB characters. For example, in the first episode, Mr. Rogers speaks with
“Edgar” in a cup-and-string fashioned phone, and Edgar’s voice relays as a series of jingling sounds like that of a mallet-percussion instrument. This happens again later in the episode when Joe Negri speaks to Miss Paulificate through another telephone-can in Make Believe. He requests a meeting with the King, and all of her responses are jingles created on set but out of sight. The same occurs in “What is Love?” when Lady Aberlin requests her own meeting via Miss Paulificate with Queen Sara. This scene is depicted in Figure 10 below.

![Figure 10. Synchronous “Voices”](image)

*Note.* Lady Aberlin requests a meeting with Queen Sara Saturday by calling Miss Paulificate, whose voice is composed of jingling bells played off camera nearby though portrayed as coming through the can (1973).

However, far more often, it is the Trolley which embodies a musical “voice” with whistles and instruments played just off camera. Musical intonation is an expression of this character’s life. Trolley is often asked questions prior to visiting Make Believe or in greeting characters therein once it arrives. In “A Visit to a Recycling Center,” Miss Paulificate (who is now visible in person) has an entire conversation with Trolley who, understood through musical context, asks Miss Paulificate about her “nosemuff,” which guards against the smell of piling garbage in Make Believe. The Trolley also appears to wish the NMB characters well in dealing with the garbage in its twinkling voice, with Miss Paulificate responding, “Thanks, Trolley. I hope so too,” as the Trolley rolls out of
sight. In the final episode, Betty Okonak Templeton Jones invites Trolley to look around before the Neighborhood Arts Festival and the two briefly seem to discuss the various pieces made by neighbors. Over the years, the Trolley’s musically-made voice appears in every conversation it has with a character on MRN.

Though the Trolley does not appear for long conversation, viewers are always left to interpret what it is saying through its musical voice. Subtler than an outright song, the emotionality of musical sounds leads viewers toward interpretation of what the “voice” is saying through tonality, and in this way, the Trolley (and human characters not present onscreen) reifies music as a form of emotional, communicative expression. Indeed, music and melodic sounds permeate the spaces of the Neighborhood. Beyond the obvious positive psychological and neurological effects of music, musical incorporation on MRN remains a significant part of the show’s legacy and is revisited in terms of its philosophical undertones in the following chapter. Music’s consistent presence conveys its ongoing importance, the significance of which rests in a realm that is difficult for words alone to touch.

The Treatment of Language

Upon the foundation of previously explored intentional rhetorical choices and structures, Mr. Rogers’s script writing and overall linguistic style are brought to their utmost rhetorical potential as each of these overarching programmatic patterns interweave into a coherent show. Language choices shine through “our kind of communication,” working in close conjunction with the show’s pacing and segment structure, televisual framing, and sound to help viewers concentrate on emotional subject-matter at hand. In this section, I survey Mr. Rogers’s intentional linguistic simplicity,
openness, and simultaneous treatment of complex subject matter threaded into conversation throughout the program as integral components of his authorial communicative mode.

**Simplicity, Open Space, and Invitational Language**

Linguistic simplicity permeates *MRN*. Each episode’s spoken phrases are considerably short, and even within monologues, each sentence is concise yet whole. While this is certainly, in part, due to an audience of children, the complex emotional and societal topics addressed deserve mention as they are treated with such concise simplicity. There is no need to draw this observation out; it is simple. Mr. Rogers steadily speaks in a conversational style to viewers and neighbors alike, maintaining measured vocal rhythm and meter, preserving dialogic space for audiences through language, and using invitational word choices which invite reflection.

Onscreen silent and open spaces are preserved in literal silence or within moments that Mr. Rogers poses simple questions to the audience, an invitation to consider the emotional subject matter at hand in the safe space of each person’s thought process. *Figure 11* below illustrates such a moment, as Mr. Rogers invites viewers to reflect on things in their life for which they might take care. These reflective questioning moments are frequently punctuated with a silence representative of encouraging viewers to take time to think further around these questions. Mr. Rogers often remarks a quiet “Mhm” after the question as though to embolden whatever unique thought each viewer might have for any given question and as if actively participating in dialogue. In the first episode, Mr. Rogers asks, “How do you feel about new things?” and pauses before he offers a quiet but confident “Sure.”
Open-ended questions and guarding silence reside in every selected episode. In “Death of a Goldfish,” one of the final questions that Mr. Rogers poses asks, “Do you ask a lot of why questions?” with a pause before commenting, “I know I always did when I was little. I still do. Mhm.” In the final episode about the arts, after looking through various Trolley drawings, Mr. Rogers asks, “How would you draw the Trolley?” Again, after a brief pause, he continues, “Since each person is somewhat different from everyone else in the world, each one of us would draw the Trolley in a different way. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Moments like these are directed to the television audience, but each episode is filled with responsive question-and-answer conversations between characters, who demonstrate close listening while in communication. Neighborhood conversations are gentle and approached in a sense of openness. *MRN’s* routine nature maintains a necessary space to which viewers can return to reconvene their emotional thought-work from wherever it was last left. In writing the show, Mr. Rogers seemingly includes and addresses viewer discourse without knowing exactly what it is, inviting each individual’s way of knowing and learning the world to be present. Furthermore, alongside such simplicity and
openness, the complexity of subject-matter to which these rhetorical aspects attend is nothing short of remarkable.

*Complex Themes in Simple Space*

Naturally, *MRN*’s intentional space and structure intimately connects with a sustained focus on intensely complex, personal, and profound matters of human experience. Just as the song “Some Things I Don’t Understand” questions an elephant’s death alongside the desire for day-long recreation, each episode of *MRN* pieces together serious emotional and even existential issues alongside a grown-up playing with blocks and model airplanes. Each facet of existence is given shared voice in the neighborhood, as each contributes to the reality and totality of lived human experience.

Though the first episode does not have a designated overarching theme, it is implied from the episode that Mr. Rogers wishes to invite viewers to consider life’s many changes through the lens of his new television home. Mr. McFeely’s somewhat frantic arrival and departure during deliveries are used as an opportunity to consider the fast-paced nature of life even in the late 1960s. The episode further features discussions of shoe-tying and how a ladder works adjacent to significant life changes like moving into a new home, growing, and feeling differently inside. Mr. Rogers swiftly greets every potentially difficult topic with reassurance about the viewer’s ability to handle it. However the viewer feels about life changes, Mr. Rogers is quick to remind: “Well, however you feel about it, I like you exactly as you are,” with the last several words slowly emphasized one-by-one. Anger, fear, and frustration with change are all considered from slightly different angles in the NMB, where characters work together to discuss various Neighborhood changes. Afterwards, Mr. Rogers’s visit with Mrs.
Russellite involves discussions of change alongside Mr. Rogers’s empathetic, nonjudgmental listening to Mrs. Russellite’s explanation of her quirky lampshade-wearing hobby and extensive collection. Mr. Rogers is genuinely complimentary of her during the entire visit, though he comments, “Most people don’t wear lampshades, but that’s just your hobby, isn’t it?” In this way, Mr. Rogers demonstrates openness toward, acceptance of, and genuine care for others even though he does not share the same hobby or identical appreciation for lampshades. He allows himself to be affected by Mrs. Russellite’s sharing and even takes one home to “borrow” after playfully trying one on for the camera. Throughout the episode, which continually circles back to the concept of change, Mr. Rogers invites viewers to consider multiple perspectives and ways of being and thinking via his conversations with others and between characters.

As stated in the title, “Death of a Goldfish” clearly focuses primarily on death, but still, many other ideas are interwoven. The episode starts with consideration of a simple pentagon shape, but by the end, it serves as a grave marker for the dead fish. Even after the fish is discovered, Mr. Rogers uses considerable screen time looking at it with the audience and even trying to revive it before ultimately deciding it must be buried. The onscreen time spent observing and trying to reanimate the fish mimic, in a small way, a cycle of grief with denial, bargaining, and acceptance. Light music accompanies Mr. Rogers into the backyard for burial and we watch as he digs the hole and buries the fish gently. After a brief pause, he tells the story of his childhood dog Mitsy, expressing the many emotions he felt when she passed, including the intense sadness and avoidance of saying goodbye through pretending she was still alive. Figure 12 shows an image from this moment.
Figure 12. *Mr. Rogers Talks about Death*

Note. Mr. Rogers tells the story of dealing with his childhood dog Mitsy’s death (1970).

Even after she passed, he explains his struggle for acceptance. He shows the camera a toy dog like one given to him by his aunt and uncle. He says he used to “make it go like this, and then make it pop up again like that, pretending,” imitating the dog coming back to life. Then, he shows the camera an actual picture of Mitsy before singing “Sometimes People Feel Sad.” In Make Believe, Lady Aberlin, Bob Dog, Queen Sara, and King Friday all watch as Dr. Bill Platypus checks to make sure the Trolley is alive after it is unresponsive to Bob Dog’s learned trick performance. Back with Mr. Rogers, he and his neighbor Bob are shown creating the fish grave together with tools, and Mr. Rogers simultaneously talks about humming, work, and hobbies. The episode predominantly considers death but does so alongside other, less intensive topics and from different degrees of seriousness – through the fish, Mitsy, the Trolley, and back to the fish by the end. As central to Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication, death is guided through the same overall show structure, with mindful attention to framing, alongside related music and lyrics, and in simple form.

Still complex though less grim, Mr. Rogers tackles the complexity of love in “What is Love?” Throughout the episode, viewers are invited to consider the many types of love and what it looks like in lived expression. In the beginning, Mr. Rogers is helping
Mr. McFeely with the Speedy Delivery service and mentions, “I want to do my deliveries just right. Sure, you know, when you love somebody the way I love the McFeelys, you like to be able to please them. Mhm.” Love is introduced through friendly, community-based love for a neighbor who the audience already knows. Make Believe plays a significant role in this episode to convey the complexity of love. There, King Friday is practicing the upright bass and decides he wants to play for Queen Sara. When she arrives, he performs, and Queen Sara tells him how proud she is for both his music and his role as King. The two puppets share a kiss, as illustrated in Figure 13, alongside related moments from the day’s visit to the NMB.

Figure 13. The Complexity of Love

Note. Characters in Make Believe illustrate various aspects of love, including romance and partnership, self-love, and the confusion that accompanies such a nuanced, multifaceted feeling (1973).

In this interaction, the show considers romantic love as that between partners. Shortly thereafter, Lady Aberlin arrives in an unsettled state, hesitant to speak with the King and Queen about her feelings. She walks around the Neighborhood, asking both X the Owl and Robert Troll about love. Each neighbor can help her deduce some aspect of love further (love is wonderful, it is a feeling you know through experience, it is not always romantic, and it is difficult to express in words). Next, she encounters Lady Elaine, who explains that love does not always feel happy and that loving oneself is necessary – “You can’t love anybody else if you don’t love yourself.” She encourages Lady Aberlin to
return to Queen Sara and talk about her confusion surrounding love. Queen Sara tells Lady Aberlin that “understanding love is one of the hardest things in the world,” to which Lady Aberlin responds as shown in Figure 13 above. Queen Sara emphasizes what one should do despite the variety of feelings that can accompany love: “Just go right on loving. Whether you understand it or not.” The two retreat into the castle to talk more, and throughout this process, the viewer comes to understand that some complex questions do not have an easy, simple, rational answer. Some serious issues in life innately require more emotional seeking and mental time to process and think through, and can easily be a lifelong process. Queen Sara repeats “I don’t know,” a significant phrase from an adult figure, multiple times throughout the conversation with Lady Aberlin. Back in the living room, Mr. Rogers reiterates the importance of being able to voice confusing thoughts and questions regardless of their weight, deciding Lady Aberlin did the right thing in the NMB. Then, Mr. Rogers visits Elsie Neal and the pair take turns trying on masks from around the costume shop, a whimsical sequence to follow the complex issue centered in Make Believe. The episode ends with Mr. Rogers telling viewers: “Sure, you’re special. And you love people. You get angry with them sometimes. And sometimes people get angry with you, too. Isn’t that true? But they can still love you. Sure.” Just as before, the treatment of love is sent through Mr. Rogers’s simple communicative form and process in a way that makes the concept mentionable and manageable.

The episode “A Boy in a Wheelchair” is actually a part of the MRN series on divorce. At the beginning, Mr. Rogers prefaces the episode: “Hi Neighbor. Didn’t bring anything in my hands, but I brought an idea in my head. I’m going to build a garage –
with blocks.” As Mr. Rogers builds a garage for his model airplane and electric car, he uses the segment to introduce the idea of sustainable energy, which he promotes by learning about electric car production in the Neighborhood and then test-driving one. In the NMB, the topic of divorce is highlighted as Prince Tuesday has run away from home after his mother and father have been fighting. The whole community is worried about him and goes off to search for him until Ms. Cow discovers that he has been staying with Daniel Tiger. At school, other students talk with Prince Tuesday and Daniel Tiger about their fear of not finding him after he went missing. Prince Tuesday says, “I think I want to be a machine,” after his classmates share their concern about him and his frustration in dealing with feelings. Ms. Cow remarks, “[S]ometimes we have such bad feelings, we’d just like to get rid of them any way we can,” indicating the intensity and desperation that can accompany negative feelings. Prince Tuesday reveals that his parents have been fighting because King Friday (his father) would like a new airplane, and Queen Sara believes that they use too much gas, resubmitting the idea Mr. Rogers subtly introduced earlier regarding resources, pollution, and a healthy concern for the environment. Lady Aberlin arrives and assuages Tuesday’s fears that his parents’ fighting is somehow his fault. Lady Aberlin calls Handyman Negri to report Tuesday is safe and learning at school; before the Trolley takes viewers out of the NMB, he is heard saying, “Electric you say? No gas? Well, we’ll just have to wait and see,” again intertwining the serious concerns surrounding children and divorce alongside care for what goes into our collective natural environment.

The final segment of “A Boy in a Wheelchair” features Mr. Rogers talking on his front porch with his friend Jeff Erlanger, a young boy seated in a motorized wheelchair.
This well-known scene features a dialogue between Jeff and Mr. Rogers as they discuss Jeff’s wheelchair, his health history and experiences, and how he expresses his feelings, within himself and with others. Over the episode’s trajectory, the ideas about electricity and transportation through the lens of electric cars moves to a much more personal example through conversation about Jeff’s use of electricity for mobility. At the same time, this conversation is deeply humanizing as the two openly and easily discuss how Jeff uses the chair and his negotiation of physical disability that requires its use. This conversation takes place in 1981 during a time when conversation about mobility or physical disability was not commonly approached, especially in such a respectful and humane way in popular media and almost a full ten years before the U.S. government passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (Kirst, 2018). During this conversation, Mr. Rogers listens devotedly and openly to Jeff, asking genuine questions about his life. Without including the entire conversation, Mr. Rogers centers Jeff as the “one who makes [the chair] go,” asks him how long it took to learn its functions, emphasizes how proud his parents must be of him, asks him to explain for the audience about the conditions that led to his requiring a wheelchair, and then provides ample space for Jeff to explain his experience in his own words. *Figure 14* provides an image from the conversation.
Using medical terminology, Jeff describes doctors’ failed attempt to remove a tumor which led to his wheelchair use beginning at four years old before sharing many of his doctors’ names. After indicating pain he deals with from “autonomic dysreflexia,” Jeff explains, “So I have a lot of things going on when you’re – this just shows you have a lot of things happen to you when you’re handicapped. Most of the time – and sometimes it happens when you’re not handicapped.” This language in the given context, as “handicapped” is now seemingly outdated, honors Jeff’s emotional maturity and unique subjectivity in his readiness to speak deeply of the intensity of his experience and how he relates to others dealing with life’s complex matters though they might manifest differently from his own circumstances. Furthermore, this conversation is interlaced with moments of laughter about what could be potentially seen as an “awkward” subject to approach, and in this way, Mr. Rogers’s open-ended, quiet listening orientation to Jeff makes room for Jeff to share with Mr. Rogers and viewers in his own words, ensuring Jeff’s epistemic agency. In true MRN fashion, the two end the segment by singing “It’s You I Like” together, and Mr. Rogers improvises a line to Jeff: “But it’s you I like / The way you are right now / The way down deep inside you / Not the things that hide you /
Not your fancy chair, that’s just beside you,” at which point Jeff smiles and laughs. After the song, Mr. Rogers mentions that Jeff must feel “blue” sometimes and asks him what he does in those moments. The two talk about making up stories, reading, or playing as potential solutions to bleak feelings. Before Jeff leaves, Mr. Rogers exclaims, “I’m not feeling blue right now though!” to which Jeff responds, “Me neither!” As Jeff leaves, Mr. Rogers ensures him he will watch and stands on the porch, waving goodbye. He then retreats inside and reflects on his conversation with Jeff as well as Prince Tuesday’s experiences in Make Believe. In all, Mr. Rogers gracefully interweaves an exploration of electricity throughout the episode and into different perspectives through thinking about electric transportation in cars, concern for environmental health, a boy’s struggles with his parents’ fighting, and lastly as he gently works toward dialogic understanding with a neighbor who relies on electricity for mobility. There are many complex issues at work in this episode, each of which are given a soft place to land for reflection resting on Mr. Rogers’s quiet background home.

Nine years later, Mr. Rogers refocuses concern for the environment in “A Visit to a Recycling Center.” In this episode, Mr. Rogers connects caring for pets, family, or friends with concern for environmental health and begins by visiting a recycling center. Before leaving home, Mr. Rogers is sure to feed his fish and consider other things that could be taken care of – “A pet? Or a toy? Or a pillow? Or a blanket? Or a mom or a dad?” Once Mr. McFeely arrives, the two care for their bag and box of recyclable items by securing them and departing together to see what happens next in their life cycle. The pair witness recyclables being weighed, compacted, and bundled before being sent off to create new recycled materials. Mr. Rogers zooms in to look at these recycled materials,
asking viewers to look closely and consider their part in caring for where trash goes by finding his own contributed trash in the compacted bundle. This action decreases viewer abstraction toward recycling as audiences begin to sense the lived reality and importance of recycling for environmental care. Once they return home, Mr. Rogers emphasizes another point, illustrated in Figure 15 below.

![Figure 15. Mr. Rogers Considers Garbage’s Impact](image_url)

*Note.* Mr. Rogers reminds viewers to limit excessive material consumption, a point driven further in Make Believe where the neighborhood is overrun with garbage, a full dump, and no place left to turn for trash disposal (1990).

In the Neighborhood of Make Believe, trash is everywhere, the dump is full, and the smell is overwhelming; people walk around wearing “nosemuffs” to guard their noses. Several themes are explored through the NMB’s dilemma – exhaustion from the mindlessness of endless waste, over-consumption, the existential consequences of short-term societal planning, the need to respect nature, authority’s avoidance of responsibility (represented by King Friday), and the collective discomfort that arises as the ability to live well deteriorates under spiraling waste and consumption problems. These worrisome issues are not unfamiliar to children even presently as media images show trash on beaches, entangling animals and polluting landscapes. What is happening in Make Believe thirty years ago is ever more urgently awaiting attention today. When we learn that the dump at Westwood is full as well, the episode’s message is resoundingly clear:
no matter what neighborhood one lives in, there is only one planet, and there will not always be another space for mass-produced trash. Long-term solutions and community cooperation are required to address the serious, difficult, and existential issue of global waste disposal. The issue is portrayed on a much smaller scale in the NMB, but this segment in the episode even ends on an eerie, forewarning note – “The dump in Westwood is full too.” This is the last sentence heard before the Trolley takes viewers back to the living room. Mr. Rogers reflects on what happened in Make Believe and expresses hope that they will take recycling seriously; however, instead of ending on a somber note, he takes viewers to the kitchen to show them how to create crafts with recycled items from around the house. He creates small trees from paper rolls and says, “When you make things for yourself, it’s like taking care of yourself.” He consistently equates caring for the environment and other beings with caring for oneself, insisting the interconnectedness of viewers with the people and places surrounding them – even those they cannot see. In this light, the solemn concern of mass-production, over-consumption, and humanity’s survival is treated simply in its presentation to audiences.

The final episode of MRN features Mr. Rogers’s artistic celebration. The entire episode focuses on self-expression, diversity, the variety of perspectives and perceptions that exist, and aesthetic appreciation. It is never mentioned that this is the final episode. The plot follows the same gentle routine as it always has. In the beginning, Mr. Rogers shows a series of children’s drawings of the Trolley and connects people’s individual artistic expression with the variety of individual ways to express love for others. After he looks through the drawings, he poses a question for consideration and shares a reflective transitionary thought:
How would you draw the trolley? Since each person is somewhat different from everyone else in the world, each one of us would draw the trolley in a different way. Isn’t that wonderful? Have you ever made a drawing of something and given it to someone just because you wanted to? Just because you loved that person? You know, there are many different ways of saying “I love you.” In fact, I like to think about times when I’ve seen people showing their love for others.

This sentiment immediately blends into a carefully created montage of people’s expressions of love. Viewers see children cleaning up their toys, a father reading a book with his daughter, two students working together on math homework, a mother and her two children preparing vegetables to fry and sitting together to eat them, a mother and son washing dishes, and a father in a wheelchair bandaging and hugging his son, all to the wordless tune of “Many Ways to Say I Love You” playing softly in the background.

After these moments, Mr. McFeely arrives with a gift for Mr. Rogers. An episode filled with speechless spaces, Mr. Rogers watches Mr. McFeely’s gifted montage video filled with people performing their crafts, talent, and artistry as mellow music changes and blends into the art form onscreen. This artistic collection plays for over five minutes of screen time. *Figure 16* represents several clips from these two montages.
Figure 16. Love, Self-Expression, and the Arts

Note. The top-left image is from the first montage with varying ways to express love for others. A young boy can be seen helping his mother wash dishes. The second, third, and fourth images are from Mr. McFeely’s video featuring a variety of art forms. A jazz band plays, two ballet dancers practice in a studio, and children in Indigenous dress dance to traditional music played by the man standing toward the back. The final image is from the last visit to Make Believe, where Mayor Maggie describes how she created her outfit herself for the Arts Festival (2001).

After the video ends, Mr. Rogers remarks that Mr. McFeely is both a wonderful friend and artist. He takes time to appreciate how Mr. McFeely interwove each clip together in his gift. He says lastly, “Some people surprise us in this life. I think it’s important to look for what people are able to do, and once you find it, appreciate it.” Mr. Rogers does not equate Mr. McFeely’s worth as a friend to his ability for expression or artwork but appreciates those two aspects of his friend in their own right. His words imply that all people are inherently able to do something that should be appreciated. He does not assign a quality like “look for what people are able to do well” or mention that someone must be the best at a talent or craft but that they can be appreciated for whatever level of unique expression each person demonstrates communicatively, whether through art, conversation, or loving.
Mr. Rogers prefaces the visit to Make Believe by reminding the audience that Lady Elaine was previously hurting people’s feelings after she experienced her own hurt feelings but soon realized that people were kind to her when she was kind to others. In the final visit to Make Believe, citizens are preparing for the Neighborhood Arts Festival. Many regular characters have created an item (a quilt, a mobile, some clothing) to share at the festival. Community members gather around the castle waiting for Lady Elaine to arrive and judge the festival submissions. By the end, Lady Elaine awards everyone first prize after experiencing a self-esteem boost from practicing reciprocal kindness with others. Once the Trolley returns, Mr. Rogers encourages viewers to have their own “arts festival,” featuring anything they might like – “drawing, or painting, or dancing, or dressing up, or singing, or cooking.” The last sentence before he says goodbye is simple: “You might just make your own Trolley drawing. It’ll be different from all of these, but it’ll be yours, and that’s what’s important about it. I like being your television neighbor.”

He departs, those final words echoing farewell sentiments from across the series.

Just as shoe-tying and block-building can be mentioned in the same space as death, love, ability, and vulnerable self-expression, so the program emphasizes that profoundly emotional aspects of life should be just as mentionable and manageable as any other part of daily life. Mr. Rogers’s simple communicative choices allow these complex issues to be interwoven into the televisual neighborhood spaces. The fusion of complex subject-matter with (what may appear at the surface as) the more mundane is established from the first episode and contributes to the creation of a safe space for continually revisiting profound and often difficult themes over time through uncluttered routine.
“Our Kind of Communication”: A Meaningful Expression of Care

The section title returns to the heart of this inquiry and is followed by another phrase Mr. Rogers used in his 1969 testimony to describe what he aspired to provide children — a meaningful expression of care. Upon deciphering a conceptual map of the spaces on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, we can more fully approach how “our kind of communication” manifests onscreen. Ultimately, no children’s television program has confronted such philosophically and existentially profound themes as directly and simply without sacrificing contemplative depth and introspection. *MRN*’s capacity for such continual focus arises largely out of its intentional treatment of the four major rhetorical aspects discussed herein — the program’s careful routine and segment structure, its creators’ use of televisual framing, the gentle interweaving of music, and conscientious treatment of language with instilled respect for its power. Each of these elements are discernable in every selected episode, especially as they remain relatively unchanged throughout the program’s run. The findings herein do not exclude that other unnamed aspects also contribute to Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication, but for the sake of this inquiry’s scope and space, the four areas considered are ones that arose in observation time-and-again after multiple *MRN* viewings. Therefore, they are central to “our kind of communication.”

Reflecting on how “our kind of communication” manifests within the spaces of *MRN*, how can its nature be described? Given present considerations, *MRN*’s embodied communicative mode as a whole is thoroughly intentional, slow-paced, careful, routine, infused with visual and linguistic space and openness, quiet, dialogic, conversational, aesthetically simple and soothing, and melodically reinforced, all while thematically
circulating through the most complex of life’s concerns. Throughout the gentle waves of each episode, Mr. Rogers serves as a calm, steady presence who navigates the daily theme full circle with still open space remaining for viewers to reflect within after he has exited the front door. Given the mapped conceptual space and nature of Mr. Rogers’s communicative mode interlaced throughout MRN, I move into discussion of the collective significance inspired by these findings to more fully address this project’s remaining research focus, rejoining with theoretical streams previously considered as an opening to philosophical considerations that unearth the resonant power of “our kind of communication.”
CHAPTER FIVE: Resonant Philosophy, Invitational Epistemology, and Hope

*Can enlightenment – the idea that it would be reasonable to be happy – be reincarnated in our gloomy modernity? Are we defeated once and for all, and will the cynical twilight of harsh reality and moral dream never again grow lighter?*

- Peter Sloterdijk  
*Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988)

As we have seen thus far, several facets of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* present themselves as integral to “our kind of communication”; however, what can account for Mr. Rogers’s steady resurgence in popular culture, internet, mass, and social media? Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication still affects us, and while a multiplicity of reasons surely exist, this inquiry centers consideration of his communication and rhetorical style’s philosophical and epistemological undercurrents as they help explain *MRN*’s widespread appreciation and remembrance as well as sentiments which indicate a desired collective requirement for ongoing engagement with this communicative mode presently.

Audience and reviewer responses to Mr. Rogers’s representation within the past three years (2018-2020) alone include statements such as “A balm of kindness and empathy in divisive times,” and “This is what we need right now.” In light of such sentiments, this chapter considers four overall interwoven discussions that highlight *MRN*’s contemporary importance: a diagnosis of accelerated dysfunction on multiple micro- and macro-levels of modern society, especially since the year 2001 when the program ended; the program’s exemplification of a resonant communicative philosophy embedded in its style and rhetorical movements (as considered thoroughly in the previous section); a proposed description of Mr. Rogers’s invitational epistemological worldview and poetic ontology as discovered through his rhetorical movements and related
philosophy; and, lastly, consideration of how Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication points toward a more thoroughly interconnected way of knowing and being in the world positioned from the Western paradigm within an immense, hope-inspiring post-abyssal ecology of knowledges.

**Escalating Exigencies in the Twenty-First Century**

In the nineteen years since *MRN*’s last episode premiered on television, collective life has changed; many scholars argue our relationship to reality, the world, knowledge, each other, and ourselves is steadily deteriorating and will continue to do so as long as the axiological, epistemological, and ontological underpinnings of modern society remain the same. However, hopeful messages do also exist, and many of them (from some of the same philosophers included here) gracefully align with and illuminate what is loved, remembered, and hoped for through a revival of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication” today. Recalling Zelevansky (2004), Mr. Rogers’s characteristic mode of communication was more a reflection of the “debased culture” around it rather than a purely oppositional act against it. Therefore, it is important to consider what that culture’s successor looks like, especially as its continuation has intensified, arriving at the present-day context in which Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication nostalgically gets brought back into the public eye across media forms. The question follows: what conditions define our current reality such that resonant enjoyment and widespread, collective nostalgia should manifest from one man’s communicative style? The philosophical undercurrent of our lives alongside our common approach to what constitutes knowledge or thought are in misalignment. Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication manifests as a more balanced, open form which tempers an experience of communicative life continuously deviating off a
healthy, sustainable course. In this section, I will consider thoughts on the current state of modern crises to contextualize the present-day significance of MRN’s mode of communication. Though certainly still valued during its aired schedule from 1968 through 2001, Mr. Rogers’s reemergence in post-2001 life suggests a longing for a communicative mode that differs from what is commonplace in 2020.

The same year MRN ended, 2001 undoubtedly marked the end of a global era – a divergence and rising ambivalence in the belief of “American exceptionalism,” the surge of multiple and ever-present technologies, the exponential increase in witnessing the effects of climate change, the exponential decrease in public trust of global political and economic systems, and an overall perilous shift in the tone of discourse surrounding personal self-esteem and collective existential outlook exacerbated by a hyper-stimulating media landscape. Each issue is connected to modern, capitalistic society’s reproduction by continuously “expanding, growing and innovating, increasing production and consumption,” or in short, always “dynamically accelerating” (Rosa, 2019, p. 1). Acceleration leads to a higher quantity of experience and obligations packed into increasingly smaller time increments, which in turn affects humanity’s perception of reality. Condensing this overarching force into its manifest problems, Rosa (2019) identifies three immediate crises that have intensified into the present day: the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psychological crisis (p. 2). All these crises reflect a disturbance in the nature of our relations to the world around us, especially in relation to nature, the social world, and the self, respectively.

Fragmentation and alienation are persistent themes across intellectual thought reflecting upon collective calamities. Both forces are accompanied by their own set of
adverse manifestations. Peter Sloterdijk, a philosopher and critical theorist, reflects on crises brought about by modernity even before 2001 in his 1988 work *Critique of Cynical Reason* (which introduces this chapter), alluding to the trajectory of the forthcoming heightened crises seen today. Sloterdijk (1988) asserts that the era, at that time, was already losing its ability to distinguish crisis from stability, leading to a near-constant feeling of uncertainty as each person attempts to carve out their own path for “happiness.” Press forward several decades to 2018, and fellow philosopher Bernard Stiegler echoes similar sentiments. Alongside the 2000s ushering in the social media age, constant network access with Apple iPhones, unmasked corruption and lack of consistent correction of the financial sector, and an overall seemingly unchecked rise in the influence of technology, other related philosophical challenges bring with them such an enormous “scale and profundity” that they require some response: firstly, exponentially increasing “hyper-industrialization” in the twentieth century and into the present has had and continues to have multiple chaotic, destructive effects on the natural world of which we are all a part; secondly, “deterioration of political faith, belief, trust, hope and will” is intricately connected with a subsequent rise in reactionary xenophobia and “anti-politics” which latch onto the rising tides of “fear and stupidity” resulting in the eroded post-democratic, post-truth “Trumpocene” (Stiegler, 2018, pp. 10-11). Invoking a state of what feels like perpetual precarity and emergency, life oscillates between states of feeling unlivable or in a survival mode linked to a certain sense of necessary denial.

In *The Experience of Meaning*, Jan Zwicky (2019) ruminates on an approach to life’s meanings and meaning, generally, which exists outside the realm of hegemonic analytic philosophy. In this work, she presents a gentle opposition to calculative, purely
analytic modes of thought that directly influence dominant approaches to knowledge. A growing technocracy exacerbates the experience of fragmentation and alienation. Big Data’s domination and prescription of “thinking as calculation” leads to exceedingly “limited conceptions of truth and reality” which permeates natural, social, and personal consciousness (Zwicky, 2019, p. viii). These realms naturally correspond to Rosa’s identified modern crises. Purely analytic, fragmented, calculative thought maintained by our increasingly mediated minds affects human ability to relate to other humans and the surrounding world. Zwicky (2019) contends, “Under the press of colonialism, capitalism, resourcism, consumerism, and exponential human population growth, the natural world, human cultures, and relations among nonhuman and human cultures have disintegrated” (p. 28). In our world of constant progress for progress’s sake, we wait for a period of relaxation, a way of relating differently to the dominant world-flow, but once it comes, many find themselves in an arrested state by the sudden space. We do not know how to sit in attunement with silence. Rosa (2019) poses that once we do finally find ourselves in leisure without to-do lists, task-orientation, deadlines, or “options and obligations, we are seized by the fear that this silence might actually last.” It is within this situation that the “full magnitude of the existential alienation in late modernity’s relations to the world” clearly reveals itself (p. 191).

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben considers this problem a “massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses.” An apparatus “designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being” (Agamben, 2009, p. 11). In this way, apparatuses lead to further existential fracturing. In his essay “What is an Apparatus?” Agamben (2009) decides that while there have always
been many apparatuses, today, “there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus” (p. 15). These are not only the well-known Foucauldian apparatuses but also some previously unmentioned, such as “computers, cellular telephones, and... language itself” (p. 14).

In a state of dis-relation, humans suffer across the spectrum of lived experience. Movements of contemporary life reflect a world of people individually compartmentalized within themselves, not as part of an interconnected reality. Indeed, modern conceptions of a “successful life” posit that each human is primarily individualistic and contains a “generally unfathomable inner depth that ultimately supplies them with standards and criteria for distinguishing between right and wrong life decisions” which can be discerned according to their affective sensed authenticity or inauthenticity (Rosa, 2019, p. 21, emphasis in original). This axiological perspective “undercut[s] the very ethical openness it claims to uphold by a kind of hypostasized individual teleology” (p. 21).

Despite the commonplace promotion of self-sufficiency and individualized existence devoid of interrelatedness or implication in each other’s reality, contemporary catastrophes urge us to consider a different perspective. In After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes, Jean-Luc Nancy submits that our modern turmoil, especially in light of increased natural disasters, is that “natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussion” (2015, p. 4). Disasters beg humanity to see the interconnectedness of all beings, systems, things. Chaos in this state accelerates quickly without a seemingly conscious decision to do so; it is within our society’s historical and lived subconscious
from which the seeds of civilizational catastrophes are sown. Nancy (2015) asserts that
the cure to our civilization crisis does not exist within the same civilization that created
them. Another way of thinking and being in the world is needed.

Pedagogical and epistemological norms are implicated in the diagnosis of cynical
modern ennui. With a “banking concept of education” present through the majority of
American schools (and in some cases at the university level), students are not encouraged
to develop a critical consciousness which would allow them to more fully engage with
and transform the world around them. As Freire (1996) expresses, “The more completely
[students] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend to simply adapt to
the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p. 54). Thus,
modern education is a way in which destructive societal apparatuses replicate. Part of this
process is the dominance of one-sided linguistically controlled communication imparted
on others, prioritizing the linguistic apparatus in which we become caught. Dominant
epistemology embedded within pedagogical practices highlights the incompleteness of
our thinking processes.

In her work Lyric Philosophy (a concept explored further herein), philosopher,
poet, and musician Jan Zwicky (2014) demonstrates the capacity of meaning to arise in
forms other than the logico-linguistic. Zwicky (2014) contemplates the question: “At
what point in history did philosophers become sure… that all thought could, in principle,
take logico-linguistic form?” (S. 12). In Lyric Philosophy, Zwicky creates a unique

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1 Because of the unique format within Zwicky’s (2014) Lyric Philosophy, the book is divided into left- and
right-page coherent sections with corresponding section numbers rather than pages. For this reason,
citations from this text are labeled as (S. 12), with “S” representing “Section,” for example. Through this
presentation, Lyric Philosophy demonstrates the usefulness of bridging connections between old thought
and new to lead to expanding, fertile worlds of meaning.
composition of left-right pages existing in dialogue with each other. On the left are Zwicky’s guiding reflections on what constitutes philosophy, thought, and knowledge. On the right are “lyrics,” – excerpts from academic literature (and others, like philosophy, fiction, music, or sometimes even a photograph) – which resonate with Zwicky’s “guiding” voice on the left. Each dialogic left-right composition contributes to the coherence of the entire book, as she artfully illustrates resonance at work and play while providing a broadening, unique approach to philosophy. Exemplifying other ways in which knowledge and meaning may manifest, she asserts that the singular metaphor for clarity in philosophy is analysis, which is a way that a fragmented system persists. She hopes that clarity of emotion, music, images, and other vessels of metaphoric passion can be collectively grasped for their ability to broaden our experience of knowledge and meaning. Akin to the way that Zwicky enters an opening in the philosophical realm, Mr. Rogers embarks into the televisual to suggest another way of being and thinking to complement, not vilify, dominant modes.

Life in a technocratic, late capitalist, neoliberal, Eurocentric, white supremacist, colonized, patriarchal world is isolating and dispossessed of existential gentleness, which manifests through individuals in their interactions with the self and others. In her work *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle contemplates in a chapter called “Exhaustion”: “We don’t know what the lack of gentleness causes. Words trampled, bodies mistreated; left lifeless, sucked dry, sad passions – but above all charred emotions, pure existential ashes that cannot be brought [back to life]” (2018, p. 61). Such emotional deprivation generates unhealthy, splintered coping mechanisms for compensating satisfaction. Material reality is brutal
and creates a “spiritual and emotional desert where beings are trapped,” which no resource acquisition or material wealth can gift reprieve (Dufourmantelle, 2018, p. 62). Gentleness ultimately becomes a response to the harrowing edges of technocracy and material subsistence, and in its capacity for attunement to resonance, I turn to resonance theory and some of its key components.

**The Components of Resonance**

Given a widespread diagnosis of present natural, social, and personal illnesses, I turn toward consideration of *MRN*’s resonant qualities, which are vital to its contemporary significance in 2020. To be clear, I am not expressing a need to “bring back” the series; rather, I emphasize that the program’s departure reflects a lack of the kind of communication that the program offered. Therefore, its absence still indicates a deep longing for another kind of communication than what is most commonplace in the present day. The rhetorical style and movements inherent to “our kind of communication” deliver resonance to present-day viewers, which can be understood more clearly by attending to the philosophy of resonance and its attending components. Resonance is an extensive concept which frequently, and fittingly, escapes the ability to describe it in words. It holds implications for nearly every facet of life. Two influential thinkers previously introduced, Jan Zwicky and Hartmut Rosa, take up consideration of resonance from a philosophical and epistemological to a sociological lens, respectively. A third scholar, Anne Dufourmantelle, philosophizes the concept of gentleness, which also resonates of resonance and is relevant to the discussion herein. In this section, I will explore resonance as a philosophical, epistemological, and sociological phenomenon and how it relates to *MRN* as a complete entity. I attend to resonance’s multiple
interconnected and often overlapping components, though they are separated here for the sake of individual consideration as much as is possible. However, their deep-rooted integration is fundamental to the whole of resonance and should be thought of as such while considering each “individual” component. Beginning with a definition and exploration of resonance at large, I move into gestalt comprehension; simplicity, space, and coherence; and powerful gentleness.

Resonance

A warming, deeply resonant perception arises while viewing selected MRN episodes (though I submit that watching any combination of the program’s episodes would lead to a similar response). Agamben (2009), reflecting on the power of apparatuses, writes, “At the root of each apparatus [like cell phone use] lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus” (p. 17). Through the televisual apparatus, Mr. Rogers relays a truth that we must first connect with ourselves in an interconnected world of others in order to thrive in open communicative relationships, which lends to its resonant quality as it speaks to the human desire for happiness and genuine realized connection. Considering the ways that humans relate to and experience the world, “it quickly becomes apparent that this generally occurs not [frequently] through direct physical contact with the world, but rather via media” (Rosa, 2019, p. 88). Herein lies a direct connection between MRN, as media, and resonance theory.

To establish a sense of what resonance is, I begin with sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s work *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Quite generally, resonance theory provides a small building block in the process of helping to perceive of
a possible different world and a divergent way of relating to life itself. Looking up a dictionary definition for “resonance” will first and foremost provide answers from the physics discipline with exacting, analytical descriptions of reflective auditory processes. The only word that might be helpful here is “reflective,” as indicative of two things showing themselves in connection or relation to each other, like seeing one’s self in a mirror or the feeling after a profound, enlivening conversation with a dear friend.

Hartmut Rosa (2019) starts from this sound-based principle and expands it, adding, “Resonant relationships could be understood through ‘reciprocal adaptive motion,’ like two planets orbiting each other,” maintaining a “mutual oscillation” (p. 165). In this way, two somewhat independent yet dependent beings exist in response to each other while still retaining their individual voices. Resonance is not an emotional state (alone) but can be more primarily understood as “a mode of relation” (Rosa, 2019, p. 168, emphasis in original). As a central concept in this inquiry, it is worth thorough rumination.

Another way of perceiving resonance is as “the momentary appearance, the flash of a connection to a source of strong evaluations in a predominantly silent and often repulsive world” (Rosa, 2019, p. 185). Rosa provides examples of life experience which might spark resonance like watching a sunrise or sunset, listening to music, or being in love. These moments “contain the promise of a different way of relating to the world… They convey a sense of being deeply connected with something. But they do not abolish the intervening moments of foreignness and inaccessibility” (Rosa, 2019, p. 185).

Through affect, emotion, and interest, a subject and the world around them are “mutually affected and transformed” by their relationship to each other (Rosa, 2019, p. 174).

Resonance exists in a highly complex dialectical relationship with alienation, a mode of
relation in which a subject’s interaction with the world is devoid of “inner connection” and seems to the subject “cold, rigid, repulsive, and non-responsive” (Rosa, 2019, p. 184). From the axes of alienation, one experiences depression, burnout, and a lack of “self-efficacy” which permeates their experience of the world around them (Rosa, 2019).

Many philosophical inquiries often consider a looming question on the nature of the good life. One of Rosa’s central arguments is that “life is a matter of the quality of one’s relationship to the world, i.e. the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world, the quality of one’s appropriation of the world” (2019, p. 5, emphasis in original). Rosa suggests that the “good life” comes from a secure relationship with the world, which requires open axes of resonance, like the ability to connect with love, respect, trust, beauty, and security even in the midst of life’s most frightening scenarios. The purpose of resonance theory is firstly to “investigate the nature of such axes of resonance and to define them more precisely beyond the realm of literary-seeming metaphors,” like those more prevalent in Jan Zwicky’s work (Rosa, 2019, p. 10). This investigation involves a closer look at “individual moments of happiness” and “one’s broader relationship to the world… over [one’s life]” (p. 10). With this understanding in place, Rosa questions “social conditions” that affect axes of resonance and their development. Rosa (2019) writes:

Intense moments of subjective happiness can be understood as forms of resonant experience… But the good life is also more than just the maximization of the happy moments (or minimization of unhappy experiences) that [the world] permits. It is rather the result of a relationship to the world defined by the establishment and maintenance of stable axes of resonance that allow subjects to
feel themselves *sustained* or even *secured* in a responsive, accommodating world.

(p. 30, emphasis in original)

In short, resonance is a mode of relation in which subject and world (or other interactants) can sense their interconnectedness and allow themselves to be affected by being in relation to each other. Access to and maintenance of healthy axes of resonance (perhaps family, friends, work, interests, self-esteem, among many other possibilities) promotes the tendency toward a more positive relationship and appropriation of one’s world as one becomes attuned with a greater sensitivity and appreciation for resonant experiences. Resonance emerges through any medium “capable of resonance, either literally or metaphorically: music, images, gestures, the sounds of words” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 141). Resonant thought’s focus is “non-causal, non-logical relationships… the internal relations of yet larger things” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 141). Resonant thought rests largely in non-linguistic ingredients as we have seen evidenced on *MRN* as they emerge coherently – elements of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication” recur and relate back to each other in their consistent presence over years.

Resonance theory removes Cartesian dualism (what Rosa calls a “theoretical aporia”) by altering understanding of “relationship” as an idea. As discussed in chapter two, Cartesian dualism plagues original theorizations of invitational and epistemic rhetoric in back-and-forth deliberations over the nature of “truth” and “reality.” With the selected theoretical amendments in mind, this inquiry considers reality and meaning to exist somewhere in the balance between subjective and objective reality, which are composed against, in relation, to each other. Subjective-objective reality must be interconnected for vibrating axes of resonance. The world is not made up of subjects and
objects as independent entities. A subject only has meaning against “the backdrop of a world in which it is placed and to which it finds itself related” (Rosa, 2019, p. 33). “Dynamic relationships and referentialities” might be a better understanding of the material world, according to Rosa (2019, p. 36). All are intimately related.

Resonance arises from experiences of completion in relating to the world, leading to sensitivity toward the potentiality of hope and harmony in daily existence – a healthier relationship to the world. Watching MRN, this thinking does not seem alien. In reading about resonance, words, images, and sounds from MRN immediately became illuminated; it was as though various authors were describing the experience of watching the program, though they are all focusing on different artifacts and elements of human experience. In this way, resonance quickly and clearly presents itself as an enlightening philosophical concept for understanding not only the draw of MRN but of any natural, cultural, social, or other phenomenon with which humans experience intimate relatedness to life. I am arguing that Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication, as it pertains to MRN, is full of resonances that gently rest with viewers, providing a resounding example of humanity’s communicative and emotional capacities with the self and others. Through his characteristic “management” of what can be “mentioned” on the program, Mr. Rogers leaves space open for viewers to resonate with him as well as the ideas, feelings, and situations he brings to the fore. Demonstrating a healthy mode of relation, Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication paints a picture of how discourses (and the world) could be.

Resonance is a vital way in which we experience “living” meaning in a technocratic, even nihilistic world dominated by “calculation, analysis, mechanism, capital” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 141). In our modern, late capitalist society as it has evolved
from the Enlightenment, thinking about knowledge and our experience of the world is presumed to be laden with “objectivity,” a seemingly “perspectiveless perspective” which ultimately inhibits emotional expression (Zwicky, 2014, S. 46). Zwicky (2014) poses the question: “Why should emotionlessness make a way of thinking good?” (S. 46, emphasis in original). This question asks us to consider how non-analytic modes of thinking might allow for a more complete interaction with and understanding of our emotions so that they are enabled to guide analytic thoughts in the name of “objective” work, however possible “objective” work might be. This is one node at which the importance of emotional pedagogy and MRN’s resonant quality intersect. With strong emotional footing through education, the development and appreciation for resonance detection becomes a powerful supplemental force in the task of analytic, “objective” thinking. As Zwicky (2014) writes: “Perception informed by emotion is neither completely random nor unintelligible, much less weak or shameful. Emotional resonance is one among several ways a human being has of coming clearly to understand or perceive something” (S. 45).

The capacity to be “struck” with complex understanding not completely on our own in experiencing artwork is no surprise. Given its powerful capacity, Zwicky (2014) asks why art is so commonly denied legitimacy as thought, an issue this inquiry readily engages.

As two primary examples, Mr. Rogers activates resonant experience in his musical inclusions and in his “encounters” with things, as discussed in the previous chapter. These axes of resonant experience exist alongside the realm of linguistically driven rationality. While language is certainly of utmost importance in its ability to center profound messages on the program, it is the engagement of accompanying axes of
resonance that allow resonant experience to sound. As Zwicky (2014) notes, “[A]ttention to resonance requires acknowledgement of other axes of human experience than the logico-linguistic,” and a subsequent appreciation for how these axes support language (S. 172). As viewers see fish swimming, video montages, or Mr. Rogers building a miniature garage to the backdrop of calming classical or jazz music, viewers are opened to a window of experience and meaning through the power of music’s non-linguistic character. Rosa (2019) suggests that music is a central medium by which films “generate resonant effects and ‘touch’ their audience” (p. 93). Furthermore, “[T]ones, sounds, rhythms, and melodies convey an irreducible aesthetic excess above and beyond their figurative character or ‘significance’ that opens up a specific realm of experience inaccessible to other languages or symbolic sign systems” (p. 94). Music resounds significantly in MRN’s legacy, and it is certainly, in part, due to its resonant effects.

Though Mr. Rogers mentions in “Death of a Goldfish” that things cannot “die” or “feel,” the way he interacts with and centers items (like the Trolley, craft projects, items introduced during the exposition segment) by bringing them to the fore is relational in nature though they are not alive in the human sense. He invites viewers to observe and “hear” them through close-ups and discussion. In this way, viewers relate to and connect with non-human items. Rosa (2019) considers the activation of resonant experience through relations with “things.” A particularly thoughtful passage says:

It is a specific characteristic of Western modernity that in its cognitive organization of its relationships to the world, it ascribes no resonant qualities to things, i.e. to non-human or at least non-animal objects… The rational or cognitive universe of modernity, established and legitimized by science, is thus a
‘mute universe’ in which no other voices but those of human beings can be heard. The pre- or non-modern worlds of ancient, animistic, and totemic cultures are different. They recognize animated, ensouled, or *speaking* things that share an inner connection with human beings and are often also interwoven in a web of resonant relationships. (p. 226, emphasis in original)

Mr. Rogers, in a manner un-characteristic of Western pedagogical practice, gives voice to the universe of things around him through the elements explored in chapter four. In this way, viewers are brought toward a closer sense of the interwoven nature of existence. The at-first comical thought of Mr. Rogers making a tree out of a toilet paper roll becomes more serious when thought through in this context. Perhaps we could look at *things* around us with greater appreciation, a moment for reflection and deeper consideration of the things that help us live, give us enjoyment, or affect the larger world’s well-being around us.

Returning to the issue of time, *MRN*’s resonant effects are certainly in part due to the intermediate changes described in the first section of this chapter that have worsened over years. For resonant experience and appreciation to arise presently, *MRN* needed to exist during the extended time that it did in the same quiet, gentle space as that is the vase in which its meaning was able to be nurtured and continually grow. Its meaning – over time – is part of the strength of its present-day thoughtfulness, its intelligence. “The experience of meaning is the experience of a resonant relationship. The deeper and more complex the resonance, the more powerful the experience of meaning. When a mode of representation curtails resonance, it curtails the experience of meaning” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 135). There is no shortcut for resonant experience; without time or attunement, the
experience is deprived of its meaning. Furthermore, our discernment to resonance can change over time. Zwicky (2019) comments on the way that individual and collective capacity to “discern internal structural relations and their ontological significance” are affected and evolve over time: “It is a function of complex interactions among many factors: our experience; our training; our cultural, intellectual, physical, and emotional perspectives; our state of health; our social context; whether or not we’ve had a good night’s sleep” (pp. 120-121). Each function she includes here have undoubtedly shifted in individual and collective consciousness, especially since the year 2001, enhancing attunement to MRN’s resonant kind of communication.

The philosophy behind resonance theory is certainly relevant to current nostalgia and appreciation for Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication. “Without love, respect, and esteem, our wires to the world – our axes of resonance – remain rigid and mute” (Rosa, 2019, p. 9). This sentiment partially explains MRN’s resonant strength. The program causes axes of love, respect, and esteem (for self, others, and things) to vibrate as part of its pedagogical purpose. MRN attempts to educate children (and adults) such that these axes can continue to resound throughout life – especially when life is toughest. Looking back through time at the program, something of these axes are vitalized once again. MRN shows viewers resonant hope in a difficult world, as was directly confronted onscreen through complex subject-matter, and which has certainly remained true for the children viewers who have since grown into present-day adults. The program’s hopeful existence in an oft-uncertain world highlights the experience of meaning through resonance. Rosa underscores, “Resonance… can never exist where everything is ‘pure harmony,’ nor does it arise simply from the absence of alienation. It is rather a flash of hope for adaptive
transformation and response in a silent world” (2019, p. 187). Through a seemingly cold worldly indifference, hope for another way of speaking and being appears. With a clearer understanding of resonance in place, I move to its additional yet equally important components, each of which help to explain the resonant significance of “our kind of communication.” Resonance cannot take effect without an appreciation and understanding of gestalt comprehension.

Gestalt Comprehension (Or Perception, Intelligence, Insight)

As one of resonance’s key components involves attention to internal structural relations between things, it is necessary to consider gestalt comprehension as a unit of resonance. Western thought largely neglects the importance of gestalt comprehension, which explains how parts of a whole and a whole itself are in intricate interrelation, both vitally integral to each other’s meaning as they continuously constitute each other. Generally, a gestalt is a “shape” or “form.” Gestalt theory posits that “language is not the source of meaning,” but rather it is “insight into how things hang together. It is a perception that a thing or situation hangs together” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 5, emphasis in original). Furthermore, Zwicky (2019) explains, “Gestalt thinking fundamentally involves the spontaneous perception of structure: not analytic order – one brick stacked on another – but what might be called resonant internal relations,” a concept explored in the previous section (p. 19). Being able to perceive such relations is a type of intelligence. Gestalts, as an introduction to the concept, are best understood through musical example and metaphor. Gestalt epistemology is connected to the study of melody, as melodies are “paradigmatic examples of gestalts” (Zwicky, 2019, pp. 54-55). In a piece of music, there is a center (the song or composition itself) as well as the individual parts that create the
entirety (notes, rests, key changes). Both whole and parts are interwoven so thoroughly, they each hold their own significance; they do not outweigh each other’s significance. The image of a binary star system in space illuminates the idea well. A sensitivity to perception of these ever-present relationships leads to a sharpened sense of one’s “gestalt comprehension.” However, this type of comprehension is also called “gestalt perception,” “gestalt intelligence,” and “gestalt insight,” which all indicate a similar phenomenon.

_MRN_ inspires collectively under-encouraged and underdeveloped capacities for gestalt comprehension and, therefore, resonance. These activations point to the interrelatedness of people and things on our planet as opposed to dominant more ‘closed’ forms of communication, as in those prescribed by technocratic or (as “purely” as possible) analytic thought. The world can be interpreted, lived, experienced in multiple ways other than in the dominant mode of perception through analysis. Though the world is somewhat like a machine, it is also like “a web of analogies” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 50). The machine comparison certainly suggests evolutionary benefits in technological and other scientific advancements over the last century. However, it has clearly benefited humans evolutionarily to think of and describe the world in non-analytic modes, using the type of intelligence required to do so – gestalt comprehension. To be clear, humans benefit from engagement with both analytic and gestalt intelligence in conjunction, and our society loses part of its creative and appreciative capacity in over-emphasizing one mode over the other; balance is key.

Computational thinking cannot replicate true insight. As artificial intelligence and algorithmic programming “consist of discrete, non-interdefined elements arranged in rule-governed sequences: this is exactly what a gestalt is not” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 73). To
further illuminate this idea, Zwicky (2019) pens thought on the power of non-linguistic meaning and phenomena worth providing in full:

Meaning is not a genre at all. It’s the iridescent, flowing substance of any life worth living. Our experience of meaning is not fundamentally linguistic either in structure or in content: it is a quasi-perceptual gestalt phenomenon. Because it is a gestalt phenomenon, the intellectual capacities involved in the experience of meaning can be disrupted if we try to analyze or describe them. This… has important consequences for a culture that values analysis and description as core features of intelligence. It also has consequences for our understanding of the natural world: the present planetary crisis is in large measure a result of our neglect of meaning. If, as either readers or writers, we abet this neglect, our practice is complicit. (p. 49)

As indicated in this passage, our sensory (and other non-linguistic) perception is not entirely removed from thought and holds a legitimate place in the realm of knowledge. Lack of this acknowledgement deprives knowledge of an integral capacity for attunement to meaning. Logico-linguistic communication is inadequate for relating all knowledge, and MRN demonstrates an understanding of this principle. All people might not be receptive to MRN’s gestalt-activating capacity, but on some level, there is clearly resonance with enough viewers to continue our reaching for connection with this communicative mode long after its official end. Gestalts are “radically” dependent upon context – how things are framed, situated themselves and around each other (Zwicky, 2019). MRN invites viewers to moments of insight, reflection, and contemplation, which could precipitate a gestalt about our interconnectedness. It is difficult to pinpoint another
example of current media that does this. The social media landscape, in particular, is one that exposes users to fragment after fragment of word and image, which does not seem to point to larger integrated whole. Indeed, many report feelings of alienation after heavy exposure to the networked mind of users. Ruled by algorithms, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are not constructed for coherence of messaging or interaction; one does not exit its use with the impression they can be heard or certainly be “listened” to. *MRN* presents information in a way that illustrates a more complete picture of the networked world in relation that technocracy does not coherently support. The simple framing of interwoven gestalts on *MRN* speaks to viewers in a modern context with a nostalgic yet still-hopeful meaning, complete with confident instruction on how to behave and communicate presently in an era of uncertainty and collective crises despite the varied context during its time on air.

Continual visits to the neighborhood present opportunities for gestalt comprehension over time. As Mr. Rogers presents consistent details time and again on the program, a certain knowledge is laid before viewers for their own integration and processing over time. Zwicky (2019) writes on this phenomenon: “What conveys truth here, and conveys it in myriad other cases ranging from outrage to ecstasy, is a constellation of verbally unadorned but precisely chosen details. It is in these constellated details that the genius of showing [as opposed to explicitly telling] lies” (p. 97). What she means by showing is not doing work for the audience by “telling” them what to think, feel, or believe as they watch. It is the difference between directly stating, “You need to talk to someone if you’re mad,” and showing a scene in Make Believe where a resolution to someone’s anger is shown over the course of several episodes, with space in between
for the situation to unfold and viewers to reflect. Answers are not explicitly “given,” and viewers discern meaning of a larger message over time. “Inscape” is a useful term for communicative character, a relation between concepts “shown” rather than forcibly “told.” Zwicky (2019) sees the term invoking the idea of an “interior landscape” with an “emphasis on the nonhuman and its sense of space, of vistas; complexities that shift with perspective; attunements that invite contemplation. Landscapes are not simply assemblages of trees, rocks, and water; they hang together in ways that are hard to analyze” (p. 54). Indeed, MRN presents its own kind of inscape that hangs together in its conveyance of meaning over the years. Though I separated chapter four into multiple sections for the purpose of analysis, it is the way the sections “hang together” that lend to their significance; their inscape holds resonant meaning that affects audiences then and now.

Gestalt perception is tied to the phrase “lyric insight,” which implies a non-analytical sense about the world, more evocative of music. “Lyric” as a mode of thought and understanding is “fundamentally integrative, rather than analytic” (Zwicky, 2019, p. viii). “Lyric” and “gestalt” are closely related terms, though the former has a clearer musical connotation, and a fitting notion for a program that presented many of its central themes through music. Through lyric and other resonant gestalts, MRN indicates the world as a resonant whole in which even the most complex issues can be treated simply. It provides a window to a world away from fragmented reality (despite the television set) and toward a deeper attunement with one’s relations. The show’s pedagogical approach stands as a down-to-earth safe harbor between the unsettling non-televisioned world and the imaginary realm, emphasizing that there is space to exist safely in both. Zwicky (2019)
describes “lyric insight” as “that species of gestalt comprehension most alert to, most emotionally affected by, the tension between the world experienced as a resonant whole and the world experienced as a colloquy of distinct, mortal beings” (p. 159). Indeed, *MRN* rests easily at home in the realm of “lyric philosophy,” as it presents “thought in love with clarity, informed by the intuition of coherence; by a desire to respond to the preciousness of the world” (Zwicky, 2014, S. 103). Though the overstimulating world can and is admittedly exhausting and sometimes scary within the walls of the *Neighborhood*, its citizens (who include us, as well) can rest in the strength of the emotional knowledge shared simply, consistently, coherently with them from their television neighbor. The idea of “coherence” within lyric philosophy (and gestalt perception) serves a fitting term for movement toward even more vitally connected components of resonance – simplicity, space, and coherence.

*Simplicity, Space, and Coherence*

In an interview from 1994 with Charlie Rose, Mr. Rogers speaks about the inherent interrelation between space and contemplation. Asked about the meaning of his recently released book at that time, Mr. Rogers replies: “It’s about being… It’s about the white spaces between the paragraphs, which I think are more important than any of the text, because it allows you to think about what’s just been said” (Rose, 2016, 0:55). The qualities of simplicity, space (and silence within and between spaces), and an overall sense of coherence permeate *MRN*, as demonstrated by selected analysis sections. These characteristics hold certain philosophical significance as they contribute to the program’s resonant capacity. Though each element named in the section title could be treated in its
own individual section, they are conjoined here for their close interrelation and for the scope of this inquiry.

First, simplicity appears as a key descriptor through Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication” – the show’s structure, its televisual framing, auditory elements, and its treatment of language and dialogue. Why does it matter that the show unfolds with such a permeating sense of simplicity? Simply, we like simplicity! “In many cases, truth, expressiveness, and pleasingness are… felt to be *bound up* with simplicity of presentation or conception” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 59). Meanings on *MRN* strike audiences as immediately uncomplicated yet no less true as knowledge. *MRN*’s lack of clutter and bombardment allows for gestalt insight that resonates especially with adults who once viewed the show as children. Zwicky (2019) compares resonant simplicity to “quantitative simplicity…, namely, an absence of clutter: lyric artifacts possess a resonant clarity that allows their meaning to break on our inner eye like light” (p. 60). The interwoven gestalts on *MRN* that create its overarching absence of bombardment enrich the conveyance of meaning, the interrelatedness of people to the world and the world to people. When we “unclutter” our perception of life and our relations in it, we see its meaning. As Zwicky (2019) eloquently phrases: “Paring life to its basics allows one to see its ontological core, which is that the world is a resonant whole” (pp. 62-63). This simplicity does not mean it is lacking in complexity, as Mr. Rogers clearly deals with some of life’s most pressing questions and thoughts. However, his use of simplicity eases his ability to shelter complexity.

There is a difference between complexity and something appearing as complicated. “What is *complicated* is disunified, chaotic… What is *complex*, by contrast,
may be intricate, but it is not chaotic; it has a unifying gestalt” (Zwicky, 2019, pp. 63-64, emphasis in original). Like an ecosystem, there are myriad aspects that create the whole, all existing in relation. However, “complexity is uncluttered. Everything fits” (p. 64). 

*MRN* treats naturally complex matters with simplicity; it does not overcomplicate its themes and lessons. Lastly, in regard to simplicity, the simple, comforting symbolism of the neighborhood home is significant in its uncluttered presence. As Mr. Rogers lives and moves throughout his television home, audiences witness him dealing with one issue at a time, whether it is talking to the audience or posing an item for their consideration. Homes or “homelands” are “traditionally associated with rural contexts, uncomplicated environments, and simpler relations” (Rosa, 2019, p. 369). The simplicity that pervades the *Neighborhood home* is intentional. Even if a child viewing does not live in a home with the same quiet, calm conditions, the television home serves perhaps as a temporary reprieve for some. In all, audiences enjoy the simplicity of *MRN*. It makes sense in reflecting on today’s meme-culture and news articles condensed to smaller, more quickly “digestible” coverage to appeal to some of the perhaps darker sides of an overwhelming preference for simplicity. However, this is why simplicity, by itself, is not the only resonance-invoking component, and why it is presented here alongside space and coherence.

Both visual and auditory space (including lyric, music, and silence) are integral to resonance. Just as light is foundational to visuality, so is silence a base for the auditory (Zwicky, 2019). Music serves as a bridge between silence and language. Zwicky (2014) writes (with “/” representing the spaces around each segment in the text):
Lyric thought is a direct response to the fact that the particular capacity for language-use possessed by our species cuts us off from the world in a way, or to a degree, that is painful. / We experience the burden of our capacity for language as loss – though we rarely recognize that this is the burden, that what we had lost is silence. / Lyric art is the fullest expression of the hunger for wordlessness.” (S. 132, emphasis in original)

In this passage, as in many passages of Lyric Philosophy, Zwicky evokes humanity’s increasingly distant relationship with silence – a space we need and might not fully realize we need. In many cases (media, relationships, general interpersonal communication, and so much else), it seems we have lost an ability to understand our relation to and opportunity within silent being. MRN’s resonance requires the spaces that it establishes and protects among its gestalt components. As one part or feature of the show “sounds,” other parts “sound” too without clutter, which is anything that “damps down or muffles” resonance” (Zwicky, 2014). This adds to the show’s overall sense of clarity. “The etymological root of ‘clarity’ means to shout, to resound; and resonance requires space. Complexity can accommodate space; complicatedness often cannot” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 64). MRN is well-suited to accommodate complexity given its protective, comforting places of space (both silence and music) which are interwoven throughout the program.

Surely, simplicity and space enhance gestalt comprehension required for clarity in resonance. Furthermore, simplicity and space contribute to the sense of something’s coherence. Moments of coherence contribute to our sense of meaning as humans. “We know ourselves as human beings in the taut stretch of the outfielder’s arm, in Fred
Astaire’s shoes, in the throat of anyone who is singing. In the feel of the major and minor keys, their sense” (Zwicky, 2014, S. 80). Audiences interact closely with these aspects of humanity on MRN – crafting and playing with items, engaging with and listening closely to one another, learning about the world around us and how processes work, admiring the talent of artists. Our overstimulated and fragmented society loses touch with its ability to fully relate to human moments of vivid expression, yet these are the same pieces that continue to be a part of a life fully lived, appreciated, and encountered. Mr. Rogers keeps that sentiment alive on his program, one that is filled with integrity on a naturally fragmented medium. Zwicky (2019) writes, “When a simple thing strikes us as beautiful, it is that thing’s integrity we have noticed. (It is frequently easier to notice the integrity of simple things than of complex things)” (p. 133). This rings true in this situation as well – MRN resounds with present-day audiences as beautiful, something needed now. We are reflecting on its integrity, its wholeness in an ever-splintering society. Mr. Rogers does this with repetitive gestures over time, which lend themselves also to a strong resonant clear quality and overall sense of coherence; viewers increasingly detect there is something to be gained from his repetitive consistency in programming, dialogue, gestures, and style. Zwicky (2019) posits, “Gestures occur in a context. Their meaning is a function of this context. The clarity of their resonance determines the coherence of their context” (p. 130). No part of an experience, in media or in interpersonal contexts, stands completely independent of its overall inscape.

On MRN, each part of the show is both core and periphery. It is whole. It points clearly to a way of knowing and being that resonates with viewers. Its coherence enacts a web of perception that is emotional and intellectual. Its lyric and space-laden
communicative modes bring a sense of wholeness that transcends beyond minute details. There is a sense that everything has its own rightful place within the program, and that seems critical to Mr. Rogers’s programmatic vision. In *Lyric Philosophy*, Zwicky (2014) expresses:

The intuition of coherence is what drives lyric vision of any sort – poetic, painterly, cinematic, mathematical. The delineation of coherence, if achieved, is integrative: expression that enacts and acknowledges a web of emotional, perceptual, and intellectual comprehension… Lyric coherence is not like the unity of systematic structures: its foundation is a heightened experience of detail, rather than the transcendence (excision) of detail. Details are at once centers and peripheries. That is: there is only center, there are only details. Lyric speaks of, and to, a wholeness that is not merely additive. (S. 65)

*MRN*’s intentional, thought-filled aesthetic is part of a lyric vision which activates emotional, perceptual, and intellectual response from viewers (varying from person to person and, of course, over time and context). Lyric communication, silence, and simple language ease viewers from our “logo-cratic,” language-driven world. Simplicity and lyric contain soothing, healing qualities, one of the first things many learn upon arrival in this world. Zwicky (2014) explains that tool-use (even through language) breeds “ontological alienation” so heavy that it requires reprieve; “lyric springs from the desire to recapture the intuited wholeness of a world that is not ordered by language, to heal the slash in the mind that is the capacity for language” (S. 124). Through music, we celebrate, mourn, pass the time, relax, cope – any number of expressive needs. The recognition that we cannot escape a linguistically ruled, communicatively oppressive
world “is the source of lyric’s poignancy” (S. 124). Therefore, humans respond intensely to lyric – for what it is attempting to recapture in our experience, a sense of wholeness about reality. The treatment of visual and auditory space colors our emotional experience of the world, and MRN does so in a way that gently treats worldly complexity with simplicity, space, music, and periods of silence, all of which contribute to its time-honored coherence.

**Powerful Gentleness**

Like so many of the components of resonance already considered (silence, space, openness), each one’s representation in popular discourse lacks the nuance of deeper meaning considered herein. The same is true for what I suggest is another important relevant component of resonance – gentleness. In *Power of Gentleness*, Anne Dufourmantelle (2018) considers the quality of gentleness as entrenched with often unappreciated power and transformative ability (though not for power and transformation’s sake). Though neither Rosa nor Zwicky consider gentleness, itself, explicitly in any of their works on resonance and gestalt insight, the concept naturally seems to fit in relation to previous descriptions of resonance and its “fellows.” In this section, I consider Dufourmantelle’s meditation on gentleness and its qualities, especially as they ignite resonant thought in viewing MRN over time. Both MRN and Mr. Rogers (as “character,” public figure, and fellow human) radiate gentleness in their communicative demeanor, both verbally and non-verbally. Consider the following thoughts on gentleness, and the present internal relations between MRN and gentleness become clear.

Dufourmantelle never directly names or defines gentleness; the entire work invites readers to allow its emotional imagery and extensive thought to conjure a coherent
impression of gentleness. She first calls gentleness an “enigma.” It accompanies experiences of birth and death, varies in its intensity, and is a “symbolic force” with a “transformative ability over things and beings,” making it a power (Dufourmantelle, 2018, p. 1). In this way, gentleness embodies a curious influence and can arise throughout many significant life moments. Another “definition” describes gentleness as “an active passivity that may become an extraordinary force of symbolic resistance and, as such, become central to both ethics and politics” (p. 5). Here, gentleness is endowed with a stronger force than what might typically accompany its ponderance. Steady ethical and political gentleness clearly abounds in MRN; such gentle concern upholds Mr. Rogers’s treatment of complex ethical and political issues. This is apparent in his conversation with his friend Jeff, part of a vulnerable population; his statements about reducing gasoline usage and encouragement of recycling; his celebration of the many types of artwork that exist; and the expressive individuality of each person as integral to our whole existence – our community of peoples who see the world differently yet live together.

Simplicity, as explored previously, is naturally connected with gentleness, and is a needed part of life. Dufourmantelle (2018) writes, “We perform acts of gentleness…We soften the end of life, its beginning. Gentleness is an enigma in its simplicity. It comes to recognize its own obviousness. As giver and receiver, it belongs just as much to touch as to thought” (p. 8). We intentionally inlay certain parts of life with gentleness, but it is needed just as integrally in between its beginnings and endings. Gentleness holds a dimension of thought; it does not only belong within the realm of touch or physicality. Mr. Rogers lays a gentle foundation for an era of children, knowing that its ripple effects
would lead into adult life, bringing gentleness alongside. As demonstrated by Mr. Rogers’s pedagogical approach, “Gentleness is what turns traumatic intrusion into creation. It is what, during the haunted night, offers light; during mourning, a beloved face; during the collapse of exile, the promise of a shore on which to stand” (Dufourmantelle, 2018, p. 84). Gentleness creates a bridge between trauma and creativity, healing. This sentiment is shared with viewers in the continual message that what is mentionable is manageable; even good results can rise out of bad circumstances. This is a thought which holds comforting promise into the adult world of uncertainty, even crisis.

The notion of “care” is insufficient to frame Mr. Rogers’s communicative mode. Gentleness intensifies the understanding of Mr. Rogers’s “meaningful expression of care” that he expresses to the Senate in 1969. Even as he speaks the phrase during the testimony, it is imbued with an urgent gentleness that is innately political and ethical. Beyond the philosophical notion of “care” alone, gentleness adds nuance to human need for connection with each other and the world as it manifests throughout MRN.

Dufourmantelle (2018) asks, “Is gentleness sufficient to heal?” She responds thereafter:

It equips itself with no power, no knowledge. Embracing the other’s vulnerability means that the subject cannot avoid recognizing his own fragility. This acceptance is a force; it makes gentleness a higher degree of compassion than simple care. To empathize, to ‘suffer with’ is to experience with the other what he feels, without giving in to it. (p. 13)

Mr. Rogers engages in a dialogic embrace of others’ vulnerability. When he asks viewers if they talk to anyone about love, what they think of change, how he felt when he lost his beloved dog, the embedded space and stillness of his posed questions leaves room for
gentleness – an awareness and “experiencing with” all the possible answers that exist with his viewers. He does not explode with emotion in reflecting on complex matters, yet still allows their depth to sit before him and viewers. Even the show’s plot structure and music are consistently full of gentleness. Dufourmantelle (2018) considers the relationship between gentleness, light, and physicality: “Gentleness has many affinities to light. Its radiation, its intensity, its transformations, its night. If it had to be pictured in space it would be a moving curve, however miniscule” (p. 20). Like the routine show structure’s gentle movements through similar segments in each episode, embedded with its original music along the way, gentleness walks alongside the story and viewer.

Childhood holds a unique relationship to gentleness in its powerful need for such a force. The theme recurs many times throughout Dufourmantelle’s reflections. She reflects on this relationship: “Gentleness shares with childhood a kind of natural community but also a power. It is the secret lining, or where the imaginary joins the real in a space that contains its own secret, making us feel an astonishment from which we can never entirely return” (p. 3). It is noteworthy that MRN chooses to always blend the real with the imaginary in each episode in a way that makes both realms safe and honored even while dealing with seemingly “adult” problems. This sentiment further expresses the importance, strength, and power of childhood over the trajectory of one’s life. Childhood is not “mawkish” or feeble. It waters the imagination and the real; it is the grounds for growing a healthy sense of wonder. A following question is posed: “How many children wait for [gentleness] their entire lives, how many lives wasted away for an utterance that has never come?” (Dufourmantelle, 2018, p. 33). Mr. Rogers offers gentle words daily, which very well might not come from elsewhere in some viewers’ lives. It is a safe, quiet
place on television, a reprieve from bombardment. Gentleness exists alongside despair, potentiality, change, growing, and living. Mr. Rogers seems to have never lost the perception and potentiality of gentleness that can be carried through life and living, not cut off after many aspects of childhood end. As Dufourmantelle (2018) reminds us, gentleness should never end, as the language taught to children is the same for the adult they grow into:

The world will not change languages for the adult that the child will become. The exquisite gentleness of one afternoon by the water is encapsulated forever in every experience with similar light. We would not survive childhood without gentleness because everything about childhood is so exposed, hyperacute, in a way violent and raw, that gentleness is its absolute prerequisite. (p. 95)

Childhood’s legacy is gentleness, its “secret name.” While it is not always treated as such, gentleness is a requirement for adult life, as it is a spiritual and emotional foundation of life. MRN communicates its messages with this awareness of the permanent need for gentleness. It establishes an emotional foundation complete with gentleness to contribute to a strong overall foundation for life. Audiences who remember this kind of communication know that it strongly influenced their childhood and thus their adult life, especially in such a tumultuous day and age.

Like many aspects of existence, neoliberal capitalism commodifies gentleness. Soft blankets, laundry detergents, business advice. Like the idea of a “self-brand” created from individual identity, genuine gentleness is beyond the physical dimensions of a Tide bottle. It cannot really be sold, yet its physical likeness is slapped onto packaging as though it could be. It can be difficult to recapture the essence of gentleness painted by
Dufourmantelle’s meditations. However, *MRN* provides one such mediated example that many living today can remember as exemplary of necessary gentleness. Dufourmantelle (2018) powerfully describes a difficult condition of modern life:

> We do not recover from our childhood without choosing life, consciously, a second time. Being born is not enough. The joys, the expectations, the troubles of childhood are events that compose us with an intensity that will set the tone for our entire existence. In that sense childhood is entirely ‘traumatic,’ not because it is tragic but because it reaches psychological realms within us primarily through perception and sensibility. And to be entirely there without remainder is rare and is becoming more rare as our scattered, fragmented self takes over, as absence to ourselves becomes the rule. (p. 96)

We must choose life twice. Childhood establishes the tone for that choice. The world breaks down further as more experience is packed into smaller increments of time; fragmentation ensues. Mr. Rogers, through his program, asks that his viewers make the second choice – keep going – and with well-being intact. He both teaches and asks viewers to listen to and to love themselves and one another, despite the hardships of this world. And in that place of gentleness, viewers can more safely, confidently say “Yes.”

Gentleness holds clear relation with resonance. We are affected by gentleness, especially in childhood yet throughout our entire lives. In addition to gentleness, gestalt perception, simplicity, space, and coherence interweave to lead one to the perception of resonance. Though life cannot be *all* resonant experiences, those that are shape an ability to relate to, live in, and experience the world. When we become more attuned to the nature of relations within the world, humanity and its home are nourished. Sensing the
interconnectedness of people, places, experiences, things, all, we make decisions that contribute toward better outcomes that this knowledge suggests. We act and correspond with a gentle, kind, patient communication with self and others, and even treat the environment and “things” within it with a deeper sense of appreciation or respect. This is the philosophical power of Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication,” one that wholly resonates today.

**Mr. Rogers’s Invitational Epistemology**

Whereas the previous section considers philosophical thought, surrounding resonance, that illuminates the present significance of “our kind of communication,” in this section, I revisit theoretical openings from chapter two with openings in invitational and epistemic rhetoric. With this inquiry’s releasing of invitational rhetoric from original critiques, such a theoretical approach points toward a rhetoric with an aim of dialogic understanding rather than traditional modes of persuasion. Additionally, once detached from disciplinary circulations, epistemic rhetoric is useful in thinking of communicative modes that indicate a way of knowing within the web of existing epistemologies (Barreto, 2014; Santos, 2014). With these concepts in mind, I consider the question: What does the world look like if we consider Mr. Rogers’s “kind of communication” as a way of knowing and being in the world? What is Mr. Rogers’s contribution to the ecology of knowledges? I propose that Mr. Rogers’s way of knowing the world could be described as an invitational epistemology. Simplicity and resonant perception are key components of this way of knowing. Additionally, it is “invitational” in its primary aim as a communicative mode that works through dialogue, in seeking-to-understand based on sharing, openness, and equality. Listening and auditory space are integral to an
invitational epistemology. Therefore, I consider aspects of Mr. Rogers’s invitational epistemology, with emphasis on the importance of a genuine, non-normative (by societal standards) approach to listening as vital to knowledge.

As Foss and Gill (1987) consider Disneyland’s knowledge creation through its rhetorical movements in their piece centering epistemic rhetoric, so too, can Mr. Rogers’s epistemological contribution to the world be surmised through evaluation of his rhetorical choices. Here, epistemologists and philosophers also help center why these rhetorical choices matter presently. To preface clearly, Mr. Rogers creates a rhetorically indicated, invitationally-oriented epistemology over the course of the *Neighborhood*’s existence.

The discernment of an invitational epistemology on *MRN* comes about through an understanding that rhetoric contains epistemic capacities (as explored in theoretical discussions surrounding epistemic rhetoric). In this way, a particular pedagogical approach (like that of Mr. Rogers’s) can teach a certain way of knowing and interacting with the world. Through Mr. Rogers’s pedagogy, he evokes insight of an invitational epistemology of which he demonstrates throughout his “kind of communication.” Understanding invitational rhetoric (alongside the onto-epistemological amendments considered in literature) is crucial for understanding the rhetorically-created invitational, listening-based epistemology that arises out of coherent reflection upon *MRN*. Therefore, invitational rhetoric can be understood as a type of epistemic rhetoric – a type of rhetoric that creates and sustains a knowledge. Mr. Rogers’s invitational epistemology demonstrates the practical applicability of epistemic rhetoric and is further substantiated by invitational rhetoric which helps characterize the rhetorical mode.
Resonant clarity is central to Mr. Rogers’s epistemology. It is not computational, analytical, or only for children. It is one accessible to all people and intended as such even though it was and is categorized as children’s television. Zwicky (2014), responding to a criticism that centering resonance and non-analytical forms of intelligence constitutes anti-intellectualism, emphasizes that what she is trying to illuminate in her approach to knowledge is “a way of thinking that in addition to using analysis can travel by extra-logical connections of images, similarities in overtone and structure; thought that is at once clear and resonant; in which clarity can assume the form of resonance” (S. 48). Mr. Rogers’s pedagogical approach incorporates other communicative forms that are not within the logico-linguistic realm, such as thorough consideration for its dimensionality of space, time, simplicity, coherence, and overall integrity. It does not cast out analytical thought but seeks to supplement and support it through components of resonance and resonant clarity. MRN’s kind of communication speaks to a way of knowing in the world grounded in healthy, emotional individual and collective well-being.

The program’s coherence and internal alignment bring to light a certain truth, or knowledge, or epistemology about what constitutes a robust, life-sustaining communication. Zwicky (2019) connects a sense of truth with a sense of coherence:

Truth is often understood as a correspondence between what is said or thought and states of affairs in the world. But it can also be understood as a kind of coherence. This view of truth has a long and distinguished philosophical lineage and is reflected in the English verb ‘to true,’ which means to bring something into alignment with other things. It is also reflected in the idea that we trust people of
integrity. On this way of understanding it, truth connotes wholeness. To grasp truth means to see how things hang together. (p. 90)

Such a way of knowing is sensitive to inconsistencies in perception, worldviews, perspectives, and can adapt or change in response to knowledge of inconsistency or lack of integrity. In this world, it can sometimes be difficult for many to discern between the variety of “truths” tossed into view across communicative channels; however, an enhanced gestalt perception, one that becomes attuned to how “things hang together” in a larger picture, can more firmly perceive coherent truths. This requires a balance in both analytic and non-analytic knowledge (gestalt capacities), a balance which our culture and individuated lifestyles does not easily support with a required strength (Zwicky, 2014, S. 60). A detection for coherence is integral to this proposed invitational epistemology.

MRN’s epistemology imparts a sense of interconnectedness which supersedes language. Western society undervalues the concept that meaning can arise out of non-verbal phenomenon. Western philosophical study commonly adapts “computational models of learning” in conjunction with “logico-linguistic analysis” in a way that “penetrate[s] deeply into the idea of what epistemology is” (Zwicky, 2019, p. 73). As a result, analogical modes of thought are considered dismissible. After such analyses and discussion herein, the ways in which non-verbal phenomenon contain meaning becomes increasingly evident.

Central to this epistemology is an orientation toward openness, similar to openness as an aspect of “our kind of communication,” and it inherently accepts emotionality as integral to knowledge. One of the ways discussed that Mr. Rogers does this is through dialogic questioning with the audience and with spaces or pauses built in,
as though he is listening for possible answers which he knows he cannot physically hear. In this way, the symbolic space is preserved for any number of possible answers to emerge from the vast unique contexts each viewer brings before the television. Fiumara (1995) remarks on the “perplexing” nature of talking about “knowledge” as separate from “the experiences of joy and pain” (p. 46). In that sense, she reflects that when kept separate, “knowledge would thus come to be restricted to a minimal sphere of human functioning, with hardly any relevance to the live complexity of the knowing person” (Fiumara, 1995, p. 46). Knowledge is intricately interwoven with experiences of joy, pain, and every human emotional experience above and in between; therefore, an epistemology that legitimates emotion’s role in knowledge is vital to our cognitive health and justice, and it is one that the *Neighborhood* reveals.

Mr. Rogers’s rhetorical choices point to a communicative philosophy and epistemology which allows closeness and openness to the complexity of life in the simplest manner. As the *Neighborhood* “epistemologist in a cardigan” (Zelevansky, 2004), his way of communicating demonstrates a philosophy and way of knowing that is for everyone, and that he is no “better” for living it out. As Fiumara (1995) recognizes: “We sometimes raise our eyes towards philosophers with a feeling almost of reverence or inadequacy” (p. 48). There is danger in over-idealizing our greatest or most admirable thinkers and figures, and Mr. Rogers removes room for this idealism or distance between himself and his listeners. In many instances, it appears that the *philo* in “philosophy” is lost. “It almost seems that knowledge forms part of an epistemic horizon that is saturated with a sort of tacit fury that only rarely and with difficulty can be scanned according to authentic dialogic methods” (Fiumara, 1995, p. 109). The dominant rhetorical and
epistemological mode is not oriented toward openness and invitation; in fact, this
“epistemic horizon” contains anger and defensiveness at what constitutes “knowledge” in
a seeming race for who can be the “most right” rather than know or grow together in
community. When the love for knowledge and others erodes, anger becomes the defining
characteristic in communication, and any attempts at such understanding become closed,
disappearing at the horizon. *MRN* teaches a loving epistemology and philosophy that can
be planted in childhood for lifelong harvest.

Mr. Rogers’s invitational epistemology fosters gentleness, which requires genuine
listening and therefore allows people to affect and be affected by others. Dufourmantelle
(2018) comments on the epistemic capacity of gentleness:

> Gentleness is primarily an intelligence, one that carries life, that saves and enhances it. Because it demonstrates a relationship to the world that sublimes astonishment, possible violence, capture, and pure compliance out of fear, it may alter everything and every being. It is an understanding of the relationship with the other, and tenderness is the epitome of this relationship. (p. 14)

Through and through, Mr. Rogers’s epistemic position instructs listeners toward a life
lived from gentleness, which is crucial for living, growing, and listening well. It makes space for others so that each individual may live and be more fully themselves while in relation to others.

In all, *MRN* invites audiences to live in the interconnectedness of things as if this quality were prerequisite for all subsequent knowledge. Gentleness exists in the liminal space between the spiritual and material world. Dufourmantelle expresses this sentiment with grace: “[Gentleness] sews the world together like a poem that pulls back the folds of
reality but without reconciling them” (2018, p. 69). Through Mr. Rogers’s way of knowing, a more poetic ontology opens to those who listen and affects their relations with other humans and nonhuman beings in the world. As Rosa (2019) reminds readers, daily life is often lived in a liminal state between fullness, resonance, and alienation – between hills and valleys. Invoking a “Mr. Rogers epistemology” invites readers and viewers into understanding and perceiving the world such that things in it inspire joy and resonance without a need for acceleration or more and more exceptional experience. We witness this perspective unfold as we watch a grown adult feel satisfied and content after making a toilet paper roll and tissue paper into a tree, as he watches fish swim in his tank, as he reflects on his role in recycling, or delights in the presence and gift of a neighbor. The greater our ability for sensitivity to resonance, the broader our sense of understanding complexity in the world. We cannot live only for resonance, but an enhanced sensitivity to resonance brings health to our relationship with the world. The space between hills and valleys can be lived in deeper sensitivity and appreciation for the miracle of the seemingly ordinary.

Mr. Rogers rhetorically invokes an invitational epistemology – a way of knowing that is based upon simplicity-loving, coherent resonance; non-analytical, and sometimes emotional, modes of thought; a gentle sense of the world’s interconnected relationality; and a safe, stable orientation toward openness which can handle complexity without fleeing. Though he is not physically present to express these epistemological tenants, they are reasonably garnered from repetitive viewings of MRN. A central component of this epistemology to be explored is its “invitational” nature, which grounds this way of
knowing as based in dialogue and listening in a way that runs much deeper than common considerations of such communicative modes generally acknowledge.

The Centrality of Listening Space

Listening lives in the heart of an invitational epistemology. Listening is crucial to open dialogic communication and thus steadies the foundation for understanding an invitational epistemology. Listening is commonly misunderstood. It is treated like a stamina sport, which can reduce the process to a deluge of cognitive violence. Fiumara (1995) considers what genuine listening looks like in practical action. She suggests that, first, what listening is not must be understood – the most deceiving idea of which believes that “listening is something imposed by the holders of standard rationality upon those who cannot or should not speak” (Fiumara, 1995, pp. 93-94). Though genuine listening can be a tiring process, it should not lead to frustrated “forced feeding, hypnotic induction or epistemic violence” (p. 94), as is built into the banking model of education (Freire, 1996). Given the significance of listening in a disposition out of invitational rhetoric (and subsequently, an epistemology), in this section, I briefly review the central tenants of invitational rhetoric as they relate to Mr. Rogers’s communicative mode. Then, I discuss the philosophical significance of listening as key to an invitational epistemology like that which is demonstrated by Mr. Rogers.

Invitational rhetoric proves useful in understanding MRN’s significance especially given its theoretical capacity for highlighting rhetorical choices which reach toward broadened understanding (or knowledges) of the self and others through genuine dialogue and contemplation. Mr. Rogers’s rhetorical mode does not fit well any “traditional” definition of rhetoric as persuasion, especially when considered through invitational
rhetorical theory as a guiding lens. Invitational rhetoric accepts a listener in whatever state of being (emotional, physical, spiritual, and on) they might reside. It considers an interactant’s viewpoints wholly, allowing them to be received unimpeded by the receiver’s ego as much as possible. As described in invitational theory, the rhetor protects the connection with their audience, creating a safe space, which are seen clearly throughout Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood of communication. Furthermore, an invitational rhetoric allows for an offering of and protected respective space for unique perspectives. Some of this occurs through Mr. Rogers’s facilitation (such as when he speaks with certain friends and neighbors and demonstrates an invitational conversation as he does with Jeff Erlanger), and other times it occurs in the off-screen space between viewer and television (as in asking open-ended questions that can be reflected upon in the privacy and relative comfort of one’s mind and home). *MRN*’s slow pacing allows space for thought-work to arise surrounding the explored themes and ideas without judgment. Mr. Rogers’s pedagogical intentionality across *MRN*’s unfolding works rhetorically to protect a space for inviting viewer reflection on emotional development and lessons. As invitational rhetoric is a communicative mode based on the goal of dialogic, relational understanding, it is reliant upon a wider conceptualization of listening.

Though Mr. Rogers cannot physically hear each viewer watching through the television, he possesses an ability to create perception that he is listening and sympathizing with each child in a demonstration of understanding. In this way, he creates a listening space for his television audience as he reassuringly and consistently invites their trust from start to finish of each episode. The listening space that is planted grows
both between the television and the viewer but also within the viewer. Such reflective
space becomes a self-perpetuated garden for dialogue with the self and others.

Mr. Rogers holds profound regard for the serious, gentle power of listening. In
*The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, Gemma Corradi Fiumara
explores the philosophical roots and evolution of listening as a communicative concept.
She introduces her work by comparing our conception of *logos* with *legein*, which has
historical meanings like to “shelter,” “gather,” “keep,” or “receive” (Fiumara, 1995, p. 1).
*Legein*’s “simple connotation” is “laying” or “letting-lie-together-before,” which at first
sounds strange, though understandably so as the present logocentric linguistic mode
dominates the collective ability to think of a different approach or an additional key
aspect of communication (Fiumara, 1995, p. 7). Without the cultural legitimation of
*legein* passed down similarly alongside *logos*, language’s capacity to reflect the entirety
of the communication process is reduced by half, as the capacity for listening is
disproportionately represented within our inherited dominantly logocentric
communicative legacy. In other words, there is a vital depth missing from our
communication process. In this way, knowledge centered around *logos* alone lends itself
to arrogance. Though it may sound obvious, listening lives on the other side of the
communicative coin from speaking, but it requires a more serious integration and
reflection on our part.

What does a deeper philosophical consideration of listening contain? In many
communicative scenarios, we tend to rely on expression and speaking rather than being
quiet and leaving room for space – for something to be said and settle in its integrity
hearing is meaningful, it has to be embedded in an openness where what is said might be heard even if it threatens to break the order of the known world for those who listen” (p. 80). Here, openness arises as critical to listening once again. One who is listening well must be open to their worldview to shift, change, evolve as they interact with others – to receive someone else’s thought-world while allowing it to remain intact, undamaged by their own ego’s intrusion. Fiumara (1995) says, “Listening as de-stitution [as opposed to in-stitution] of the defining, dictating nature of our encompassing logic is essential to the life of thought so that it may develop in a living syntax of reciprocities” (p. 21). Listening breaks down epistemological domination and communicative modes that reify such domination and subsequent stagnancy or recirculation of formulaic thought processes. Genuine listening allows already-dynamic knowledge to live, grow, and change within a listener, fostering dialogic reciprocity with others; therein, one can affect and be affected by the world around them.

Listening is a taken-for-granted aspect of human communication. As resonance requires space, so does genuine listening. Silence exists in contrast to constant worldly noise and in opposition to inert knowledge. Fiumara (1995) reifies the need for silence in a commonplace setting of noisy “desolation.” She writes:

The problem, therefore, is that of creating sufficient silence to allow ourselves at least to hear the incessantrumbling of our cultural world – a machinery of thought that seems to have lost its original vitality as a result of its enormous success. No longer able to hear the noise it makes, we nevertheless recognize a desolation that is not so much the deprecated crisis of values as, possibly, their inert realization. (p. 25)
Retreating from the noise machine into silence, the realization emerges. What can truly be *heard* in our raucous, non-stop cultural machines? Social media, television, streaming, technology, applications, cell phones – constant connection, constant bombardment of language. Much thought falls inert in ongoing catastrophic equivalence. Fiumara (1995) promises the potentiality of silence: “The highest function of silence is revealed in the creation of a coexistential space which permits dialogue to come along” (p. 99). In open silence, space exists for understanding to arise within it and presents the other with hope that they might be listened to once again. On *MRN*, silent visual and auditory spaces demonstrate the requirement for true dialogue with the self and others. To be sure:

Silence… can be a very fertile way of relating, aimed at the inner integration and deepening of dialogue; from this point of view, silence rarely becomes an object of philosophical attention… [T]he creation of an empty space, or distance, within a dialogic relation might be the only way of letting the deeper meanings and implications of that relationship emerge. (Fiumara, 1995, pp. 102-103)

Some sense of distance and isolation is needed to appreciate and understand genuine dialogic communication. Silence is *not* an absence; rather, it allows beings in conversation to more fully attend to the present moment.

Self-awareness and self-listening are needed in an invitational epistemology. One responsibility of learning and knowing in the world is holding the ability to revisit the self and grow sustainably into its inner spaces. Through open questions and dialogue supported by televisual framing, Mr. Rogers asks his audience to engage in this process; in this way, it seems an invitational epistemology is one that centers and continually revisits self-knowledge and awareness. Fiumara (1995) emphasizes, again, what listening
is not: “Listening is not simply an activity of applied thinking in which, with a minimal amount of personal involvement, one occupies oneself with an object of study; it is…a procedure whose authentic advancement depends upon one’s ability to reenter one’s own self” (p. 115). Listening involves tending to a capacity for introspection and carefully watering it for life; it is not a linear process. This is one way in which MRN and an invitational epistemology centered on listening returns to consideration of hermeneutics. Listening to oneself and being able to return to the same emotional themes and issues over time allows space for growth in knowledge and understanding of self and world. The learning process moves in concentric circles, which grow larger around an existent core of knowledge, which can live, grow, and change with time and introspection.

Listening well to oneself and others plants seeds that affect society at large. An invitational epistemology, as all strands in the web of knowledge do, affects the world in which it emerges whether by ripples or tremors. In her book Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard, Jill Stauffer (2015) elaborates a larger picture of what deep-rooted emotional pedagogy becomes implicated in as part of a larger world system filled with an ethos of trauma, despair, and ethical loneliness. Ethical loneliness is “the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (p. 1). This happens to those who experience trauma and are cut off from social support – those facing persecution, violation, dehumanization, and other injustice from human beings and human-made systems which then demonstrate an inability to “properly hear [the affected’s] testimony – their claims about what they suffered and about what is now owed them – on their own terms” (p. 1). A capacity to listen well affects every being from micro- to macro-level of society. Genuine hearing and listening
pave paths of potential healing for those suffering the injustice of not being heard.

Stauffer (2015) states:

The self with a will to repair needs to be open to being interrupted, to hearing something other than what she expected. And that matters because some loneliness is made of a failure of hearing. Such failures may happen even in institutions designed for hearing: courts, archives of testimony, truth commissions… Human communication is fragile. (p. 70)

Poor conceptions of listening contribute not only to direct interpersonal suffering and loneliness but collectively as well since listening can fail throughout multiple societal levels and institutions. Genuine listening across levels requires an openness to hearing the unexpected without letting pre-formed answers intervene that indicate one already knows what one is about to hear. Here, space and silence are part of the solution to this need for openness.

There are several ways in which listening commonly fails. Stauffer (2015) names six primary ways that we witness hearing “insulation”: a sense of “mental paralysis” stemming from fear of listening; fear directed at one who needs to be heard; withdrawal; “a flood of awe and fear,” which keeps the other at a distance; a bombardment of facts that reify what one already knows in an attempt to “foreclose” the other; and a drowning, defensive “hyperemotionality” which blocks the other (p. 75). Throughout these blockages, a common solution arises through listening space – silence and openness, which do not bombard or barricade another being. The requirements for stronger, healthy listening are naturally vulnerable and necessitate communal work to communicate on such delicate grounds. Emotional pedagogy grounded in an invitational epistemology
establishes a deeper sense of listening than common perception considers. This is the strength of an invitational epistemology gathered from the *Neighborhood.*

Mr. Rogers appears within the Western paradigm of media education, the same that birthed the banking style of education. However, there is a dialogic quality to his pedagogical approach that is highly unlike that of the status quo during *MRN*’s run and even presently. In many ways, Mr. Rogers’s pedagogical style (borne out of his philosophical and epistemological standpoints) differs from the banking method, as he champions the individual in their value and uniqueness, presenting all beings as interconnected and related, with room to love each individual as part of the whole. Although Mr. Rogers’s pedagogy is likely not entirely considered liberating in the Freirean sense, Freire (1996) remarks that non-dominating pedagogy is one that sees humans as interrelated in an intermingled subjective and objective reality:

> Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people.
> Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it.

(p. 62)

Freire’s description of reality indicates a precursor to Rosa’s (2019) sociology of relationships to the world, the basis for resonance theory, which clearly relates to *MRN.* As Freire writes, Mr. Rogers’s pedagogy comes into view; he emphasizes reality made safe in the home and the imaginary, as well as inherent human interconnectivity and
relationality. Non-banking method pedagogy needs dialogue founded “upon love, humility, and faith” which allow dialogue to become “a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire, 1996, p. 72).

When considering *logos* missing its counterpart *legein* in listening’s philosophical legacy, we must ask, “[Is] listening… an… ancient ‘art’, a capacity that has gradually been lost in the noisy inflation of discourse or in the infestation of pseudo-symbolic language? Or conversely could it be the vital, eco-logical rationality of times to come?” (Fiumara, 1995, p. 9). I posit that while listening sometimes seems lost in the former, there are many signs that point to the latter. Genuine listening creates a trail toward post-abyssal thinking.

Mr. Rogers, through his *Neighborhood* creation, inspires awareness of an invitational epistemology – a way of knowing in the world that both points to the program’s ongoing popular significance and invites audiences toward its following on one threaded path to a healthier, stronger world – one with resilience bred out of dialogic, loving pedagogy rather than fear and trauma. Invitational rhetoric undergirds an invitational epistemology in its communicative goals aiming for understanding and connection among and between beings. An invitational epistemology promotes knowing the world through resonant relations, coherence, a knowledge of interconnected relationality among human and nonhuman beings, gentleness, an openness which protects life’s complexity, and most of all, an invitational foundation which centers genuine *listening* with a safeguarded sense of *legein*. *MRN*’s invitational epistemology provides hope from within the Western educational paradigm; its potentiality bears fruit in hopeful
conversation with epistemologies surrounding other paradigms and thought-worlds, a
dialogue for which many non-Western and Western thinkers have expressed a need.

**Can We Live Together?: Hope Within the Ecology of Knowledges**

*Mister Rogers’s Neighborhood* positions itself pedagogically from within the
Western paradigm but outside of the commonplace banking method of education. The
invitational epistemology that the program evokes brings promise when placed in
necessary conversation with non-Western and Western epistemologies, which are focused
on international cooperation, dialogue, and understanding channeled into the bettering of
our world. In this section, I briefly review thoughts from Indigenous, decolonial, and
other non-Western and Western thinkers which indicate the need for epistemologies in
dialogue with one another, based around an additional urgency for genuine listening,
openness, and a strengthened appreciation for our interrelation to each other. An
invitational epistemology inspired by Mr. Rogers is only one such representation of a
hopeful Western epistemology.

Though there are multiple realms of thought that enrich the epistemology
contributed by *MRN*, Indigenous thought, in particular, as one of the arguably most
oppressed and vulnerable groups around the world, continually circles back to the issue
of how we might *all* live together within our planetary home. As conversation
surrounding colonization and decolonization are increasingly brought to attention,
Indigenous scholarship frequently ponders the manifestation of a world different from
what is, to some, a status quo, but to many others, an extreme imposition – the
destruction of ways of knowing and being which existed long before projects of
colonization began. To be clear, decolonization is not to be misunderstood as simply an
academic arena for theory and thought but an active movement which has supplementary support in the academic realm. The “Indigenous Research Agenda” has four primary directions – healing, mobilization, decolonization, and transformation – each of which occurs across societal spectra from the socio-political to the physical and spiritual toward a different life for collective humanity (Smith, 2012). Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication is one from the Western paradigm, as detailed throughout this discussion that seems to reach in solidarity toward these efforts.

Many thinkers cast light onto the need for interaction among listening pedagogies, epistemologies, and philosophies. Rosa (2019) asserts that dialogue with non-European traditions is the only way to “gain a sense of the diversity… and contingency of potential axes of resonance, and only through such dialogue can we also come to recognize the blind – or, rather, deaf and dumb – spots of Western relations of reification” (p. 453). Decolonial scholar Enrique Dussel (2019) writes in *Pedagogics of Liberation: A Latin American Philosophy of Education* on the necessity for a just epistemology which echoes out from a communal and collective center. Dussel’s (2019) *Pedagogics* aims to achieve: a transmodern culture where intercultural dialogue can educate a new generation, and create a pluri-versal worldliness (not Eurocentrically uni-versal), one that is epistemologically decolonized: in a word, a culture that respects the existing distinction of the diversity within every community of Humanity. (p. 41)

Dussel’s and Rosa’s thoughts clearly speak to each other. Dussel calls for growing awareness and engagement with epistemologies branching beyond dominant Eurocentric thought, leading to a culture that holds space for plurality in ways of knowing and a self-reflective ability around Western thought’s power and limitations. Grande (2004) hopes
that her *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* contributes to the “decolonial imaginary,” a dream-space in which “Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples will work in solidarity to envision a way of life free of exploitation and replete with spirit” (p. 243). She invites “scholars, educators, and students to exercise critical consciousness at the same time they recognize that the world of knowledge far exceeds our ability to know” (p. 243). Grande asks us to realize the principle of incompleteness about knowledge (Santos, 2014). Despite what cannot be known, we can know with certainty that we are implicated in a common lifeworld which necessitates respect, concern, care, and gentleness.

Cartesian dualism affects perception of individualist versus collective societies. Reality proves increasingly more complex than such a reductive dichotomy. Smith (2012) clarifies that the highly individualized “Western psychological self” does not directly translate to “a group consciousness as it is centered in many colonized societies” (p. 77). She argues that Westerners do not have a readily available understanding for what it means to perceive life as part of a group while still retaining the importance of individuals. I pose *MRN* as one such example that might be usefully illustrative for Western conceptualization of collective living which does not reduce individuality. In the *Neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers is clearly interconnected to neighbors each day; his neighbors are a significant part of his life in the world he presents to viewers. They live amongst each other, working to support, have community with, and learn and grow with each other. However, Mr. Rogers consistently refrains each individual’s importance – that there is no one else like them and they can be accepted and loved exactly as they are.
Here is a communicative mode closer in balance between individuated and collective thinking arising out of the Western paradigm.

It must be emphasized that Indigenous epistemologies do not exist for appropriation and theorization. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith (2012) remarks: “Indigenous knowledge extends beyond the environment… it has value and principles about human behavior and ethics, about relationships, about wellness and leading a good life. Knowledge has beauty and can make the world beautiful if used in a good way” (p. 161). However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) explicitly and simply state: decolonization [stemming from Indigenous thought] is not a metaphor. Smith (2012) explains that “Western fascination with New Age spiritual meanings” leads their belief systems and epistemologies to be “available, yet again, for further mining and exploitation” (p. 6). Smith (2012) further emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and respect to “underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity. Through respect the place of everyone and everything in the universe is kept in balance and harmony” (p. 125). It is my hope that this work is not interpreted with any such disrespect. Indigenous thought, theory, and belief systems are a widely diverse, polyphonic ecology within ecologies, and there is not space enough within the realm of this inquiry to give each the space and depth required for a more complete consideration. It is important to remember that the primary imperative of decolonial thought and decolonization as an active movement requires the repatriation of land to Indigenous peoples from which it was stolen. With these thoughts in mind, this section is admittedly too brief for the potential length and breadth of conversation to be had surrounding the necessity for dialogue amongst the ecology of knowledges. I propose that an invitational
epistemology as practiced and taught on MRN could be useful in working toward a greater understanding of the multiplicity within the ecology of knowledges. Such an epistemology easily fits within the realm of lyric philosophy for “[p]hilosophy might assume lyric form… when philosophy attempts to give voice to an ecology of experience” (Zwicky, 2014, S. 68). Many Indigenous scholars, as evidenced, express the imperative for post-abyssal thought which does not hold knowledge dangerously close to a precipice of cognitive injustice as it does now. Knowledges must simultaneously work with other epistemologies towards collaboration on a better world for all beings. While Mr. Rogers does not explicitly state this as a philosophical goal, his listening-based, gentle, resonant, coherent, respectful communicative mode reaches out in openness with other ways of being and knowing within our world.
CHAPTER SIX: Concluding Thoughts

It would be pointless to hope for universal enlightenment; we need to remember that even the saints could not sustain it... What we can do is respect lyric intelligence, strengthen and cultivate it as an instrument of discernment; we can use it to sense shapes emerging in the swirl of cultural change and disintegration, and to honour the individuals and landscapes that are dying; and we must use it to remind ourselves that, however dark the times, there is always cause for celebration and joy. This being, this one – and this, and this, and this! The extraordinary music of existence, which, as long as there is something rather than nothing, sounds through each of us.

- Jan Zwicky
_The Experience of Meaning_ (2019)

In a 1994 interview, Fred Rogers reflected on his gratitude for those people in his life who “allowed [him] to have some silence.” He continued, “I don’t think we get that gift very much anymore. I’m very concerned that our society is much more interested in information than wonder. In noise rather than silence” (Rose, 2016, 2:10). So vast are the rhetorical and philosophical realms that one could spend time exploring them alongside _Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood_ likely for a lifetime. However, Fiumara (1995) makes an obligatory point: “[P]aradoxically, the freedom to stop philosophizing is the same freedom that allows us to continue listening – to ourselves and to others” (p. 111). Agamben (2009) reifies this thought: “Whenever we interpret and develop the text of an author… there comes a moment when we are aware of our inability to proceed any further without contravening the most elementary rules of hermeneutics” (p. 13). At some point, time comes to put the mind’s metaphorical “pen” down and allow space, silence, and openness for listening once again. More life must be lived, and more thought considered to allow the observation and discussion herein to continue in respectful exploration, sustainable growth, and regard for both what cannot be known at this point
in time and what can ultimately never be known. Mr. Rogers continues later in the aforementioned interview: “Real revelation comes through silence” (Rose, 2016, 11:02).

This inquiry originally grew out of interest in Mr. Rogers’s six-minute Senate testimony from 1969. I was fascinated by the powerful rhetorical movements of the interaction and that a certain approach to communication could lead to such benevolent legitimation of emotionality in pedagogy and media. The exchange between soft-spoken Mr. Rogers and the preemptively antagonistic Senator Pastore rapidly transformed into a gentle, slow, and fruitful conversation which ultimately benefitted generations of children and left a highly influential legacy with its audiences of all ages. I was repeatedly drawn back to the phrase “our kind of communication,” which is what Senator Pastore and the federal government ultimately agreed to fund as Mr. Rogers described its use on the program and actively demonstrated it throughout the testimony. It quickly became apparent that I wanted to explore this communicative mode further and why it still makes appearances today across media platforms. In reading and discussion, the philosophical nature of these questions arose out of texts and were emphasized by observation of our current society which further contextualizes MRN’s significance presently.

The theories discussed herein can begin to shed light on such a Mr. Rogers “phenomenon.” Of course, I must acknowledge that not everyone likes, enjoys, or even appreciates Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. There are certainly those who may not have trusted Rogers or seen him as “real.” Perhaps there are those who could be too hurt to openly receive the kind of messaging he conveyed. While this is a worthwhile consideration, this inquiry sought to examine what made his messaging resonant for the millions of American viewers who were receptive and led the way for its continued
production over such a considerable timespan. Who is the “we” in the review of *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* that states: “This is what we need right now”? In the context, it seems the reviewer is speaking to the American cinematic public which would conceivably be most Americans, but this does not mean a universal audience exists. However, the nature of the box office numbers that arose when *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* came out in 2018 is certainly not insignificant. People are still watching, reliving, and relishing Fred Rogers’s “kind of communication.”

Within this rhetorical and philosophical study, I explored literature pertaining to mass media theory, public television, rhetorical televisual framing, invitational rhetoric, epistemic rhetoric, and a reframing of epistemology toward understanding of an ecology of knowledges, composed of plural epistemologies. In consideration of invitational and epistemic rhetoric, I devoted space to consideration of these theories within their disciplinary roots before incorporating onto-epistemological considerations of such theories in order to open them up for dialogue with a wider variety of philosophical and epistemological works in an attempt to shed the weighted theories of their overburdened contextualization. After a thorough literature review, I explored methodological conversations surrounding ethical close reading and post-qualitative inquiry in order to provide a foundation for my analysis of selected episodes. Through multiple analytical readings, four primary overarching observations became apparent. From six selections, I gathered commonalities among each episode’s overarching plot and segment structure, rhetorical televisual framing, embodiment of music and sound, and simple treatment of language despite the complexity of interwoven themes. Ultimately, I found “our kind of communication” to manifest as profoundly and consistently intentional and complex
despite its slow-paced, simple, and quiet visual and auditory mannerisms. These characteristics arose throughout analysis of the program’s *inscape* (Zwicky, 2019). *MRN*’s “kind of communication” proves resoundingly unique to mainstream television while pointing to a deeper philosophical need across humanity – for children or adults, and for this reason, it remains significant to this day.

*Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* still lingers in our collective consciousness for many reasons. In America, the highest office in our land has been shaken to its axiological core to the point of absurdity and instantaneous reaction, back-to-back, scandal after scandal. Interpersonally, many of us are not taught to deal with our emotional precarity and vulnerable human needs. Indeed, in our perceived subjective and objective “worlds,” sometimes it feels as though we are waiting on the world to collapse. Mr. Rogers told us it was okay, to look for the helpers, that he liked us just the way we are, and that what is mentionable is manageable. Even when the world feels on the brink, something in that message keeps our feet firmly on the ground. At the simplest level, it might be said that people appreciate encouraging, emotionally supportive messages in moments of both small- and large-scale hardships. After more reading and reflection, it is clear that there is a deeper phenomenon occurring, and with the help of several Western and non-Western philosophers and other scholars, we can establish a more vivid understanding of *MRN*’s ongoing significance. Zwicky (2019) reminds us that our culture is one “in which skepticism about anything that might be termed ‘spiritual insight’ runs high” in a world where dominating epistemological conceptions about the nature of thought and knowledge are prevalent. When we come to acknowledge “that poetry and philosophy overlap in crucial ways, [we can see that] their area of intersection involves a
particular kind of ontological awareness” (p. 147). Resonance theory illuminates this occurrence well as it attends to the interconnected internal relations of society and our relationships to the larger world. Resonance unfolds as sensitivity to gestalt comprehension increases and simplicity, space, coherence, and gentleness coincide. A broad understanding of resonance theory assists the development of a shifting ontological awareness – a poeticism begins to embrace existence. Our dominant modes of thought are limiting, and broadening our appreciation of what constitutes thought and awareness is necessary for working toward a better world where it is common knowledge that human and nonhuman beings are parts of the same resonant whole.

Through its Neighborhood spaces and beloved host, MRN invokes an invitational epistemology which centers sensitivity to resonance and its components, dialogic communication in aim of greater understanding, and especially genuine listening grounded with a deep sense of legein. Rosa (2019) ends his over four-hundred page treatise on resonance with a crucial reminder: “A better world is possible, and it can be recognized by its central criterion, which is no longer domination and control, but listening and responding” (p. 459, emphasis in original). His extended consideration of resonance theory and relations to the world ends with the most important facet of a better world – listening and responding, expanded beyond mainstream understandings of what is really an incomplete, underdeveloped conceptualization of communicative processes. Dominant, Eurocentric, Western-originating epistemology leads to an unjust epistemology spread around the world through conquests of colonization. We can no longer relate integrally to the world we live in, so despite science that indicates a need for changed ways, humans are still largely unable to adapt because of persistent, deep-rooted
subscription to fragmented, authoritative modes of thought. Zwicky (2019) calls technocracy and the “technocratic ideal” not only an “ecological disaster but an epistemological mistake” (p. 142). Herein lies hope for an MRN-style invitational epistemology from within the Western paradigm but not of the Western paradigm. Epistemeologies in dialogue within the web of knowledges can come to realize that they are constituted by and against each other, with a need for smoother edges and hopefully dissolution between categorical-thought boundaries.

Attunement to resonant experience, growing appreciation for relationality, and sensitivity toward the existence of plural epistemologies are vital needs for a healthier world and humanity, and each serve as illuminating takeaways from this inquiry. Future works should continue consideration of resonance theory in conversation with other aspects of our shared reality – from both within the mediated realm and most certainly beyond. A framework of plural epistemologies could serve as a fruitful foundation for future studies seeking to connect thoughts dialogically within the web for increased understanding amongst beings. As Rosa (2019) notes in Resonance, the relationship between power and resonance has not yet been written; therefore, there is much to be said for equality of access to healthy axes of resonance and the mass spread of alienation.

In the context of this inquiry, resonance theory is useful for understanding MRN’s present-day nostalgia and meaning. It is additionally worth mentioning that many of the central philosophical concepts discussed herein are relatively new (published in 2018 or after) and therefore space is needed to allow their insights to plant and settle as further inquiry and insight blossom from their theoretical seeds. Ultimately, while I consider a series of selected MRN episodes, I do not carry out a “traditional” content analysis, but I
center the selections herein to draw attention to overarching themes and patterns. In this way, most episodes of MRN would point to a similar coherence and agreement with the philosophical considerations gathered. Future research could focus specifically on the use of language or filmic aspects of a series of MRN episodes; however, I choose such an “open” approach in order to highlight the overarching rhetorical patterns on MRN to illuminate their resonant capacity as a programmatic whole.

There are magnificent forces at play within “our kind of communication.” Certainly, Mr. Rogers is gentle yet strikingly intentional in his rhetorical presence and communication choices, as he has clearly reified in interviews, in writing, and pieced delicately throughout the spaces of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood during his lifetime. As Mr. Rogers’s kind of communication gives voice to a universe of “things” around him, his use of rhetoric points to one way of knowing within a web of ways of knowing and relating to the world and others. Mr. Rogers’s communication is one that speaks with resonance to an American culture steeped in ethical, epistemological, and ontological confusion and crises, especially in 2020, when such crises directly and imminently impact the shaping of humanity’s future. As I conclude this writing in March 2020, the world is entering an unprecedented global necessity for social distancing and self-isolation in order to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) across the population, especially to our most vulnerable neighbors. Language again fails to express reality. Society is being forced to slow down, to reconsider what matters most at this time of profound crisis. People around the world are drawn into directly facing socio-economic, political, financial, emotional, and generalized precarity. It was already here, built into the fragmentation of accelerated society, providing illusory comforts of
individualized control. A coherent truth emerges – we are all connected, for better and for worse. We cannot predict exactly what the coming months hold, but already four times this day I have seen people share a commonly circulated quote from Fred Rogers: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Yes, these are the kind of comforting words that are needed right now. They always reappear in times of crises, spaced decreasingly far apart in time. However, I would like to conclude by providing my own beloved quote from Fred which has deeply resonated with me in the past and especially in this moment, now:

   Our world hangs like a magnificent jewel in the vastness of space. Every one of us is a part of that jewel. A facet of that jewel. And in the perspective of infinity, our differences are infinitesimal. We are intimately related. May we never even pretend that we are not. (Dartmouth Office of Communications, 2018)

I cannot predict what Mr. Rogers might have to say or add during such unsettling times. However, I imagine the message would not deviate far from his already lifelong, coherent truth – we are all connected to our neighbors, seen and unseen, human and nonhuman. I imagine he would desire a world where our lived reality and world systems more fully reflected this truth. A world where this truth permeated our common discourse and our silence. Perhaps he would find hope in those who are publicly advocating for and drawing attention to this truth in seriousness but in love. He would likely ask you to take sixty seconds to think about those who have helped make you who you are today and have helped you get here. Love and listen to yourself and one another. We are part of each other.
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