

Part 1: Introduction with Suzanne Ross

Suzanne Ross

It's my pleasure to welcome all of you to this special Raven Foundation event and I'd especially like to welcome our panelists who have given so generously of their time. A warm welcome also to our partners, the members of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. I'll be your host for our virtual Launch Party – I'm Suzanne Ross, co-founder and Executive Director of the Raven Foundation and I am honored to be currently serving on the COV&R Board with officers Martha Reineke and Nicholas Wandinger. Again, welcome to all those who are attending live or via the recording – we're delighted you chose to spend this time with us.

We have a marvelous program planned for you to respond to two short films produced by Raven filmmaker Billy Price. They are the first two of a four-part series called, *Mimetic Invitations*. We're going to watch the two videos together. The first, called the *Problem is the Solution*, has been available already but the second is being premiered tonight and we are very excited for you to see and experience *Dance Mimetic* for the first time. And of course, we'll hear from Billy and our three distinguished panelists followed by a time of conversation sparked by your questions and comments posted in the Q&A.

We're going to focus our conversation on a topic that's important for both Raven and COV&R: how can we more effectively reach new audiences for mimetic theory? This question is important for the future growth and sustainability of both our organizations. Since the founding of COV&R in 1990, its members have created a vast library of introductory materials, mostly in academic books and papers that has worked well to raise awareness of mimetic theory across the humanities and social sciences.

Our next step, I believe, is to build on this foundation to extend our reach beyond the walls of academia. And seeing how many of you rsvp'd to join this conversation indicates just how ready we are to be more intentional about engaging people where they are these days, online, in social media, and in video and podcast formats. It's not that the written word is dead, not by any means. But if we can begin with what we know is true about humans – that before we are cognitive we are mimetic, we may discover new and effective avenues for engaging newcomers in the transformative power of the mimetic insights.

Raven has been working to engage new audiences since our founding in 2007, mostly through blogs, reviews and interviews. When we were brainstorming last year at a staff meeting, Billy suggested that we turn to the arts for inspiration. He decided to challenge himself to use wonder, beauty, film and dance to create a video *invitation* as opposed to an *explanation*. We believe the result demonstrates the power of art to overcome cognitive and unconscious hurdles to engagement with mimetic insights which can benefit both Raven and COV&R.

I don't need to tell you why the world needs those insights today – the news is filled with problems made more difficult by a failure to comprehend the truth about desire, reciprocity,

and violence. But friends, I believe we are ready for this moment. The mimetic theory community is uniquely positioned to make meaningful contributions to the search for solutions to the world's most pressing problems. As Martie wrote in her email invitation to this event, these short films have a marvelous potential to spark our collective reflections on how we can meet this moment together.

We hope you find tonight engaging and meaningful. We are anxious to hear from you, so please do post your questions and comments in the chat room as they come to mind during the event. Even if we can't get to them all tonight, we welcome your feedback and ideas about how we can reach new audiences and contribute to the work of finding solutions to the problems facing the world today.

Without further ado, let's watch *The Problem is the Solution* after which we will hear responses from our first two panelists, Billy and Kevin Miller.

WATCH THE PROBLEM IS THE SOLUTION VIDEO

Part 2: William Price, III & Kevin Miller

Suzanne

We have been getting very positive feedback on this film and I hope you can understand why, after I saw a very rough version of it for the first time, I realized that we needed to celebrate it with our COV&R family.

So it's my pleasure to introduce fellow Raven William Price, III to you. If you are unfamiliar with the RF, briefly we share the nonviolent reading of Scripture and theology made possible by MT through blogs, podcasts and now video which has become a big part of our outreach to those who have been wounded by an exclusionary and judgmental Christianity.

Billy is a screenwriter, director, actor and creative director and he conceived, wrote, produced, directed and edited the two films we are engaging with tonight. I asked Billy to tell you about his concepts for the videos and his approach to sharing MT through the arts.

William (Billy) Price III

Thank you, Suzanne.

I think my remarks will be fairly extemporaneous and personal, and I think I could sum them all up with one word, which is gratitude. Discovering René Girard's thinking about mimetic theory, violence, sacrifice, good violence, has been a discovery that has unfolded over the years and continues to bear fruit and to provide me with a great deal of hope. I think it's very funny when people talk about René as somewhat pessimistic because he likes to talk about the apocalypse, because everything that he had to say strikes me as a gift of hope.

And I find the work of entering into mimetic theory and seeing ourselves in mimetic theory and seeing our communities through this lens to be an incredible opportunity for peace in the world. I've always been really dissatisfied and bothered by those who revel in violence, whether they revel in violence because they're "bad guys" or because it's a video game or because it's good violence and God told the Israelites to do it. It has never sat well with me. And Girard has given an incredible insight and discipline and language for me to start to understand maybe what's really going on here. And maybe I'm just confirming my own biases, but as I pull that thread, I find more and more hope in that the dynamics at play that actually lend to this human propensity to violence are actually good things in that could we apprehend them better? Could we understand them better? They are the very tools that could lead us to deeper understanding, peace, and love.

And so to work on films that expand on these ideas, explore these ideas, and introduce people to these ideas is an experience of gratitude. It's an experience of great responsibility. I take it very seriously that what we are talking about is of dire importance and urgency, that it's a global story, that it's not satisfactory to see it as an academic, or European, or Christian, or white, or male enterprise, but that this is something that will require the insights of many people around the world and a great deal of collaboration.

So making these has been so joyful because it's been an experience of collaboration. Working with Ariel Clark, who's the choreographer and dancer you're going to see later tonight, was completely a collaboration. There's not a single movement she makes with her body that did not come from her and through conversation with me and her about mimetic theory. Our DP (Director of Photography), who just blends these pieces so beautifully, was deeply invested. Another Raven filmmaker, Samuel Sorich, was on set for all of it and was instrumental in helping me to draft and compose and edit these projects. I'm so grateful to be showing them. I'm grateful to have the opportunity to do this and I'm hopeful that what we are doing is just the very beginning, the very tip of the iceberg in terms of taking something that has been poured over, for good reason, in a very thoughtful academic circles and beginning to crack it open for those who may not have an entry point so far.

And I'm hopeful that film is a good medium for that. I believe it is a good medium for that. I think that the grammar and language of film lends itself to philosophy and to thoughtfulness and to the human experience, but also to an embodied experience, an emotional experience and even a transcendent spiritual experience. And so I think that it's very helpful to see video explainers, but I think that there's a lot available in developing a new sort of approach from taking filmmaking to mimetic theory, but also from taking mimetic theory to film. A lot of modern filmmaking follows a mythical sort of structure and so to start to sort of implicitly critique that and to develop that is actually really exciting and I feel arrogant to even hint at the idea that I would be critiquing many of the greatest films that have ever been made that are mythological, but I do think that we as people who have been gifted with mimetic theory have

something to offer to the film world in terms of understanding human story and human development and desire, especially.

So I feel like we're setting off on an adventure. I've been working on these really hard and I'm ready for a little bit of a rest and I'm happy to be celebrating the release tonight. But I also feel like we've just begun and we have so much more that we can do in telling stories and expounding on ideas and using film and art to open up and touch upon all the different facets of mimetic theory. And I believe that as we do that and as we learn and get better at that, it will only become more and more resonant to an audience who's hungry to learn about the alternative to desire run rampant and the alternative to essentially combative and conflictual feeling and thinking and desires a world at peace and in mutual appreciation and collaboration.

So that's my hope and these two videos are my very humble offering to begin that pathway. Thank you.

Suzanne

Thank you, Billy. And I'm wondering if you could just share sort of your overall concept because you came up with a four-video plan, right, for this sort of mimetic invitation concept. And if you could just take a few minutes to explain that concept of why invitation, why four, what are the four videos about?

Billy

Sure, I have seen some explainer infographic and video type things, and I felt like they were satisfactory, but not very exciting to me. And I didn't want to do another one because I think they're good, the ones that exist, but also because I was like, even if I were to marginally improve on them, which I don't know if I would, I don't see a multiplication of potential impact. And so I started to sort of think about that from a mimetic standpoint, like I took a mimetic viewpoint and I started to think, well, explanation is essentially fairly didactic and I would rather expose someone to mimetic theory through a format that's more essentially collaborative.

Film is at its best when it is in conversation with the audience, and that's probably a whole other conversation about what does that even mean that could have an hour and a half or more. But I believe that film is at its best, as an art form especially, not necessarily as pure entertainment, but as an art form. When it's not simply forcing feelings and thoughts onto an audience, but is creating a sort of field for that person to exist within it. And when it's finished, perhaps you have one that person say, "Well, I thought this person was terrible" and the other person say, "Oh, no, they were really good intention." And you have these different reactions and things.

So the four part concept to start exploring that was based on we do have to transmit some ideas, and so how do we disassemble and break down those ideas and, as often is talked about, there's the sort of nuts and bolts of mimetic theory as a behavior system. There's the scapegoat mechanism. And then there's, sort of, you can potentially talk about the reversal of mythical and

sacred storytelling that we see in the Judeo-Christian perspective. We could talk about apocalyptic thinking. We haven't even actually decided what where the fourth video wants to go. But we knew we definitely wanted to focus on an audience in mimetic dynamics and on a scapegoat dynamic. And it felt right to have a first video that is more heavy on language and starts to actually specifically point out these ideas and to hopefully communicate some urgency, and some relevance. Why now? Why should I care? What can this change? What impact could it have? These are questions that are always being implicitly asked in an environment like social media where content is constantly coming. And so there's a lot to listen to and there's a lot to ignore. And I felt that for this it was important that we stake our claim as that we're worthy of attention immediately.

And so it felt right to sort of speak to the audience, to sort of pull them in close enough to the idea, to give them some language, and to explain this is why it matters. And then from there, I think we can set out on more open ended pieces of art that explore and invite an audience to react to with a little bit of a common set of knowledge and language. Not nearly as much as you would get from reading a Girard book or from studying it for years in an academic setting, but just something. So hopefully that's going to be a good structure. And I'm really excited when they all get to sit together as a four part, and, you know, you can watch them episodically. I think that will be really great and we'll work towards that.

Suzanne

Wonderful, thanks so much, Billy. And now it's a real pleasure to welcome Kevin Miller to our conversation. Kevin is an amazingly talented man who has written novels, non-fiction books and comic books and written and directed feature films and documentaries. His documentary on universal salvation, *Hellbound!*, was the winner of the 2012 Raven Award for Excellence in Arts and Entertainment. In his 2020 documentary, *J.E.S.U.S.A.* Kevin seeks to untangle American Christianity from militant patriotism and is greatly helped by reading Scripture and Christian history through a mimetic lens. I asked Kevin to talk to us about how film as an art form is well-suited to creating an invitation to engagement with new ideas.

Kevin Miller

Thanks, and I'm starting my timer because I love the sound of my own voice, so I'm going to make sure I cut myself off. So if you hear the red alert from *Star Trek*, you'll know I'm 30 seconds away. But first of all, I want to say thank you so much to Suzanne and Keith Ross and Raven for just their support over the years. It's hard to believe it's getting close to a decade that we've known each other, but I'm very thankful for them. And Billy, I also want to say congratulations on the release of these films. I've been involved in premieres of my work before, so I know kind of the double-edged sword of that experience. It can be unnerving, but also exciting. And I want to say to everybody who just saw the films for the first time, I encourage you to watch them online. Nothing drives me crazier than bad audio. And I think Zoom has really compressed the audio. So you're not really getting the full experience. I think that's really going to hit you in the dance film, but I would encourage you to watch them online afterwards to get the full experience of the films.

So I want to talk to you just quickly about story as well as film. So I've been a filmmaker and an author for over two decades, but I still primarily view myself as a writer. That's what I started out doing and film kind of just became a way of doing that. And for pretty much as long as I've been a writer, I've also taught creative writing and screenwriting in particular. And it's kind of fun and fascinating to teach about something that you do for a living because it forces you to just ask some really fundamental questions about what it is that you do and why.

And so when I first began teaching about writing, I asked myself three main questions. Number one, what are stories? What function do they serve? And what do all great stories have in common? And I think there's two schools of thought on this. The first is that this idea that all the stories are like snowflakes, they're all completely different. And that's what makes them great is that they're all absolutely unique and totally unlike any other story in the world.

The second theory is that, yes, stories are like snowflakes, but in the sense that they all share the same fundamental elements. You probably grew up learning that no two snowflakes are alike, which is true on the surface. But at a structural level, all snowflakes are completely symmetrical and all snowflakes have six arms or points because of the way water molecules bond together. So snowflakes on the surface are very different, but structurally they're all the same. And I definitely fall into this latter group when it comes to understanding stories and what makes stories great. I think that the best stories all are great because they coalesce around the same structures, the same basic shapes. And I think that they do this out of necessity rather than choice on the part of the author. I think that no matter what story you're writing, eventually the story itself will shepherd you in a certain direction because of the nature of what a story is, so that idea of form follows function. So the function of a story ultimately dictates the form a story takes.

And I came to this conclusion after thinking about the work of people like Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung and all these guys who are, you know, recognizing these universal archetypes that you see across cultures and across time. Things like the Hero's Journey that you probably heard about in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. And what that tells me is that if cultures, very different cultures from around the world are all kind of like iron filings to a magnet, they're all finding the same structures. What's driving storytelling is not something in the environment, it's something that's inside of human beings that is coming out. So, the environment will have a very minimal influence on the surface of the stories, but structurally, it's something coming from inside.

So if we think about what stories are, what is their function, what are stories doing for us. We've been telling stories from the beginning of humankind and every year we spend billions of dollars creating films and TV shows and hundreds of hours binge watching them on Netflix. So when I tried to think about really what is a story and what is it doing, I reflected on the three act structure. I spent a lot of time as a screenwriter and that just is hammered into you, structure, structure, structure. You got to have three acts and everything is going to happen by page 10

and if this doesn't happen by page 25 and it's very rigidly structured. But why is that? Why do stories, for instance, have a beginning, a middle and an end. Why don't they have just a beginning and an end. What about that awful middle which everyone hates to write, which is the longest part of a story?

It may seem like a simple question, but it's not a simplistic question. But when I thought about the three act structure, I thought about something else that has three parts and that is a debate. A debate or an argument is going to involve three things. It's going to involve a thesis. It's going to involve an antithesis, and it's going to arrive at some form of a synthesis. So that roughly correlates to Act One, Act Two, Act Three. If you think about the characters in a story, you have a protagonist and his or her supporting cast, they represent a thesis, which is a statement, a statement of belief. They encounter an antagonist who has a very different belief. They wrestle, they engage in conflict and eventually the story arrives at some form of a synthesis.

Now, we tend to think that the good guy defeats the bad guy and everyone's happy. But I think the best stories are when the protagonist comes to recognize that the antagonist isn't just somebody that they are to defeat. Actually, the antagonist, one of their greatest roles is as teacher. And so rather than negate what the antagonist has to offer, the best thing that a protagonist can do is to come to understand what they're missing and to learn from that and to incorporate it into their point of view. So what a story ends up in is some kind of a conclusion that nobody, ideally not even the author, anticipated because the act of creating the story itself is a journey of discovery.

So the key point here, and this gets us to I think why mimetic theory is so helpful to understanding story is that the thesis and the antithesis both represent two parts of the truth. And so therefore, the protagonist and the antagonist are both unwilling to surrender because both of them have latched on to a part of the truth, so why should they have to surrender it? But they've also both made the same mistake, is that they've taken part of the truth and mistaken it for the whole truth. And so therefore they're trying to negate the other person. And that's why in a story, a character has got to be beaten and broken down to the point where they kind of finally come to the end of themselves and, for a brief moment in time, they become teachable. They realize that they don't have all the answers. They all along only had part of the answer and, in fact, the part that they really need the most may actually be from the person that they least want to learn from.

So in this battle to win out, you'll see the protagonist and the antagonist as they move forward into the depths of the film, they become increasingly similar. So they both reach the point essentially where they're willing to take life or surrender their life for the sake of a partial truth rather than submit to the lesson that the story's trying to teach them. And it happens over and over and over again. I know Billy said stories are of a mythic structure, but I think stories inherently have a mimetic structure. And I think that one of the tools we can do is to help people see that, to see that mimetic structure that is a natural thing happening in the

machinery of story. And then how does that relate to conflicts that we see in the rest of the world.

So, again, going back to the analogy of snowflakes, each story is going to appear very different on the surface. The *Avengers* is going to look very different from *Anne of Green Gables*, which is going to look very different from the TV show, *Mr Robot*, which I recommend you all watch. On the surface they're going to look very different, but what's going on under the surface is the same. So ultimately a story becomes a debate or an argument about what is the best way to live. We tend to argue about a pretty short list of things. I've broken it down to love, justice, freedom, and truth. And I could in another time tell you why I break it down to those four things. But that tends to be what we argue about the most.

And so to get to the key point here, though, is if stories are just arguments, why do we need stories? Why aren't we packing theaters every weekend to watch people debate? Why aren't people binge watching debates on Netflix? Well, because humans don't respond very well to bold propositions. In fact, we have an entire defense structure built up to prevent any new presuppositions from entering our brain. We are ready to ignore, minimize, diffuse, and destroy arguments that come against something that we already believe. We also tend to believe a lie about ourselves. We think that we're all rational beings, with the word rational defined is something akin to Mr. Spock's cold, objective logic. We think that we've arrived at our beliefs through this objective reasoning process. But the truth is, none of us have arrived at our core beliefs at this fashion, which is why we've become so passionate when we're threatened, when those beliefs are threatened. We arrive at our beliefs via an emotional path, through some sort of emotional experience that makes us susceptible to a change.

As Pascal said, the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. So if we arrived at our beliefs via an emotional path, what is the way out? Oh, man, (checking the time) I'm already at *Star Trek* here. If we came into our beliefs on an emotional path all the way out is going to be through an emotional journey as well. And this is why I think stories are so powerful. Stories are full of propositions, but those propositions are always wrapped in emotional experiences. And so it's almost like a Trojan horse. It's a way of bypassing our logical defenses and planting ideas in our mind. So I'm going to just skip ahead to the end.

This brings up one key question, though. Are our stories merely a form of propaganda? Because what is propaganda attempting to do? It attempts to wrap a proposition in an emotional package to make us be afraid, to somehow control us. But I think the difference between art and propaganda is that propaganda presupposes its conclusions and propaganda gains its power by suppressing alternative narratives. Art, on the other hand, stories, are a journey of discovery.

I've just completed my fifth novel and I always begin a novel with an outline. But there's always a stage in the process where I kind of let the characters take over because I always say they have better ideas than I do. And I take on the role of transcriber and recorder of what they're doing.

And eventually the story will reach a conclusion and I can almost walk away from it almost like I don't even know how it happened, but we got there.

And so I think that the story should be a journey of discovery for the writer as much as it is for the viewer and as much as it is for the characters in the story. And that's what separates it from propaganda, is that it begins with some ideas, but those ideas are held loosely and you almost leave it up to the story to help you understand the truth that the story contains. And so that kind of gets with what Billy is trying to do in his films or what he talked about is inviting the audience on a journey of discovery, engaging them in conversation, and seeing where it goes. So it's a much more open ended thing that gains power by exploring the counter narratives, not by hiding from them. And that's why you need an Act Two go so deep into the antithesis that there's a danger that the protagonist may go the way of the dark side, but something ultimately pulls them back. But when they do finally make that choice, we know it's a real choice because we knew that they could have gone another way.

And so I'm excited about what you're trying to do in terms of looking to these types of mediums, because I think that there's a natural fit with mimetic theory. And I think it's actually quite astounding and that's one of the things that makes mimetic theory so powerful to me, is looking at story after story and just seeing that machinery at the heart of the conflict that makes the piece of art so compelling. So sorry I went over about three or four minutes there.

Suzanne

No, that's okay, and it's really fascinating. I actually just feel like I need to ask Billy if he wants to respond in any way, because you were just pointing out some wonderful ways in which story can overcome that resistance to change that happens in story that we all have when, as you say, when something propositional comes at us. Billy, did you want to say anything? I want to give you a chance to respond.

Billy

I feel like if I do, I might open a wormhole for us because I think I have a feeling, Kevin and I could probably go around and around on this all night. I think I agree. I think that there's ... maybe one way I would say is that in a lot of the stories that seem to embrace violence as a solution, for example, that there is a mimetic structure at play and there also is a sacred mythological structure at play. And I think that there is a misapprehension at play as well, or an unconsciousness, and a desire to see an easier solution rather than an incorporation of the sort of antithesis that the villain provides, it's an eradication.

And so I think that the best stories that are sort of your hero's journey kind of stories, the ones that speak to me the most, where violence does play out in the third act are the ones where it's tragic. Even if the villain is the one who's getting the comeuppance, there's a sorrow, or a sadness, or a wounding there. The idea that because the bad guy is the bad guy and the good guy kills them or eradicates them in some way that they get to go off, the good guy gets to go off into peace and goodness with no personal wounding, no moral personal wounding. I think

that's deeply dishonest. And so I love everything Kevin is saying. I think we're coming into the same thing from different angles which creates interesting refinement, and I find myself wanting to adjust what I've said based on what he's saying that I don't want to disagree. I think there's so much to explore and so much to open up and, yeah, I'm really grateful for those remarks, I would be thinking about them for a while. So, yeah, thank you, Kevin.

Suzanne: Thank you. I love listening to filmmakers talk.

WATCH DANCE MIMETIC VIDEO

Part 3: Marcia Pally

Suzanne

I'm delighted to have Marcia Pally on our panel. Many of you are familiar with her academic work and the 2020 book she edited, *Mimesis and Sacrifice: Applying Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. But you may not have known – I certainly didn't – that Marcia is a former dancer, choreographer, dance and film critic which makes her ideally suited to talk to us tonight about the use of dance and beauty to convey mimetic insights. Thanks for joining us, Marcia.

Marcia Pally

Perhaps I should begin by saying that before I was a boring professor, I was a dancer and choreographer. So tonight, I'll offer some of my thoughts but also a short piece I co-choreographed and performed to illuminate them.

In talking about dance and mimesis, the title of these short remarks-- **Dance Emergent from Positive Mimesis**--says it all: dance is a human activity emergent from mimesis itself. It's not that people exist and then decide to dance, or not. Rather, dance is among the human capacities and activities that emerge from the mimetic exchange that makes us human. The mimesis that makes us human—giving us the cognitive and emotional capacities that we have—also makes us dance. Some of us stodgy professors don't dance anymore, but all children dance.

I'll speak first about participatory dance as ritual, which carries over to the ritual of watching dance performance as well.

Human cognitive and emotional development are grounded in relational exchange—in the playful copying and exchange of gestures and facial expression between human infants and their kin and non-kin caretakers. We do not develop singly but within “the larger system of body-environment-intersubjectivity” as Shaun Gallagher notes. This playful back-and-forth yields a “unified common intersubjective space” Vittorio Gallese writes, with a wide variety of others that even infants know are *different* from themselves.

Each stage of human cognitive and emotional growth is grounded in this *interaction* to arrive at what Sarah Hrdy calls “emotional modernity” the capacities to grasp and coordinate with (i) the attention of others, (ii) the intention of others, and (iii) the emotions of others in order to sustain relationships through which one feels safe and learns about the world. Importantly, to learn enough for survival, learning and relating generalize to those outside the kin group. Michael Tomasello adds that joint attention and intention created the basis for role reversal and recursive thinking (the understanding that you want me to know that you know that I know, etc), which together allow for complex, *collaborative* endeavors. “[T]he key novelties in human evolution were...” he writes, “adaptations for an especially cooperative, indeed hypercooperative, way of life.”

These basic abilities also foster an additional cognitive capacity: the abstraction of sequences of behavior from the immediate context. This enables humans to learn tasks not only for present but also future application and to symbolically (in gesture and language) re-enact not only past tasks but past *events*, to communicate future collaborative plans, and to describe a hypothetical scene (Donald 2001, 263–65). That is, not only how one used this tool but how one *could* use it in a situation that has not yet occurred.

Among humans, it is not only memories that can be recounted but imagined worlds. The imagining of the conjectured and fictional by a species capable of (i) complex collaboration in (ii) repeatable activities (iii) with agreed-upon intention (goals and procedures) may be the origin not only of survival projects like food procurement but of play: games, theater, sport, and dance. These three features together with imagined worlds are all present in play activities. *And from play—repeatable, intentional activities that reference the past, future, and the imagined—may come ritual, an intentional activity that repeats action-patterns and references the past, future, and the believed.*

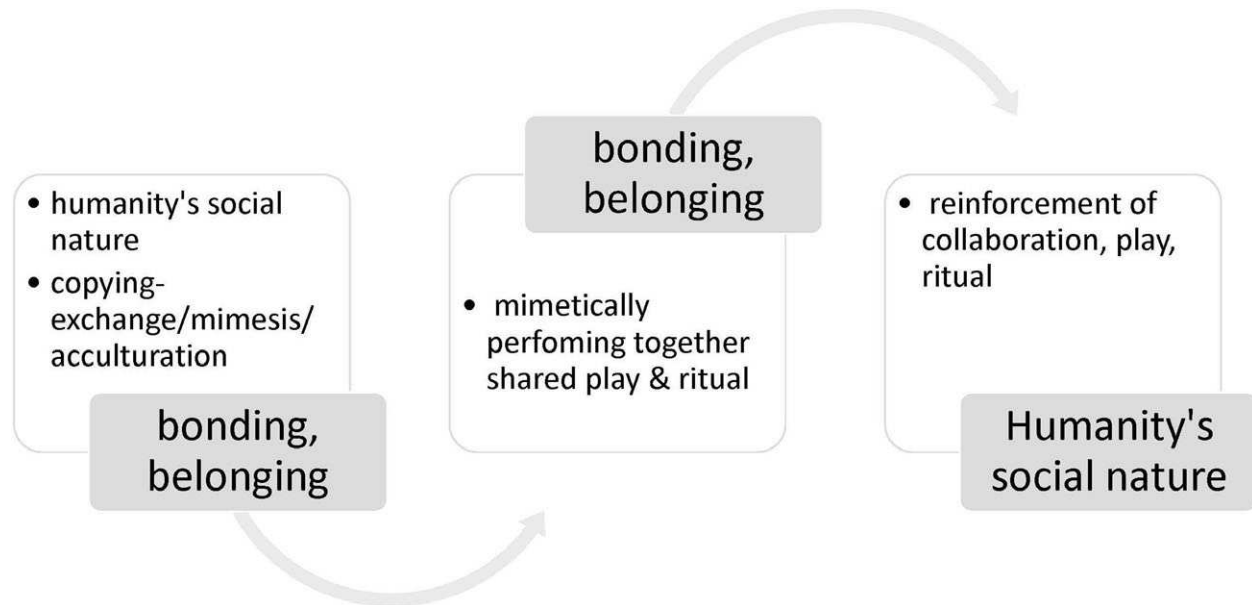
As Tomasello notes, “cognitively, the dual-level structure of simultaneous sharedness (creating socially shared realities) and individuality (individuals’ perspectives within those shared realities) characterizes everything from children’s pretend play to adults’ cultural institutions.” Shared worlds, real and imagined, allow for shared, collaborative, intentional activities from sports to worship services to dance.

I’ve discussed the development of human cognition, emotion, play, and ritual in [Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science](#), and now I’d like to link them to dance.

Dance, emerges from the same mimetic exchange of gesture and expression that grounds our cognitive and emotional selves and as such, it is foundational to human living. Why? It’s somewhat clear why mimesis-enabled cooperative food procurement is important for species survival, but why is playing and moving together in ritualized patterns important? One primary benefit is bonding/belonging. We have seen that mimesis promotes a “we-centric” or “unified common intersubjective space” through which we align ourselves with the attention, intention, and emotions of others in order to sustain relationships, feel safe, and learn about the world. As

mimesis develops into collaborative play, dance, music, and ritual, these activities too contribute to this reciprocal alignment with others and sense of bonding and belonging.

The activity of mimetically performing together shared ritual patterns in song, dance, sport, and worship gives humans the sense of relatedness and belonging needed for our long-evolved, mimesis-grounded social nature (see Figure 1).



The bonding and belonging of moving with others in shared ritualized patterns carries over in certain ways to watching dance as well. We watch dance for its beauty as a (distant) aesthetic object “over there” so to speak, but we also watch it for the ritualized *experience* of participating in the event together—of being in one place with the dancers doing rehearsed, ritualized movement patterns. This is not only a case of mirror neurons giving watchers the experience of the dancers’ movements—and really, most of us can sense only a little what a dancer feels in spinning off multiple pirouettes or grand jete. Rather, the impact of watching dance is also in the experience of being with other watchers who are in the same concentrated, focused, ritualized, energy-space with the dancers—as is also the case with music concerts, theater plays, and religious worship.

The coronavirus shut-downs have highlighted this: while it is wonderful to attend a worship service on zoom, it’s not the same as being-with-people-in-places--performing ritualized patterns of word, song, and movement together--that an in-person worship service is. Zoom may approximate the experience, but it is not the same. While it is wonderful to watch the ballet *Giselle* on screen, it is a rather different experience to be in the theater with others who are also grabbed, speechless, by the opening of Act II, as the pale, cold world of the wrongfully dead is evoked by the slow entrance, one after the other, of young women draped in long white, bouree-ing *en pointe* across the stage with their exposed *backs* to you. One doesn’t get the chill,

the fated-ness, and the loneliness from watching on screen disconnected from others. We need to be in the ritualized energy-space together.

I'll close with one final note about dance, as it emerges from pre-verbal mimesis: dance reaches us and teaches us non-propositionally or not as non-fiction is propositional. If we could learn and experience everything human in verbal expression, we would not have non-verbal play and art forms. And we would talk like Vulcans, *pace* Spock. Dance reaches us at the same neuronomic level as the playful, back-and-forth exchange of primary mimesis. It gets to us under the wire, so to speak, and gives us what verbal forms cannot—and which I cannot describe in this talk precisely because it is not verbal.

So, there is no place to go from here but to dance itself. I'd like to show a short piece, "An Argument About a Duet," choreographed and performed by Gus Solomons (Merce Cunningham's lead male dancer) and myself. In this piece, it turns out that not only the experience of dancing and watching dance is grounded in mimesis—as all dance is. But in this case, the content of the dance, what it's "about," is also mimesis. We didn't intend it that way or set out to make a dance about mimesis. But there it is, non-propositionally.

Suzanne

Thanks so much, Marica. Now it's my pleasure to introduce you to Patty Prasada-Rao, a community development practitioner from Baltimore, MD. As you know, COV&R has always been a uniquely open academic association, welcoming practitioners as well as academics into membership. Recently Keith and I have begun a project to showcase the work of practitioners around the globe applying mimetic theory to the problems of rivalry, violence and scapegoating. We are calling it *unRival, a Network for Discoveries in Nonviolence*. Patty is the type of practitioner we hope to connect with, someone for whom the mimetic insights about rivalry and violence make sense in the context of her work in community development. I asked Patty to talk about these videos as an invitation to change makers working for peace and nonviolence in their communities.

Part 4: Patty Prasada-Rao

Patty

Thank you, Suzanne, and thank you to Raven and COV&R for the invitation to share tonight. I suspect that of all of the people on this call and maybe many of those who will watch it online later, that I am probably one with the baby understanding of mimetic theory. But as I have come to learn about this theory, I am like many others who have said that their eyes were opened to how mimetic theory can be applied to so many things, and especially to the work that I do.

I want to tell you just a little bit about myself. It was hard to answer Suzanne when she asked me for my title. In our American culture we usually say something about the work we do which then defines how we introduce ourselves. In my culture, I am South Asian Indian, you introduce yourself by which family you belong to. It is not what you do

or what your profession is that first creates your identity, but your family. And so I want you to know that I am a South Asian Indian, first generation born in the US, which has influenced how I see the world, and how I understand things. I heard the stories from my parents coming from India, knowing that my grandfather was born in 1907 into the untouchable caste as a Hindu, and heard stories of what he saw transpire in his life. I want you to know that my family came to know Christianity through the work of missionaries, western missionaries, who often also came with the colonized idea of how to share theology and the impact that had on my family. There are a lot of things like this that shape who I am.

The other thing to know about me is, well, I suspect – because all I can see are the panelists, I can't see the attendees – that I may be one of the few people of color on this call and I want you to know that I understand that and I don't take that lightly. I also think it's important to say that I don't speak for all people of color and as a person who is not African-American, not black, I don't speak for folks in my community. But I come tonight to share some thoughts and to ask questions perhaps on their behalf and on behalf of others like me.

I first heard about René Girard when I was invited to speak at a Theology and Peace conference in 2015. That year might not mean as much to you all, but to me when the Theology and Peace conference happened was just a mere few months after the death of Freddie Gray. Freddie Gray was a young man who was a resident in my neighborhood. He died under the hands of the police and it sparked civic unrest in my neighborhood, in my community, in our city. I'm sure that many of you saw the CVS burning and heard comments of many people on what happened in Baltimore. We went through a very difficult time in our Sandtown neighborhood. And in learning and reading about mimetic theory, I could see in everything I was reading the applications to what was happening in my community. In particular, I saw a way to help understand, explain, or get insight into the relationship between members of my community and the police. The feeling of being the oppressed with the oppressor, the subdominant culture to the dominant culture, the marginalized to those who have power. And I believed that there was a way that mimetic theory could help us to push forward to thinking about the solutions to addressing some of these issues. I do still believe that, and I'm coming tonight to encourage what Suzanne had said at the beginning, to try to find new ways to tell the story, how to reach more people, and how to have mimetic theory meet this moment.

Billy, you said you know there's an insight in mimetic theory to what's really going on now and we're asking the questions: how do we help others know what matters and how can mimetic theory help address what's happening now? I believe that some of the answer to that question of how, from the perspective of my community, is to address what the barriers are. I'm sure you all have asked yourselves those questions. What are the barriers of bringing something from an academic perspective to a practitioner's perspective? What are the hurdles of bringing something to my community when the thought is (in its origin) it's by/from older white men?

Perhaps I'm making some assumptions, but I do want to know, what are the ways to help people understand this theory? To help them see that this could have something to do with

them? That it could have something to do with issues we face in our community? I would venture a guess that if I told many people in my neighborhood that I was going to be on this panel and they asked me what it was about, I'd probably get a lot of blank stares back from them. And it would take me a while to explain to them why I actually think that there's something here for us. And in that, I think, is where the challenge lies. How do we help translate this for them? I do believe that the arts are a way we can communicate where theory, thought, and writing from an academic perspective may not communicate as well.

The second Theology and Peace conference I attended was in 2016 where the focus was in particular on violence in communities and policing. One of the speakers at that conference talked about two ways of looking at this: with violence and with blessing.

And because I'm showing my baby understanding of mimetic theory, please forgive me for the way I may say things which might not be correct. But as I looked back through my notes from that conference, I found that the words on the violence side were conflict, competition, closed, acquisitive, death-oriented, with no choice. And the words on the blessing side were reconciliation, collaboration, generative, generous, life-oriented, with choice. And that desire can be seen in both of those columns. There is a desire that's imitative, that leads to competition and then ultimately to scapegoating. And there can also be a desire that can lead to following (rather than competing) and to serving in community, and then to mercy, forgiveness. The one will lead ultimately to violence and destruction and the other could lead to shalom, justice, and restoration. I believe that if you wanted to come to my community to talk about these issues, we actually know a lot on the violence side that leads to destruction. We know a lot about what leads to competition and conflict, especially as you talk about turf issues and the cliques (what other people call gangs), in my community. There is a way that my neighbors would understand that part of mimetic theory, but I don't know that they would care that much to delve more into that, because we get it. That's what we are faced with, it's what we are dealing with all the time.

I think what would get people in my community to care about this theory, is to address what difference does it make, what impact could it have on getting us out of what we already know. What does it have to do with me and how can understanding things from a mimetic theorist framework help us to get to that place of restoration, resolution, and shalom?

In order to figure out how to communicate more with communities like mine, I believe that you have folks in your circles who come from communities like this, who also understand mimetic theory. Those who are black, are of minority, and who are people for whom this reality lives in them. And so does mimetic theory. I think they will be part of your key.

I believe that even in the arts, in story, in film, and in dance, getting the input from those folks would be important. I had a chance on a panelist's call earlier, to ask Billy about something in the film "The Problem is the Solution" and the use of dark-skinned individuals to represent Adam and Eve and Jesus. I also tried to ask a couple of folks I know, people of color, how they

reacted to that. How they responded was mixed. Some people thought it was amazing and beautiful and some people had questions of why it was done that way. And that's okay, we're not all going to react to something the same way.

But I would say to COV&R and to Raven, if you want to reach communities like mine, then I think part of your process will need to involve including these communities with you in that. I think some folks in my neighborhood would want to know: Do we matter? Do we have something to contribute to this, or is it only what you have to contribute, to tell us, that's important? I don't believe that's what it is, it's not only you telling us, but sometimes it can feel that way. So how do you include us so we understand we have something to offer, that we are players at the table, not only receivers of something that you are sharing with us? And what is it that helps us to know that we and our input matter. We need this. Do you need us? Do we need each other? And how is that demonstrated?

I'll come back to something as I close. As I said, my grandfather used to share stories about the caste system and what happened when independence came to India. I then had the privilege, when my grandfather was turning 96, of living in his village for eight months and helping with a school our family started. My grandfather had long been living in the States and he and some other family members (from America) came to visit (in India) while I was living there. We took a walk in his neighborhood and then walked to the town. As we walked down one street he turned to us grandkids and said, "You know when I was a young boy, I wasn't allowed to walk on this street."

As he walked, because he was an elder in the community, people started coming out into their doorways to see him. Then one elderly man invited my grandfather into his house and wanted to show him something inside. When we left that gentleman's house, my grandfather gathered us together on the street to share something with us. He said that man was a high caste person and that in the olden days my grandfather would never have been permitted to enter into his door. As he said this, Grandpa did not speak with anger. He didn't even speak lament about what had happened and what that injustice meant for generations of Indians and for his (our) family. Instead he spoke with hope. He wanted us to know that this shows that change can happen. Things can be different. Then he told us that we all are a part of that.

So I take this as one of my callings in life: to say that hope is what I'm holding on to. And to remember as my grandfather said, that I can be a part of helping that change come true wherever I am and whatever groups I am with.

As I close my remarks, I say: Namaste'. One of the understandings of that gesture and that word is that it's a form of respect as well as a form of greeting, that "I bow to you in humility." Another translation is "I look to see the god in you" or "the god in me sees the god in you."

I don't know where exactly and how that fits with mimetic theory but I do believe that there's something to this. That as I'm looking to see something in you that you will look to see

something in me. And if we look to see the god in each other, how will we treat each other differently. I believe there's something in this which can help us as we think about how mimetic theory (and understanding it) can make a difference in communities like mine.

Thank you, Suzanne.

Suzanne

We are so grateful for and inspired by the contributions from our panelists. We'll be thinking about your comments for a long time! I'd like to wrap up this Party with an invitation to all of you to redouble our efforts at encouraging and promoting applications of mimetic theory to the problems of rivalry, violence and scapegoating. This is the vision for *unRival*, the initiative that is the result of many conversations with all of you at many annual meetings over the years.

In fact, in true mimetic fashion the idea for *unRival* may have been planted in the heart of COV&R by Thee Smith 21 years ago. Thee is one of our premiere scholars working with positive mimesis and peace building and he hosted the 1999 COV&R conference at Emory which was the first COV&R meeting I attended. This is from his opening remarks:

“Do theorists of violence, such as most members of COV&R, have the imagination, vision, or fortitude for attempting to reduce violence, an effort that engages most practitioners? Should we not become more publicly accountable concerning the consequences for the practice of the theories of violence that we explore?”

I'm ready to take up Thee's challenge and I hope you are, too. Please look for more opportunities like this and for news about how you can be part of *unRival* in the weeks and months ahead. On behalf of Martha Reineke, Nicholas Wandinger and the entire COV&R board as well as the staff of the Raven Foundation, I want to thank you all for joining the Launch Party. And a special thank you goes to our distinguished and generous panelists Kevin Miller, Marcia Pally and Patty Prasada-Rao and please join me in a hearty round of virtual applause for the incredibly talented Billy Price for creating a model for engagement that can inspire our work for years to come. Thank you all and be well.