

MERCER STREET

2019 - 2020

Program Director

Dara Rossman Regaignon

Editor

Jono Mischkot

Senior Production Editor

Richard Larson

Managing Editor

Katherine Carlson

Development Editors

Natalie Behrends

Clare Kernie

Riley Lopez

Program Manager

Christine Jensch

***Mercer Street* Committee**

Jono Mischkot, Chair

Benjamin Gassman

Grant Ginder

Christopher Stahl

Madeleine Stein

EXPOSITORY WRITING PROGRAM
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE

MERCER STREET

To the Class of 2023:

Welcome to New York University!

An NYU education begins, in part, with writing. This practice reflects the University's longstanding commitment to the centrality of written inquiry to undergraduate education.

It's a bit of a cliché to say that reading and writing are connected, but in 2019 it seems important to say it nonetheless. As information circulates more and more quickly—moving ever farther from its origin—we have to read critically and for context: *Who was the author? What were they trying to achieve? What is their evidence?* This is all the more urgent when we take up what we read, re-posting it or relying on it for insight or opinions of our own.

Over the course of the next four years, you have a wide range of courses open to you; alphabetically, they range from accounting to history to mechanical engineering to woodwind studies. No matter what field you choose, during your time here you will find yourself using writing to think, analyze, investigate, and create. And no matter what path or career you choose after you graduate (that of a scholar, educator, health practitioner, entrepreneur, artist, performer, lawyer, engineer, or activist), you will find yourself using writing for those purposes and others: to propose, to investigate, to analyze, and to represent yourself and your work. Recent research shows that work in the twenty-first century involves more writing than ever before, regardless of the specific occupation. This writing ranges across genres (email, proposals, essays, reports, and more), and encompasses prose that is creative, technical, reflective, and persuasive. It's writing that seeks to make an impact on its readers, that seeks not only to make audiences see the questions and challenges that face us today in new ways but also to help them imagine new possibilities and perspectives.

The essays collected in this volume represent some of the best work written for Expository Writing Program courses over the course of 2018-19; most were written by first-year students. These essays are smart, moving, funny, analytic, imaginative, and—like us all, and like all written work—incomplete. They open up questions, problems, and puzzles that are not entirely solvable. The faculty of EWP hope that you will both enjoy and learn from them.

Take heart! College is a time to challenge yourself and to nurture your mind both in and out of the classroom. Your most surprising encounters—your most creative or insightful moments—may happen when you least expect them. Be interested. That is always the best way to begin.

With all best wishes,

Dara Rossman Regaignon
Director of the Expository Writing Program
Associate Professor of English

EDITOR'S NOTE

We learn early on that writing is about proving an argument, finding a solution, advocating for an opinion. In short, we learn that good writing has something pointed and definitive to say. And although this might be true to some degree, the motivation to write, research, read, even watch rarely starts from someplace definitive. Think back to the first book you read or film you saw that stuck with you: Did it stick because it reiterated what you'd already thought or because it confronted, frustrated, deepened your thoughts?

What I admire about this most recent collection of student essays is that each is so clearly stirred by such moments of complication and/or fascination. Whether it be the intellectual challenge of untangling a complex theme or metaphor in an artist's work or a deeply personal reflection on the meaning of loss or gender or race, they all start with a problem that motivates an investigation.

Such motive is fundamental to the act of writing because it helps you find a place in a conversation that has been going on long before you joined in. Students often wonder: How can I possibly contribute anything new to this topic when so many smart people have already considered it? The answer, in no small way, is motive. Take a look at the three essays in this year's *Mercer Street* that all engage with the film *Crazy Rich Asians* as a primary text. One would think they'd have pretty much the same thing to say. And yet, despite what would seem to be a glaring redundancy, the essays are entirely unique in tone, rhetoric, and idea because they take vastly different problems as their starting points: from noticing that this traditional Chinese family is making the "wrong kind of dumplings!" (81), to unpacking the problematic ways a gay character is portrayed, to observing racist graffiti on a movie poster that puts into question the film's capacity to overturn Asian stereotypes.

Another curious pattern emerges in this collection: we have five essays on the subject of empathy. Even more interestingly, each writer seeks to complicate the idea of empathy as an assumed good, interrogating its limitations and uncovering its sociopolitical implications. However, once again, this collective concern does not result in congruent essays because each writer explores the problem of empathy in

a distinct context—from VR, to the Kavanaugh hearing, to a controversial painting, to the disturbing phenomenon of incelism, to an octopus making a daring escape from its tank.

In some ways, empathy (or rather its ineffectiveness) works as a central metaphor for this collection. As Elizabeth Makris observes in her essay “If the Shoe Doesn’t Fit,” “[W]hen we feel what we consider to be ‘empathy,’ we are more often than not relating a feeling or experience we have had to the other person’s situation, not trying to imagine ourselves in their specific situation. We put them in our shoes, not the other way around” (36). The same thing can happen when we only see writing as a platform to prove what we already know. We run the risk of reading all texts through the lens of our own experience, thus reducing the text to mean only what we want it to mean. And so as you read these essays, take note of how each writer allows the evidence to change, fine-tune, and strengthen their thinking, and how such openness to the evidence makes room for them to say something new.

Jono Mischkot
Editor of *Mercer Street*
Director of Writing in the Disciplines

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Expository Writing Program is grateful to Gene Andrew Jarrett, Dean of the College of Arts and Science, for his support of this publication. The *Mercer Street* Committee—Benjamin Gassman, Grant Ginder, Christopher Stahl, Madeleine Stein, and Richard Larson—and the editorial staff are also grateful to EWP Director Dara Rossman Regaignon for her ongoing commitment to student writers' success and achievement.

The *Mercer Street* editors are also very grateful to EWP's other Directors—including Denice Martone, who also generously supplied the cover image, as well as William M. Morgan and Abby Rabinowitz—and Assistant Directors Olivia Birdsall, Nicole Callihan, David Cregar, Beth Machlan, Elizabeth Mikesell, and Tara Parmiter, as well as to the many Writing Program faculty members who read submissions.

We also thank Senior Production Editor Richard Larson and Managing Editor Katherine Carlson, both of whom ensured the seamlessness of our operation. Katherine's editorial expertise and decisive management style in her first year on the job ensured our successful production phase and a meticulously edited book. Finally, our three talented and resourceful undergraduate student editors—Natalie Behrends, Clare Kernie, and Riley Lopez—brought intense editorial care to the essays published here, and we couldn't be more grateful for their hard work and invaluable expertise.

Diversity and Inclusion Award 2019-2020

The Diversity and Inclusion Award recognizes writing that thoughtfully explores topics related to diversity and inclusion, engaging critically and carefully with sources that help us understand our world in a more nuanced way. This year, the inaugural award is given to two essays: Colleen Dalusong, who explores the complex relationship between representation, race, and experience in the world of art in "The Spectacle of Experiences"; and Jamal Mohamed, who examines the lived experience of racism and the role of recognition as a way forward in "A Conversation About Recognition."

MERCER STREET

CONTENTS

Writing the Essay

- | | |
|--|----|
| A Transaction of Trauma
<i>Elizabeth Crawford</i> | 10 |
| Voices of the Dead
<i>Seamus Hogan</i> | 16 |
| Gay Asian Men
<i>Keighton Li</i> | 21 |
| Broad Brushstrokes
<i>Nicole Li</i> | 25 |
| Not the Only Nine-Year-Old
<i>Belle Lu</i> | 30 |
| If the Shoe Doesn't Fit
<i>Elizabeth Makris</i> | 36 |
| A Conversation About Recognition
<i>Jamal Mohamed</i> | 42 |
| Mazes of the Mind
<i>Siri Ranganath</i> | 48 |

Was Ever Woman This Humor Won? 56
Jules Talbot

Writing the Essay: Art and the World

Connecting With the Lone Ranger 61
Grace Andreasen

To Be Still 68
Grace Whitcomb

International Writing Workshop I

A Faraway History 71
Nathan Nguyen

International Writing Workshop I: Tandon School of Engineering

A Crisis of Authenticity 75
Danni Lai

International Writing Workshop II

Keeping Up With the Youngs 81
Megan Feng

Open Letter to NYU Residential Life and Housing Services 88
Yifan Zhang

The Advanced College Essay: Education and the Professions

The Spectacle of Experiences 93
Colleen Dalusong

Bridging the Empathy Gap 102
Helen Wajda

The Advanced College Essay: Tandon School of Engineering

Beyond Human 112
Lisa Ye

The Advanced College Essay: The World Through Art

Displaced: An Exploration of the
Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto 115
Athena Gerasoulis

The Limits of Empathy 123
Haley Gustafson

The Empathy Machine 132
Sarah Peng

Freshman Seminars

To Watch the Destruction of Worlds 141
Belle Lu

Contributors 149

Noteworthy Essays 156

Index by Essay Topic 158

Index by Rhetorical Category 161

Index by Rhetorical Strategy 163

A TRANSACTION OF TRAUMA

Elizabeth Crawford

On an unassuming wall in the International Center of Photography hangs a print of Italian photographer Dario Mitidieri's *Savita, a two and a half years girl from North Bombay, performs for Arab tourists near the Taj-Mahal Hotel*. Mitidieri's subject, the titular Savita, towers over her invisible audience atop her wooden stilt. Her gaze reaches higher still, to the heavens. She has one arm wrapped tightly around the top of the pole, the other outstretched and reaching upward. Her hand is poised as if to steal a piece of the sky. Your eyes travel down the image, past the footholds on which Savita has planted her tiny feet. Descend further along the pole, and for half a second it seems infinite. Of course, it isn't. Eventually the wooden stilt meets a human hand, which belongs to Savita's father. He balances this pole, and his daughter, on his thumb. With Savita so high above solid ground, one can't help but wonder: what if she were to fall?

Her father has put her in this vulnerable position, and as spectators, we're forced to reckon with his choice. As Savita and her father perform, they will attract tourists, whose money may very well keep their family fed and housed. But, in addition to scrappy wages and shallow accolades, their spectacle invites an ethnographic gaze. Is it an even exchange? Is the opportunity worth the possible trauma? Is it worth being treated as a specimen in one's own country?

In her essay "The Parent Who Stays," Mexican-American author Reyna Grande examines the relationship between opportunity and trauma through an intimate account of her childhood immigration to America as well as her subsequent life in the US. Grande examines deeply personal suffering—her alienation from both her parents and from society—to urge us to consider the disturbing regularity of these experiences for the immigrant children of this country. Trauma, Grande shares, is not something shed at the border. Just the opposite: "For the rest of your life, you carry that border inside of you" (76). Trauma is the one constant in an otherwise turbulent existence, taking on multiple, painful forms.

Grande's father emigrated to America to try to create a new life for his family before she was old enough to remember him leaving, and her mother left not long after, when she was four. This absence during the formative years of her childhood in Mexico shackled her with a terrible inferiority complex. Grande couldn't help but think of herself as "unloved and unwanted" (75). Once Grande and her siblings came to America, her father returned as a stranger when she was nine and a half, and would remain one all her life. They were together as a family from that point forward, yet Grande's father died never having evolved into anything beyond the man who hugged her "too briefly, too hesitantly" (73).

In the American school system, the chasm between herself and her parents only grew larger, and the further she progressed in her education, the more pronounced the disconnect became. "It is the central irony of my life," Grande writes, "that my parents emigrated to try to save our family, but by doing so, they destroyed it" (78). The tragedy of education's role in the corrosion of Grande's relationship with her parents is twofold. On a surface level, she surpassed them in terms of her worldly knowledge. But beneath was the more painful truth that her success in the American school system would always be dependent on the swiftness of her assimilation, and, whether conscious or not, on her readiness to dispose of Mexican culture.

Grande unloads all this trauma only to turn around and express immense gratitude for it, to share that she'd never wish for anything different. It is now, as an adult with children of her own, that Grande has come to reflect on and appreciate her parents' sacrifices. She thought they had left because they didn't love her, but in truth it was just the opposite. It was precisely because her parents loved her that they would leave, risking everything to give her a chance at a new life. Hers, Grande explains, was not the most extreme case. She considers herself lucky, as the current US immigration policy is nothing less than sinister. Grande did not experience "the terrors of war," nor was she "robbed . . . raped . . . [or] attacked by gangs, bandits, or corrupt Mexican officials along the way" (80). For her, though, the trauma is ultimately a mixed blessing. Her experience of being ostracized and "othered," losing any real opportunity for familial connection, was "a

price [she] would pay a hundred times over” for the opportunity she now has to protect her own children from similar trauma (81).

Grande’s juxtaposition of her own pain and her hopefulness for her children pushes the reader to consider: to what degree does one normalize one’s own traumas under the guise of silver linings? In “Letter to My Son,” African-American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates examines the trauma that shackles the black experience—from a more pessimistic place. The condition of being black in America is one in which skin color acts as both the motivating factor and the justification for constant debasement. Coates contends that black people have been dealt an irrevocably unfair hand, expressing that this society was founded on and remains firmly grounded in institutions that not only consent to but thrive upon the destruction of black bodies. Racism, and specifically American racism, “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (Coates). This is a reality that Coates wants his adolescent son to grasp fully, because it is not until he accepts this that he may truly begin to take ownership of himself. It is not until he understands the unflagging threat on his body that Coates’s son will be able to do more than simply survive.

To maintain a pulse, although important, is not all that Coates wishes for his child. This sentiment is one he shares with Grande’s parents and Grande herself. As parents, they want to give their children all that eluded them in their own youths, to minimize their pain. Where Coates and Grande diverge, then, is not in intention, but in what they believe trauma’s role is in one’s pursuit of fulfilment. Grande’s parents fled Mexico “not for their lives, but for life” (74). A mote of promise, that enigmatic American Dream, was reason enough for her parents to first leave her and her siblings, then uproot and re-plant them into a new life of distress and insecurity. Grande posits that without America, without that arduous border crossing and the sacrifices of her parents, she couldn’t possibly have achieved all that she has. More than becoming a successful writer, Grande was able to be “the parent who stays,” and for that, she considers the cost of her trauma to be less than what she and her children have gained (81).

But as Coates tells us, black children are in perpetual danger in the United States. What positivity can he offer his son? Ceaseless violence is not necessarily conducive to optimism. Even if black parents wanted to risk their lives and their children's lives in the same way Grande's did, they wouldn't be able to. Coates laments that there isn't another America, and that this one wasn't made for black people.

This Land of Opportunity may be more a Land of Quiet Terror, as suggested by author Sandra Cisneros. In her essay "Notes of a Native Daughter," Cisneros details her life growing up in the slums of Chicago and her eventual decision to leave home to pursue a career as a writer. Cisneros, a second-generation Mexican-American, is wracked with the guilt of opportunity. Born to immigrants, she feels she has no license to complain about much of anything. Cisneros writes, speaking about her father, "How could I tell him this was not the everything I'd asked for?" (25). Her reservations are, in some respect, valid. Cisneros doesn't know and may not ever be able to fathom the true cost of the privilege afforded to her. Unlike her parents, she is tasked not just with survival, but with purpose. By immigrating, Cisneros's parents gave her a gift: they opened up her potential. In her neighborhood, folks are made to believe that they are wholly deserving of their destitute circumstances. Of housing projects corroding in real time, Cisneros writes "*What did you expect? Rent's cheap*" (21). Like her neighbors, Cisneros feels a psychological oppression and a conditioned shame for wanting.

Grande is familiar with such psychological trauma and is most compelling when she admits this. Her family failed twice before they successfully crossed the border (Grande 74). Persistence would bring them to this great melting pot, but once here, institutional racism would push them to society's fringes. Grande presents this disappointment most vividly through an observation of her father, who "dealt with his psychological pain by drowning it in a can of Budweiser" (77). He expected so much more from America than the country gave him, and this frustrated dream slowly but surely consumed him. He was gone long before he died. When hope falls away, what stares back but all the suffering and all the trauma? Being confronted with that nothingness completely ravages the spirit.

Cisneros does everything in her power to avoid that fate. On every block in her neighborhood, she notices “liquor stores or taverns to mute the pain of dreams deferred” (22). These places provide escape to people like Grande’s father, unable to articulate what it is that draws him to drink. Seeing such hopelessness, Cisneros knows she does not belong in this city. She does not want to be swallowed up by the same place that shaped her. She refers to Chicago as if it were a person, which shows just how strong an influence it had on her personal development. Cisneros owes much to the place, but she does not owe it her entire being. She comes to the conclusion that, despite her second-generation guilt and her fear of disappointing others, she cannot continue to live for anyone other than Sandra Cisneros, so she runs off “with that wild boy—[her] pen” (25). It’s a painful decision, cleaving herself from the only life she’s ever known, but with Chicago behind her, Cisneros is closer to defining the American Dream on her own terms.

Coates has similar aspirations for his son. Coates wants three things: that his son grow up unashamed of his blackness, that he never think that whiteness is something to aspire to, and that he won’t forget the unending attack on his body so that it will never get the chance to turn into an attack on his soul. For Coates’s son, being on the precipice of maturity in a black body takes on a very specific meaning. It means accepting racism as a fact of life, learning that America has invented an idea of him, but also learning that he does not have to submit to it. Coates tells his son “that this is your country, that this is your world, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it.” Does Coates put this immense responsibility on his son because he has the confidence that he’ll rise to the occasion? Has Coates been fronting pessimism because he doesn’t want his last flicker of hope extinguished? Is hope a callous? A callous appears rough, but beneath it is the most delicate skin. The trauma of the human experience necessitates hope, especially in the moments of seemingly insurmountable hardship, and even within the seemingly most resigned of individuals.

WORKS CITED

- Cisneros, Sandra. "Notes of a Native Daughter." *Tales of Two Americas: Stories of Inequality in a Divided Nation*, edited by John Freeman, Penguin Books, 2017, pp. 21-25.
- Coates, Ta-nehisi. "Letter to My Son." *The Atlantic*, 4 July 2015, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619.
- Grande, Reyna. "The Parent Who Stays." *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Abrams, 2018, pp. 73-81.
- Mitidieri, Dario. *Savita, a Two and a Half Years Girl from North Bombay, Performs for Arab Tourists near the Taj-Mahal Hotel*. 1992, International Center of Photography, New York.

VOICES OF THE DEAD

Seamus Hogan

The question ambushes me, and at first, I have no answer. “How much do you know about the camp?” asks my Aunt Frances. I have heard whispers of the camp before, echoes of a rich and tragic family history, fleeting glimpses of my lineage, but I never dared to look any further. We are seated in my grandmother’s living room. Light pours in from the courtyard outside where chickens strut idly, picking at seeds tucked between the stones, my mother at the piano across the room, my grandmother beside me, and, of course, my great-aunt Frances on a bench facing me, exuding wisdom, knitting habitually, inspecting me.

My grandmother’s house is nestled in a picturesque mountain borough in rural Pennsylvania, deep Appalachia, built on the vestiges of a Chautauqua Methodist commune. There is a void in the house, unspoken, yet somehow tangible, omnipresent. Dust on the fretboards of steel guitars or between the pages of once familiar books gives form to the absence of my grandfather. The myriad titles populating the high bookshelves in the living room—*Finnegan’s Wake*, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, *Rewilding the World*—cast a shadow of him: polymath, captain of his college football team, professional weightlifter, professor of psychology, novelist, arborist, historian, and so on. Many years have passed since his death, yet the grief has not yet evaporated from this sacred place, my second home in the forest. New books have found their way here, boasting titles like *Finding Your Way after Your Spouse Dies* and *Getting to the Other Side of Grief*. My grandmother’s life has been consumed by mourning. She has lost a part of herself too precious to replace.

I attempt to answer my aunt’s question, recounting what I have gathered about “the camp” over the years. My great-grandfather was a missionary doctor, a pacifist, not a soldier, providing medical aid to the Allies in China during the Second World War. He and his family were taken as prisoners of war during the Japanese invasion of the mainland and eventually interned in Camp O’Donnell in the

Philippines, north of Manila. They arrived as members of the infamous Bataan Death March, a Japanese war crime entailing the forced migration of more than 60,000 Filipino and American prisoners. My grandfather was just a boy at the time, my aunt no more than an infant, yet somehow both managed to survive and return to the United States after the camps were liberated.

There is, of course, much more to the story, many more miracles nesting within the great one of survival and return, with each individual miracle leading to my eventual birth. My aunt hands me a book, *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*, which I have now read more times than I can count, a comprehensive work chronicling the lives of Christian missionaries interned by the Japanese. It depicts the struggle between unspeakable, horrific cruelty and stalwart, unfaltering faith in the divine. I did not realize then that this was her parting gift to me. Knowledge of history, particularly one's own history, is a great onus. The keepers of history are charged with its preservation and with the prevention of distortion and erasure, a weight that often breaks those who carry it.

In his documentary *Nostalgia de la Luz*, Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán tells the stories of those who seek to resurrect and memorialize the past. His film centers on Chile's barren, parched Atacama Desert and explores two intertwining narratives of people desperately searching for answers: one of astrologers investigating the mysteries of the cosmos, and one of Chilean women looking for the remains of relatives killed by Augusto Pinochet's brutal regime. The arid landscape petrifies the past to form a great and terrible archive of sky and soil. Absolutely devoid of humidity and blanketed by skies of unrivaled clarity, the desert may be Earth's premier vantage point to the heavens above. "Science fell in love with the Chilean sky," Guzmán narrates, a sky best observed in all its brilliance from the wastes of the Atacama, where astronomers constructed "the biggest telescopes in the world" to gaze with unadulterated clarity into the firmament (*Nostalgia* 00:06:52-7:12). All that dies in the Atacama is preserved, written into history, as if time ceased to exist within its borders. Archaeologists seek to unearth the knowledge buried in these records, revealing a tragic and violent past that demands to be remembered. Corpses, evidence of imperialist crimes perpetrated against

Chile's indigenous population, are abundant in the desert, as are the petrified victims of a more recent terror, the rule of US-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet. Pinochet "assassinated and buried the bodies of thousands of political prisoners" in the desert during his seventeen year reign, a ghastly history which has largely been suppressed and secluded to the periphery of modern Chilean memory, a fact which Guzmán laments and seeks to rectify (*Nostalgia* 00:51:52).

For some, he shows us, the memory of these atrocities is far from distant. Decades have passed since the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, yet there are still some, the wives and sisters of the disappeared, who traverse the Atacama in search of loved ones stolen from them long ago. Violeta Berríos is one such woman. She intends to continue searching for her departed brother as long as she is able, indicating that, though much of her strength has left her in old age, her will to memorialize her brother's legacy remains unflinching. She has taken up the tremendous burden of giving life to the dead and lending voice to the past. She has carried this weight for a long time, yet she refuses to break beneath it. These women are not mere seekers of ghosts, but seekers of justice, of truth, and of memory. They "demand an answer from those responsible for the disappearances" (*Nostalgia* 00:59:02). When maligned forces seek to erase and falsify the past, memorialization becomes an act of resistance.

Violeta and her fellow searchers were not the first in Chile to resist General Pinochet's iron fist, however. In one of Guzmán's most moving scenes, military junta survivor Luís Henríquez recalls time spent in the Chacabuco concentration camp, deep in the Atacama, where he and a group of twenty other brave souls looked to Chile's skies for liberation. They studied the cosmos and the practice of astronomy by day, then tracked the stars at night, looking into the past to inform a present resistance. As fellow astronomer Gaspar Galaz elucidates during his interview with Guzmán, the night sky, as we see it, merely projects an image of the cosmos long since passed. In this sense, the astronomer becomes a historian, or perhaps an archaeologist, one whose duty is to memorialize the past and seek answers to life's greatest mysteries. The present moment itself, Galaz asserts, is illusory, due to the momentary sensory delay caused by the finite speed at which light can travel and be processed by the eye. We

cannot escape the past; it surrounds us, constitutes us, orients us, and, if we allow it to, teaches us. We must seek only to understand and honor it, to take up the burden of history and allow the voices of the dead to speak.

Violeta Berríos expresses her wish later in her interview that “the telescopes didn’t just look into the sky, but could also see through the earth,” revealing the whereabouts of the disappeared (*Nostalgia* 01:03:19-28). Just as the astronomer gazes into the past in search of answers to life’s great mysteries, the keepers of history seek answers to our present questions in the wisdom of the past. “Those who have a memory,” Guzmán narrates, “are able to live in the fragile present moment,” able to reflect upon the wisdom of the past to inform the ever-changing now, while “those who have none don’t live anywhere” (*Nostalgia* 01:27:23-34). To be disconnected from the past is to be displaced and abandoned, to lose the memory of one’s own history is to lose an irreplaceable part of oneself, and to misplace those departed souls who contributed to the summation of that self.

It wasn’t long after she delivered her parting gift that my aunt left this world for the next. Reflecting on her passing, I recall a passage from the Argentinian master Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Witness” which reads, “[s]omething, or an infinite number of things, dies in every death, unless the universe itself is possessed of a memory . . . for in the course of time there was a day that closed even the last eyes to see Christ” (56). With Frances gone, a generation of my family has perished. While there are none left in my lineage who lived and breathed in the camp, the memory lives on, miraculously, through me. I have not forgotten that my aunt’s parting gift to me was more than a book, more than an heirloom or a fragment of the distant past. It was an incitement to ensure that the past never grows too distant in hopes that memories needn’t die with those who carry them. We ought not to neglect Borges’s caveat. If we accept that memory transcends the individual, then it may truly be that the universe itself possesses a memory, that nothing is truly lost in the void of death, so long as we lend our voices to history.

WORKS CITED

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Witness." *Dreamtigers*, translated by Andrew Hurley. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1960.

Nostalgia de la Luz. Directed by Patricio Guzmán. Atacama Productions, 2010.

GAY ASIAN MEN

Keighton Li

They say parties bring families and friends together. In Singapore, the Youngs' family party is indeed bringing people together as they socialize over champagne and cocktails, gossip about the host's latest girlfriend, and wonder when the girlfriend is finally going to make a fool of herself. But not Oliver T'sien. Alone by the bar, Oliver appears to be the lone wolf in the crowd. Oliver is dressed to the nines for this party, sporting a freshly ironed shirt and a dashing navy suit. He sips his glass of rosé with his little finger in the air as Rachel Chu, the latest girlfriend of Nick Young, spills her wine all over her rich and influential boyfriend, tainting his immaculate white shirt. All the guests gasp, but Oliver reaches out his helping hand to the couple, offering to keep Rachel company while Nick changes. Oliver walks up to Rachel and introduces himself: "I am one of the poor relations, 'the rainbow sheep' of the family" (*Crazy Rich Asians* 00:45:45-49). Yes, Oliver is gay.

Oliver T'sien, played by Filipino-American actor Nico Santos, is the only gay character in the critically and commercially acclaimed blockbuster, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Directed by Asian-American director John M. Chu, the movie made Hollywood history with its all-Asian cast. The movie centers on Rachel Chu, a Chinese-American economics professor at NYU, who travels to Singapore to meet her boyfriend Nick Young's obnoxiously rich family. Santos's role adds more diversity to the already historic cast, yet his presence calls attention to more absence. While Hollywood is grappling with cinematic representation of both the Asian and the homosexual communities, characters like Oliver, Asian and gay, are hardly ever seen.

Even though *Crazy Rich Asians* manages to include representations of the gay Asian community, its depiction of Oliver is rather stereotypical: he is a fashionista who adopts a soft tone when he speaks. He likes to judge what people are wearing with sassy comments and he even transforms Rachel into a full-on Disney princess with his spot-on sense of style. And of course, when he is busy trans-

forming Rachel, the background music he works to is a Cantonese version of Madonna's '80s hit "Material Girl." By this we infer that he does not listen to anyone but the divas. He is also an outcast—wealthy Chinese families like the Youngs possess traditional values, where men are supposed to marry women and become the moneymakers, and the wives are the homemakers. While he defies the norm in this sense, Oliver fits into every single big-screen gay Asian stereotype.

Unfortunately, *Crazy Rich Asians* is not the only case of misrepresentation of gay Asian men. Stereotypical portrayals of the community are instead the norm in Western mass media. The community is rarely depicted in mainstream media, and when it is, gay Asian men are mostly depicted as submissive to their white partners or to their conservative Asian families. Ang Lee's 1993 debut, *The Wedding Banquet*, deals with ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender roles, and familial conflict, and offers its viewers a better understanding of these elements within a cultural context. Lee's movie centers on a Taiwanese gay man, Wai Tung, who lives in New York City with his long-term white partner but has to hide his true sexual orientation and relationship by getting involved in a sham marriage with his female Shanghainese tenant when his parents come to visit from Taiwan. In the movie, Wai Tung feels a large amount of pressure from his parents to get married and have a son to carry on the family name. Being a good, submissive Asian son, Wai Tung complies and decides to marry a woman, despite being in a gay relationship. When his white partner lashes out for not caring about his feelings, Wai Tung changes his mind and finally comes out to his parents. Wai Tung is depicted as a compliant gay Asian man, which is a stereotype often attributed to the group. While Oliver is only a minor role in *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Wedding Banquet* dedicates a whole movie to an Asian gay man's unwillingness to assert himself.

Not only in Hollywood films can Americans witness stereotypes of Asian gay men, but also in the pornography industry. In his book *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*, Tan Hoang Nguyen, Assistant Professor of English and Film Studies at Bryn Mawr College, explores the cultural meanings associated with sexual positions in adult films. According to Nguyen, the typical Asian gay porn star is skinny, in possession of a

rather small penis, on the receiving end of anal sex with a white partner, and known as a “bottom.” In contrast, the white partner is typically a muscular and dominant “top,” a male that is on the giving end in anal sex, with large genitals (Nguyen 18). Porn studios, Nguyen argues, often make gay Asian men appear less powerful by casting Asian men with relatively slim bodies and less traditionally masculine features. Such choices play to the studio’s target audience, white men, helping them fulfill their fantasies of being dominant in bed, or even in a relationship. Through diminishing the power of gay Asian men in pornography, studios fortify the idea of masculine, white dominance and Asian subservience as the norm.

Stereotypical misrepresentations of gay Asian men within the larger culture of gay body-worship in films and pornography have made dating as a gay Asian man in America difficult. In recent years, online dating apps have overwhelmed the market and online dating has become the most mainstream way for gay men to meet potential romantic partners. On the most popular gay dating/hookup app, *Grindr*, racism against Asian men is extremely explicit on some users’s profiles. When I first moved to New York from Hong Kong in 2016, I failed to find the city’s famous inclusiveness on *Grindr*. On the app, a large number of white men specifically stated their racial preference on their profiles as “no rice” or “no spice,” euphemisms that not-so-subtly indicate that they were not interested in East Asians or South Asians. I could not help but wonder—are Asians at the bottom of the New York City’s gay dating hierarchy while white men are on top?

Apparently, the hierarchy does not only exist in New York City. In July 2018, *NBC News* reported that Sinakhone Keodara, an immigrant from Laos and current resident of Los Angeles, brought a class-action lawsuit against *Grindr* for racial discrimination after encountering multiple user profiles with one short descriptor: “Not interested in Asian” (Truong). Keodara and his Asian-American friends had all noticed exclusionary language on the app, and realized *Grindr* had been allowing such racism on their dating app for a long period of time. Following Keodara’s class-action attempt, *Grindr* launched a campaign named “Kindr,” featuring homosexual men in a series of webisodes talking about their experiences of being discriminated against in the gay community. “Kindr” aimed to tackle various forms

of discrimination, including racism, on the dating platform; it is the company's first attempt at addressing racism since the app's release in 2009. In the first webisode, published by *Grindr* in 2018, two Asian men are featured, alongside Latinos and African Americans, sharing their experiences with racism in the gay community. Profile descriptors like "no femme," "no Asians," or other comments that these two Asian men receive on *Grindr* stem from misconceptions of gay Asian men having less autonomy or power, for which mass media, including movies and pornography, are in part responsible.

Mass media's constant stereotypical misrepresentations and oversimplifications of the group have misled audiences into believing gay Asian men are subordinate to white gay men. Such men, presented as powerless in Hollywood films and pornography, fall to the bottom of the sexual hierarchy within the gay community. While the queer community is marginalized by the larger community, some gay men further marginalize one another, and Asian gay men's individuality is often ignored. In a community that already faces discrimination, we ought to urgently spread more love and acceptance rather than perpetrate harmful and untrue stereotypes about certain communities.

WORKS CITED

Crazy Rich Asians. Directed by John M. Chu, Warner Brothers, 2018.

"Grindr Users Talk About Sexual Racism." *YouTube*, uploaded by Grindr, 18 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5_juTW4UTU.

Nguyen, Tan H. *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Truong, Kevin. "Asian-American man plans lawsuit to stop 'sexual racism' on Grindr." *NBC News*, 13 July 2018, www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/asian-american-man-threatens-class-action-discrimination-suit-against-grindr-n890946.

The Wedding Banquet. Directed by Ang Lee, Good Machine, 1993.

BROAD BRUSHSTROKES

Nicole Li

There are moments in life that surprise you, and then there are moments when you are so utterly shocked that you lose all sense of the world around you. Passing by a bus stop in Vancouver, Canada, I saw that a promotional poster for the major Hollywood film *Crazy Rich Asians* had been vandalized, saying, “chinks” and “go back to China.” I watched my surroundings fade to a blur as I struggled to comprehend what I had seen. In 2018, *Crazy Rich Asians* became the first movie in twenty-five years to feature an entirely Asian cast, garnering public attention for its representation of diversity in American cinema. The film subverted the Western habit of oversimplifying non-Western cultures and provided a platform for a diverse representation of Asians. It seemed frustratingly ironic that a film praised for debunking racist stereotypes would be slandered with discriminatory language just days before its release. Despite *Crazy Rich Asians*’s attempt to promote a multifaceted portrayal of East Asian culture, it is clear that bias toward Asians lives on in the generalizations we make about Asian lives and Asian culture.

Binyavanga Wainaina’s essay “How to Write about Africa” explores the generalized portrayal of Africa in Western culture as unidimensional and stereotypically helpless. Adopting a tone of pointed sarcasm, Wainaina instructs the reader on how to write about Africa and condemns the oversimplification of a richly complex culture in Western eyes. By emphasizing key elements of the dominant Western narrative of Africa, “How to Write about Africa” draws attention to the methods by which the West blatantly imposes its views and values upon another culture. Although it focuses mainly on the portrayal of African culture, Wainaina’s text provides a basis for analyzing Western bias in the larger socio-political conversation on race and culture, shedding light on the struggle to rise above the problem of generalized stereotypes of Asians in Western society. The stereotypical representation of Asians in American cinema has always been one-sided, often reduced to stock or ‘sidekick’ characters. Asian characters

in movies usually have strong Chinese accents and are funneled into various stereotypes. The examination of stereotyping of Asian characters in Western media, as guided by Wainaina's examination of Western treatment of non-Western cultures, gives meaning to the successes of *Crazy Rich Asians* as a platform for Asians to exist in a space beyond the stereotypes dictated by the dominant Western narrative. By rejecting common stereotypes and granting a certain autonomy and depth to Asian characters, *Crazy Rich Asians* rewrites the Western narrative and establishes a precedent for nondiscriminatory representation in mainstream cinema.

The stereotypical portrayal of Asians in Western media as unidimensionally intelligent prompts an analysis of the term 'model minority.' While the term may seem positive, its hasty generalization can lead to microaggressions and outright discrimination. An instance of how idealization can lead to negative consequences can be observed in "How to Write about Africa," as stereotypical images such as the "sunset" and "rainbows" are emphasized as the defining characteristics of the African continent (Wainaina 546). The use of such clichés robs Africa of its nuance. In a sharply critical sentence, Wainaina reflects the attitudes of the dominant culture by satirically instructing the reader to neglect the variety of Africa's landscape, coyly arguing that the "continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular" (543). Rather than choosing to understand the nuances of the African landscape, there is a distortion of truth in favor of an artificial image that is more "romantic and evocative and unparticular" (543).

Much like the problematic overgeneralization of Africa, the assumption of Asian-American identity as the model minority breeds ignorance and misunderstanding. In a society where attitudes are largely dictated by the West, it's easy to assume idealization as praise or approval, yet the implications of idealization involve a process of generalization and simplification that undermines the rights of Asian Americans to exist as unique human beings rather than uncomplicated stock characters. This dehumanization of minority cultures allows for a subconscious justification of disrespect, thus encouraging the use of derogatory terms such as "chinks."

Paradoxically, the allegedly elevated status of the model minority becomes the basis for social debasement. The very existence of the concept of the model minority conceals the act of dehumanization through an illusion of praise.

Building on the paradox of idealization and dehumanization, the motivations behind Western treatment of other cultures also follows a similar relationship of duality between dominance and submission. In his essay, Wainaina instructs the reader that “Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated,” suggesting that the Western portrayal of Africa is not an attempt at realistic representations, but rather a way for Western society to assert its power (544). This relationship between dominance and subordination can be explained by philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which he writes that a recognition of self is achieved through a recognition of the other, and that the self and the other take on respective roles of dominance and subordination. In a section titled “Self-Consciousness,” Hegel separates the self and the other into identities of the master and the servant. “However,” Hegel writes, “the master is no longer consciousness existing for itself only as the concept of such a consciousness. Rather, it is consciousness existing for itself which is mediated with itself through an other consciousness” (113). Without submission there is no dominance, and without weakness there is no power, hence the Western establishment of a duality of cultures. The assertion of dominance continues as Wainaina orders the reader to “be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed” (544). The emphasis of “importance” versus being “doomed” highlights a relationship of dependence and explains the motivations of such a bias as a search for self-importance. In a similar sense, acts of vandalism and the use of the derogatory term “chinks” reflect not only signs of disrespect, but more explicitly a desire for power and self-recognition ingrained in the biases of Western society.

Wainaina suggests that the desperate desire for dominance exposes a Western lack of effort to understand non-Western cultures. Stereotypes are born out of ignorance of African culture beyond words such as “‘Guerrillas,’ ‘Timeless,’ ‘Primordial’ and ‘Tribal’” (Wainaina 543). In contrast to the stereotypes mentioned in “How to Write

about Africa,” *Crazy Rich Asians* finds its success in the subversion of Asian stereotypes. For example, the emotional strength of the character Astrid counters stereotypes of Asian coolness and reserve, and Kitty Pong’s comedic ignorance disrupts the common assumption of the intelligent model minority. Each character in the movie is fully explored through individual personalities and flaws, thus allowing for a more authentic, human portrayal of Asian characters. *Crazy Rich Asians* is unafraid to portray human beings as flawed and imperfect individuals, each with a certain specificity that is not present in the stereotypes of “prominent ribs, naked breasts” and “Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress” alluded to in “How to Write about Africa” (543). Furthermore, multiple Asian countries are mentioned throughout the movie, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, which serve to emphasize Asia as more than just a singular entity, but rather a continent full of various cultures and idiosyncrasies. The lack of such idiosyncrasies in Western depictions of African culture as described in “How to Write about Africa” illuminates how specificity can come to benefit an accurate and respectful portrayal of certain cultures. The title of Wainaina’s text uses the word “Africa” to simplify all the countries of the African continent into a singular presence, and thus proceeds to write of the stereotypes of Africa in a similar fashion of obvious generalization. Wainaina emphasizes that “broad brushstrokes throughout are good,” satirizing the lack of specificity in Western portrayals of African culture (545). “Broad brushstrokes” wipe away the complexity of African culture. “Broad brushstrokes” vandalize a poster of *Crazy Rich Asians* with racial slurs and derogatory comments. “Broad brushstrokes” paint the dominant Western narrative through a biased lens formed by the tendency to generalize a culture rather than confront the reality of discrimination.

Although the vandalized poster for *Crazy Rich Asians* was eventually cleaned, the reality of Western society’s treatment and portrayal of other cultures still persists. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a breakthrough in terms of its representation of Asian characters, but its successes also draw attention to the fact that Hollywood often generalizes non-Western cultures out of ignorance and a quest for dominance. Through Wainaina’s examination of stereotyping and biases, “How to Write about Africa” questions the power of the dominant narrative in

overshadowing the intricacies of non-Western cultures. The act of stereotyping erases the nuances of Asian culture and forces individual identity into a bubble of clichés. As I sat in the movie theater with my eyes glued to the screen, my mind flashed back to the scene that I witnessed at the bus stop just a few days earlier. Torn between the uplifting story of the movie and the harsh truth of reality, I couldn't help but wonder if our voices could ever rise above the dominant Western narrative.

WORKS CITED

- Chu, Jon M., director. *Crazy Rich Asians*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Terry P. Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write About Africa." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard, et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 543-546.

NOT THE ONLY NINE-YEAR-OLD

Belle Lu

Leaving your hometown is not easy for any nine-year-old. Neither is growing up in a war-torn country; being under constant threat of gang violence; being separated from your father from the age of one, your mother from the age of five; and having multiple near-death experiences with immigration police, *coyote* smugglers, or white men's trained attack dogs. Yet these are the experiences Javier Zamora faced as an immigrant to America in 1999 driven from his home by the brutal aftermath of the Salvadoran Civil War. These are the experiences with which Zamora grapples in his debut poetry collection, *Unaccompanied*. The Center for Justice and Accountability, a human rights watchdog group, estimates that the US-backed Salvadoran Civil War resulted in more than 75,000 civilian deaths and disappearances over the course of twelve years ("El Salvador—CJA"). Zamora's poetry comments on countless repercussions of the war, which forced many Salvadorans to make the risk-filled passage through Central America to the US-Mexico border. The poet recreates these experiences for the reader through the lens of his younger self.

Through his stylistic choices of fragmented sentences and omission of punctuation, Zamora establishes the narrative perspective of a child. In the poems regarding his childhood and border crossing, instead of retelling or reflecting on his experience from his current age, he chooses to relive these experiences as he experienced them, as a nine-year-old. Each individual poem reads more like a scrapbook, with snippets of nature imagery and repeated, mantra-like phrases in both Spanish and English. At first glance, some poems such as "June 10, 1999" may read smoothly, like a story: "first day inside a plane I sat by the window / like when I ride the bus / correction when I rode buses / below the border" (1-4). However, the punctuation, or lack thereof, reveals both Zamora's perspective as a child and his state of mind when recollecting these events. Not only do the long and continuous strings of thought replicate a child's way of speaking, often in one unstructured ramble, they also convey Zamora's attempts to

process these events, as well as his inability to fully process them even now. Similarly, Zamora's omission of punctuation is often employed in conjunction with many instances of flowing enjambment. We understand that these fragments and the lack of punctuation mirror his scattered memories of his childhood and his experience crossing the border into America. We realize that we are undergoing this journey of self-rediscovery with Zamora, and we must try to make sense of these fragments the same way he has.

At times, Zamora also uses this lack of punctuation to reproduce the scene being described. In "Citizenship," Zamora describes his experience watching people on the American side of the border from the Mexican side: "up to that invisible line visible thick white paint / visible booths visible with the fence starting from the booths // booth road booth road booth road office building then the fence / fence fence fence" (7-10). His language not only aurally replicates the physical border that Zamora saw, but also, the repetition of the word "fence" on the page physically resembles the shape of border fences. Moreover, the repetition of "booth road booth road" almost mimics the sound of Zamora's van as it passes by the border, while the harsh sibilance of the repetition of the word "fence" conveys the hostility and threat of the fence itself. It also presents the childlike tendency to name and list everything he sees, a nine-year-old's attempt to pass time and to process his border crossing.

In presenting this childlike perspective, Zamora accomplishes two things: first, he replicates the experience for the readers exactly as he remembers it, allowing the readers to experience his anecdotes organically and authentically; second, by presenting these events with the jumpy thought process of a child, Zamora constantly reminds his readers that these traumatic experiences and memories were imposed on a child. He juxtaposes these sights against the innocence of childhood, amplifying their horror and violence. This juxtaposition can be seen in the poem "Dancing in Buses." The poem begins like a child's song, saying, "Pretend a boom box / blasts over your shoulder. Raise / your hands in the air. Twist them as if picking limes" (1-4). The short lines and the playful comparison of "picking limes" to dancing creates a light mood, one that reminds readers of the innocence of childhood. The images, such as "Look to the left, / slowly as if bal-

ancing orange / baskets. Bend as if picking / cotton” (6-9), establish the idea of a child’s creative imagination, and readers are introduced to the image of a boy likening dancing to the other tasks he encounters. At times, the poem almost reads like a nursery rhyme, saturated with instances of playful rhythm and repetition: “Rake, / do the rake. Sweep, / do the sweep. Do the Pupusa- / Clap—finger dough clumps. Clap” (10-13). However, this changes halfway through the poem. Although the lively instructions continue, they are no longer a child’s instructions for dancing: “your hand’s a ladle, scoop. / Reach and scoop. Now, / duck. They’re shooting. Duck / under the seat, and / don’t breathe. // Hands behind your head. / Drop down. / Look at the ground” (15-22). The previous childlike innocence is replaced, in the same format, with something deadly and horrific: a shooting. Through creating this parallel between dancing and being shot at, Zamora emphasizes how quickly innocence can sour. The poem conveys the trauma of his childhood, torn apart by gang violence, military dictatorships, and extremist militias.

Much like the instances of lack of punctuation and enjambment, it is easy to identify, with a cursory reading, the heavy role that nature plays in Zamora’s poems. In a *New York Times* feature, Zamora explains: “there’s a lot of nature in my work. I think my affinity for it is a way of missing El Salvador” (qtd. in Guadagnino). However, imagery does more than just convey Zamora’s longing for home. His poems weave together images of nature with descriptions of civil war. Readers watch with a young Zamora as the familiar beauty of his home morphs into unfamiliar violence, suffering, and death: “I mistake bullet casings // for cormorant beaks diving / till water churns the color of sunsets” (“The Pier of La Herradura” 10-12). The intertwining images of brutal violence and nature signify young Zamora’s inability to separate the two, underscoring the depth of the civil war’s impact on his psyche.

Another notable feature of Zamora’s poems is his code-switching between English and Spanish, such as in the poem “Ponele Queso Bicho’ Means Put Cheese on It Kid:” “But the dolares and war bicho. Ponele queso. / Ponele queso and the rat won’t leave” (35-36). Quotations spoken to or by Zamora often contain one or two words of Spanish, sometimes italicized and sometimes not, and sometimes

entirely English questions are bracketed in two Spanish question marks, as seen in the line, “¿What does that mean?” (32). Zamora’s frequent code-switching in his work represents his inability to separate the two countries that he has called home. As journalist Vaidehi Mujumdar points out, code-switching, typically defined as “a mixing of languages and speech patterns in conversation,” can be a powerful tool to consider identities. Writing from a multilingual, interracial immigrant family background, Mujumdar asserts, “we so easily navigate and display our layered identities in conversation through ‘code-switching.’” Zamora code-switches in his poems for a similar purpose. Through the way the Spanish text is embedded in the poems, Zamora demonstrates how his Salvadoran childhood, his border-crossing experience, and his subsequent upbringing in America are all integral and inseparable parts of his identity, and thus represent the extent of his belonging and loyalty to both countries.

However, despite his sense of belonging and loyalty, Zamora also presents his struggle of knowing that both countries have displayed hostility toward him. While the violence in El Salvador forced Zamora to leave, the United States has made it clear that he’ll never truly belong. “There’s no path to papers. I’ve got nothing left but dreams,” he acknowledges in “To Abuelita Neli” (7). He iterates in “June 10, 1999” that “more than once / a white man wanted me dead // a white man passed a bill that wants me deported / wants my family deported” (3-6). Zamora is forever in the liminal space between these two loyalties.

By including such instances of Spanish, Zamora portrays his almost organic, real-time processing of the complex issues represented in these poems. Certain phrases are transcribed exactly as he remembers hearing or saying them in their original Spanish, and this lack of translation suggests Zamora’s uncertain state of mind. The fact that it is represented on the page in its original language and phrasing is also indicative of these phrases’ lasting impact on Zamora. These Spanish or partially Spanish phrases also stand out to the readers, because they disrupt the flow of the poem and force readers to reread the line, much like how Zamora has reconsidered these images through the years. Readers realize the lasting impact of his childhood in El

Salvador and his experience of crossing the border, and infer the extent of his trauma and the importance of his experiences even now.

We relive Zamora's experiences from the perspective of him as a child, but Zamora also presents what he's learned as an adult navigating two loyalties. Zamora explores hard-hitting political questions in poems dispersed throughout the anthology that provide, or at least hint at, the historical context surrounding his childhood trauma. The poem "Disappeared" is a list of parties responsible for the Salvadoran Civil War, including "*Batallon Atonal, Bush Sr., Ronald Reagan, Batallon Ramon Belloso*" (28); the poem "ARENA" describes the operations of the ultra-right-wing National Republican Alliance, a Salvadoran political party that, as journalist and historian Richard Gott describes, "fuelled the paramilitary militias and death squads of the 1980s." We relive these traumatic experiences with Zamora and fully realize the shock and intensity of them, but Zamora doesn't want us to stop there. "We craved water; our piss turned the brightest yellow—I am not the only nine-year-old who has slipped my backpack under the ranchers' fences," Zamora writes in "To President-Elect" (3-5). Facing the Trump administration's scathing anti-immigrant rhetoric, polarizing family-separation tactics at the border, and repeated threats to repeal various humanitarian programs for immigrants, including the very one that has protected Zamora from deportation, Zamora pushes for his readers to acknowledge the cruelty behind these policies, to realize that the 200,000 Salvadorans whose rights the Trump administration threatens are not just numbers—they are 200,000 individual stories, much like the one Zamora movingly tells in *Unaccompanied*.

WORKS CITED

- "El Salvador—CJA." *The Center for Justice and Accountability*, 2009, cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador.
- Gott, Richard. "Victory for the left in El Salvador." *The Guardian*, 16 Mar. 2009, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/16/el-salvador.

- Guadagnino, Kate. "The Rooms Where Writers Work." *The New York Times*, 16 Aug. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/t-magazine/writers-room-camille-bordas-javier-zamora-danzysenna.html.
- Jordan, Miriam. "Trump Administration Says That Nearly 200,000 Salvadorans Must Leave." *The New York Times*, 8 Jan. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/us/salvadorans-tps-end.html.
- Mujumdar, Vaidehi. "I don't 'code-switch' to hide my identity. I 'code-switch' to celebrate it." *The Guardian*, 31 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/31/i-dont-code-switch-to-hide-my-identity-i-code-switch-to-celebrate-it.
- Zamora, Javier. "I Have A Green Card Now. But Am I Welcome?." *The New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/opinion/sunday/immigration-el-salvador-trump-united-states.html.
- . *Unaccompanied*. 1st ed., Copper Canyon Press, 2017.
- "ARENA." P. 26.
- "Citizenship." Pp. 63-64.
- "Dancing in Buses." P. 23.
- "Disappeared." P. 28.
- "June 10, 1999." Pp. 79-91.
- "The Pier of La Herradura." Pp. 21-22.
- "'Ponele Queso Bicho' Means Put Cheese on It Kid." Pp. 46-47.
- "To Abuelita Neli." P. 3.
- "To President-Elect." P. 15.

IF THE SHOE DOESN'T FIT

Elizabeth Makris

At my elementary school, there was a giant mobile hanging in the lobby. This mobile displayed words that the school believed were important for us to know, words like 'respect' and 'resilience.' They imprinted these words, and their defining slogans, into our young, impressionable brains. To this day, the first thing I think of when I hear the word resilience is the high-pitched voices of my peers repeating, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again!" Resilience was an easy concept for our young brains to grasp; there were some words, however, that were more challenging. I remember being particularly perplexed by the word 'empathy.' They told us to "put ourselves in someone else's shoes," and I thought, okay, my sneakers are a little too small anyway, who wants to trade shoes? Of course, I was immediately corrected and told that this was not a literal trading of shoes, but that I must imagine myself in someone else's shoes, which really meant someone else's situation.

The little elementary school version of myself had no idea that these words I was learning would follow me throughout my whole life, particularly empathy. Growing up attending private school in Baltimore, where you could travel less than a mile and find children living below the poverty line, I often found myself being asked to empathize, yet I struggled to do so. Separated from them by racial and socioeconomic differences, I could not really imagine myself in the situation of these other children. I would try to "put myself in their shoes" as I had been taught, but through my repeated failure I have come to realize that when we feel what we consider to be 'empathy,' we are more often than not relating a feeling or experience we have had to the other person's situation, not trying to imagine ourselves in their specific situation. We put them in our shoes, not the other way around, and perform a sort of reverse empathy.

Jacob Brogan discusses our tendency to understand others by relating their experiences to our own in his essay "Don't Anthropomorphize Inky the Octopus." Inky the Octopus escaped from his tank at the New Zealand National Aquarium, and the story

of his liberation received a lot of media attention. The world reacted to Inky's escape by thinking about it in human terms. Brogan cites a few of the most anthropomorphizing responses, including one from a journalist on social media: "Today, we are all this octopus, who looked around at his life situation and said, 'F**k this'" (980). This type of reaction, according to Brogan, is an example of "humans turning the most unusual creatures into simple metaphors for our own plights" (980). We do not attempt to understand Inky's escape from his point of view, as we are incapable of seeing the world in the way that an octopus does. They experience the world in a fundamentally different way than we do, as "[t]hey explore and interrogate their world with their arms, which in the case of the octopus, means with their brains—a profoundly alien sensory apparatus" (981). The octopus's way of life is so exotic to us that it makes it nearly impossible for us to imagine ourselves in Inky's situation; therefore, we put Inky into our situation. We use our reverse empathy, looking at ourselves as a way to understand Inky's adventurous flight.

We look at the world through a lens designed by our experiences, and Brogan asks us to step away from this lens and find a new way of understanding. But how far away from the lens can we really move? Brogan complicates the idea that our communication with others and our understanding of them depends on us having something in common, noting, "instead of equating Inky's adventure with our own banal travails, we should stretch our imaginations to better understand his plight" (983). Brogan seems to be arguing that we can understand another being without relating to it, without moving and making sense of the world in the same way. Just because we do not explore the world with our arms does not mean we cannot try to understand something that does. We do not have to fully relate and we do not have to perform our distorted reverse empathy to attempt to understand.

But were my teachers, in introducing me to empathy, really just trying to get me to understand, or was it something else entirely? Edouard Glissant, in "For Opacity," agrees that we do not have to empathize, but he also claims that we do not have to fully understand; in fact, we should not attempt to. He explains:

If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce. (189-190)

To Glissant, “understanding” or empathizing can have negative effects, as implied in his use of the term “reduce.” We try to relate everything back to ourselves in an attempt to fully understand, but in this process, we erase an essential part of what we are attempting to understand. Brogan would most likely agree that anthropomorphism shares the same sentiment as Glissant’s “reduction,” as he professes that “[b]y minimizing [the] details, we’re effectively recontaining Inky and his ilk, trapping them in aquariums of a different sort, enclosures with walls made of misconceptions rather than glass” (980). At the end of his essay, however, Brogan still believes we can “better understand” others without reducing or anthropomorphizing (980), while Glissant would not support any attempt to understand at all. Building on earlier claims, Glissant discusses how we use the term “to grasp” synonymously with “to understand.” He notes that “the verb to grasp contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation” (Glissant 192). With this, Glissant concludes we are incapable of understanding without using our process of reverse empathy.

Although both determine that the type of empathy we use is not beneficial, Glissant does something that Brogan does not: he offers an alternative. Glissant argues for “the right to opacity” (189). In his opinion, people do not need to be reduced, to be transparent; we should accept others as opaque, as something we cannot entirely understand. And with this opacity, we do not need to try to relate or empathize, we simply need to feel in solidarity with one another. He explains, “[t]o feel in solidarity with [someone] or to build with [someone] or to like what [one] does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image” (193). Here, Glissant asserts that we should value feelings of respect and solidarity over feelings of

empathy. But what exactly is solidarity, then? It is defined by *Merriam-Webster* as “unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community interests, objectives, and standards,” but this definition only leads me to another question: what is our common interest?

Susan Sontag, in “Regarding the Pain of Others,” suggests that our common interest maybe be alleviating some of the suffering in the world. She further explores whether or not looking at photos of wartime suffering is a viable way of affecting this change. Sontag specifies that those who look at photos of wartime suffering are “those only nominally concerned about some nasty war taking place in another country” (227). Sontag refers to Virginia Woolf, who defines these viewers as “the educated class” (Woolf qtd. in Sontag 228). Woolf believes that when looking at photos of wartime suffering, these people will become motivated to end the war and suffering, as “such photos cannot fail to unite people of good will” (Woolf qtd. in Sontag 227). In Woolf’s opinion, the only reason we have been slow to motivate against war is “our failure” to empathize, and implies that she believes we can reverse our failure (Woolf qtd. in Sontag 228). But empathy, in the way that we understand it, is not something that can drive us to action. Sontag agrees that using such photographs as “shock therapy” fails to affect meaningful change, and she does not seem to believe that this voyeuristic empathy will ever lead anywhere (231). The reader is left with the sense that Sontag wants us to find a way to motivate and unite against war as well as to feel a sense of responsibility for the suffering of people in warzones. But if empathy will not drive us to action, what will?

Looking at the way Brogan, Glissant, and Sontag denounce empathy, I am forced to wonder why my esteemed private school thought it so important to teach me about it. Looking at it from Glissant’s perspective, empathy comes into direct conflict with the idea of respect, as we are disrespecting part of a person when reducing them. Respect, however, was one of the other important words I was taught. Clearly my teachers did not examine empathy from this perspective, since they made it out to be a valuable, positive emotion. In trying to form me into an empathetic person, they may have unintentionally hindered my ability to simply respect and stand in solidarity.

I was taught to understand other people's pain before I can do anything about it. But especially now, when movements such as Black Lives Matter have come into existence, my fellow Baltimoreans need my solidarity and support more than they need my empathy and understanding. In teaching me to empathize, my school was really trying to teach me to be a caring person and to care for others when they experienced suffering. They wanted to teach me to help others and take action by making me empathize and see that we all share similar feelings, but they failed to realize that empathy is a passive emotion. According to David Penman, a writer for *Psychology Today*, "[e]mpathy is the sharing of another person's state of mind and their emotions whereas compassion actively seeks to relieve another's suffering." I believe my school meant to teach me about solidarity, respect, and, most importantly, compassion—not empathy.

Compassion as an active alternative to our passive empathy is abundantly present in the documentary *4.1 Miles*, which follows a Greek Coast Guard captain who helps Syrian refugees travel the 4.1 miles between the coast of Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos. This captain, who does not even speak the same language as the people he rescues, cares deeply about their safety. In the opening scene of the documentary in which crew members pull children from the water onto the boat, there is a sense of panic amongst both the rescuers and the refugees. The lives of the refugees depend on getting onto this boat, and the rescuers, especially the captain, understand this. More importantly, the rescuers feel as though they have a responsibility to help the refugees. This responsibility, again, may come from a sense of compassion. This leads me again to conclude that compassion is what should be taught in schools if they want to mold us into active and caring members of society.

There is no room for passive emotion in today's political climate. Susan Sontag would want us to be active, and not leave any room for reducing and disrespecting our fellow human beings through voyeurism. Empathy is never going to get us to motivate against sources of suffering and oppression. Empathy and understanding, to Brogan and Glissant, are more a hindrance than a help. To allow everyone to exist with their right to opacity and with minimal suffering, we must find another way to teach children to be active partici-

pants in society. Working within the metaphor of “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes,” we can see that trying on another person’s painful shoes will not make that person’s feet hurt any less.

WORKS CITED

- “4.1 Miles.” *Op-Docs*, season 5, episode 10, NYT Video, 2016. *The New York Times*,
www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004674545/41-miles.html.
- Brogan, Jacob. “Don’t Anthropomorphize Inky the Octopus.” 2016. *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 979-83.
- Glissant, Edouard. “For Opacity.” *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 189-94.
- Penman, Danny. “Is Empathy Our Most Dangerous and Self-Indulgent Emotion?” *Psychology Today*, edited by Kaja Perina, Sussex Publishers, 1 Feb. 2018,
www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindfulness-in-frantic-world/201802/is-empathy-our-most-dangerous-and-self-indulgent-emotion.
- Sontag, Susan. “Regarding the Pain of Others.” 2003. *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 225-33.

A CONVERSATION ABOUT RECOGNITION

Jamal Mohamed

This past June I was given the opportunity to work as an intern for the Neighborhood and Community Relations Department of the City of Minneapolis. My job was to assist the office when engaging with the city, directing my efforts toward educating the younger demographic on city- and neighborhood-level issues. During my time there, I was surrounded by some of the most hardworking and passionate people I have ever met. People who have spent decades of their lives dedicated to their communities, decades invested in trying to rebuild trust in the government in places where it simply wasn't there, decades strengthening their communities and fostering a connection between the people and those in power who were meant to serve them. I watched decades of work unravel on June 23, 2018, when two white police officers fatally shot Thurman Blevins at least fourteen times just blocks away from where I had recently hosted a neighborhood event (Barajas). The articles that were all over the Internet the day that news was released outlined the grisly shooting in horrifying detail:

Thurman Blevins's last words as he was chased by police were pleas for mercy. "Please don't shoot me," he said. "Leave me alone."

...

According to the video, two police officers found Blevins in a residential area, while they were reportedly responding to a 911 call that someone was firing a gun into the air. The police officers, Justin Schmidt, and Ryan Kelly, quickly and vocally identified that Blevins had a firearm. They got out of their car, telling him, "Put your fucking hands up." Blevins began to run, and police chased him—telling him to put his hands up and that they would shoot him. Blevins claimed he didn't do anything and didn't have a gun. (Lopez)

I opened my work email early that day to find the video, released by the Minneapolis Police Department, along with a statement offering a safe space to anyone who needed to digest what had happened. I was the last in the office to see it, and by that point in the day, there were no more tears to shed and no more sad faces. No more grief. People moved on. Despite the horrifying gravity of the situation, it was still just another day at the office.

To live in America as a black man, woman, or child means to run the risk of dying at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve. It means to constantly live in fear, always aware that your future might be determined solely based on the color of your skin. According to the *Washington Post*, police officers shot and killed 229 African Americans in 2018. A substantial number of those victims were completely unarmed (“Fatal Force”). The title of Claudia Rankine’s essay “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning” is an accurate description of the reality we face. In her essay, published in the *New York Times*, Rankine writes about the constant fear racism forces on the black community, especially by the police, through the perspective of mothers of black children, specifically the mothers of dead black children. Rankine cites the aftermath of the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till by Mississippi racists in 1955 as a demonstration of the power a mother’s grief can have. Emmett Till’s murdered body was found bloated and horrifyingly disfigured, yet despite this his mother “demanded his body be transported from Mississippi . . . to his home in Chicago” and “requested an open coffin.” She wanted people to see his bruised and beaten body, refusing to “keep private grief private” (Rankine). This brave action served as an important message, a refusal to be silenced, a cry from the mountaintops against the threat that is anti-blackness.

Rankine writes that racism is embedded “in [American] culture . . . in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies, in our communities and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system.” Our culture is centralized in whiteness, and the injustices that African Americans face have become normalized. It’s not surprising to see instances of racism, hate crimes, or police brutality. Rankine believes

that this is the reason nothing changes. Rankine feels that our struggles are swept under the rug and that the normalization of dead black bodies nurtures the furthering of anti-blackness. Black Lives Matter, the social justice movement founded by Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza, has been fighting against this normalization. It stands against the anti-black establishment with its simple yet powerful message: black lives matter.

Through this message, Black Lives Matter stands for a very important concept: recognition. Rather than fighting for self-preservation, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did during the Civil Rights Movement, Rankine believes that the Black Lives Matter movement asks for “a more internalized change,” or recognition of the people who have lost their lives, have been subjected to racism, and have suffered under our anti-black society. It stands for “an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture” (Rankine). Right now, police brutality is an everyday occurrence. This normalization enables police brutality and racially charged violence to continue. Only when everyone recognizes that it is a problem and that black lives do in fact matter can steps be taken to stop it from continuing. But what does this recognition look like? Rankine writes about a national sense of guilt being the catalyst for change, writing that it serves as a model of “intervention and interruption” and that grief for the deceased “might align some of us, for the first time, with the living.” Based on this, it is clear she feels that we need to put racism under the spotlight, but the question remains: how can we achieve this?

The concept of recognition is explored in Ira Boudway’s essay “NBA Refs Learned They Were Racist, and That Made Them Less Racist.” Boudway writes about a study on NBA referees conducted between 1991 and 2002. The study examined how often referees would call fouls on players of races different from their own. The study found that white refs were much more likely to display bias, calling more fouls on black players than anybody else on the court. Even more interesting than the findings themselves is the effect of this study: the NBA demonstrated a “dramatic decrease in bias” as “a causal result of the awareness associated with the treatment”

(Boudway). "Once the results of the original study were widely known," Boudway writes, "the bias disappeared."

This is the effect of the type of recognition Rankine calls for. The referees had a clear bias, the press recognized that bias when the study went public, and things changed. Boudway argues that "The remedy might be to locate bigotry and bring it into the light," and one clearly effective way to do this is by exposing racism and cultural bias through investigation. When put under a magnifying glass, there is no way for bias to go unnoticed, and it can therefore not survive. But large investigations like this one aren't feasible in everyday life. You can't measure generalized racist behavior like an NBA foul. Racism in America is more dynamic than that, and while there have been studies on the police measuring how often they violate the rights of African Americans, the situations vary too much from case to case. Real life isn't as cut and dried as the NBA, and because of this, recognition of bias is too limited.

Binyavanga Wainaina provides the necessary alternative in his essay "How to Write About Africa," shining a light on the misconceptions that surround the Western perception of Africans through satire. He instructs his reader to "[n]ever have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it," calling out the notion that Africans can't possibly be as high functioning as whites. Through his satirical style, he is also calling for recognition, but rather than asking it from just NBA refs, he's asking it from everyone. Wainaina wants his black readers to recognize the stereotypes built around them, and his white readers to understand the absurdity of said stereotypes. He expects his audience to reflect on how their own ideology perpetuates these stereotypes, while his biting words incite a feeling of shame in his reader.

Wainaina further asks his reader to "[d]escribe, in detail . . . dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies," bringing up the normalization of black bodies that troubles Rankine. He states that they should "not feel queasy about this" as they are trying "to get aid from the West." Wainaina attempts to address the West's desensitization to black people's suffering, connecting it to what he ironically calls "the 'real Africa.'" This form of recognition is much more meaningful. It invites everyone to stop and reflect on their own biases, and really think

about how these biases feed the anti-blackness that is so clearly embedded in our society. This invitation brings everyone together, and through this togetherness, Rankine's "national state of mourning" becomes possible.

Anti-black racism is part of our culture and thrives in our society. Black people are viewed as subhuman and have been historically categorized as less than whites since the birth of our nation. Due to this, police get away with murdering us in cold blood. We are ruthlessly slain in hate crimes because of the color of our skin and our future is taken out of our hands by the establishment. Claudia Rankine writes about how a "sustained state of national mourning for black lives is called for in order to point to undeniability of their devaluation." We need to, as a country, recognize the problem. Everyone needs to stop and recognize where our society is, and how African Americans are mistreated. Whether it be through an investigation, or through honest reflection, recognition is necessary for the betterment of society. Only when the problem is fully acknowledged can it finally be solved.

WORKS CITED

- Barajas, Joshua. "The Minneapolis Officers Who Fatally Shot Thurman Blevins Won't Be Charged." *PBS*, 31 July 2018, www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/the-minneapolis-officers-who-fatally-shot-thurman-blevins-wont-be-charged-heres-what-we-know.
- Boudway, Ira. "NBA Refs Learned They Were Racist, and That Made Them Less Racist." *Bloomberg*, 7 Feb. 2014, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-07/learning-they-were-racist-made-nba-referees-less-racist.
- "Fatal Force." *The Washington Post*, 31 Mar. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?utm_term=.d2b9fed897af.
- Lopez, German. "'Please Don't Shoot Me': Thurman Blevins's Last Words Before Police Did Just That." *Vox*, 30 July 2018, www.vox.com/identities/2018/7/30/17629722/minneapolis-police-thurman-blevins-shooting-video.

Rankine, Claudia. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." *The New York Times*, 22 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write about Africa." *Granta*, 2 May 2019, granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa.

MAZES OF THE MIND

Siri Ranganath

The concept of the labyrinth, a seemingly impossible puzzle, holds a special place in art and literature across many cultures. We remember the myth of the Minotaur hidden in his maze, devouring hordes of ancient Greek children, while the hero Theseus navigated the infamous labyrinth in pursuit of the monster. We remember the Mahabharat and how Indian warriors, centuries ago, would get lost in man-made labyrinth formations in battle, ultimately reaching their doom when attacked by the enemy. In *Labyrinths*, a collection of short stories, essays, and parables, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges shows how the human mind loses itself in metaphorical labyrinths, intellectual realms in which one's perception of logic and reality are distorted. His disorienting *Labyrinths* forces us to take upon the seemingly impossible puzzle and derive something meaningful from it.

Borges freely experimented with the conventions of Spanish literature. One great Spanish literary tradition he toyed with was the *cuento enmarcado*, the frame story, or a story told within a story. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is perhaps the prime example of Spanish frame stories. Don Quixote, the protagonist, reads chivalric romances and falsely fancies himself a knight. Meanwhile, Cervantes reads the tale of Don Quixote, and the Moorish scholar, Cid Hamete Benengeli, narrates the text that Cervantes is reading, the same story that the protagonist, Don Quixote, is living in his present. Within one novel, there are three narrative spheres, three frame stories. *Don Quixote* is arguably the foundation of Spanish literature, and Borges clearly is influenced by Cervantes's technique, especially with respect to metafiction (Corona 422).

A notable example of this influence are the many frame stories in *Labyrinths*. What results is an innumerable quantity of characters, plot lines, and endings, some of which are contradictory by nature. "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a prime example of this literary effect. This short story takes the form of a confession by Dr. Yu Tsun, a German operative during World War I. Upon finding out that a

British agent is pursuing him, Dr. Tsun must tell German forces the location of a secret artillery park before he is killed. On his journey, he finds Stephen Albert, a renowned sinologist, and together, they discuss the mystery of Ts'ui Pên, one of Tsun's ancestors. Pên is a Chinese novelist who infamously left his last book, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, unfinished to work on a labyrinth, but no one was ever able to find this labyrinth. Pên's novel is our frame story, and Borges guides us through the complexity of this fictional text. Ultimately, Tsun ends up murdering Albert and facing the death penalty for his actions, but his mission is successful. Albert is the name of the city where the artillery park is located, and when news of his crime spread, the Germans are able to understand Tsun's signal.

The labyrinth Pên had been trying to create in the story was not physical, but intellectual. The book he was writing was his labyrinth. After all, the title of Pên's novel, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, describes the appearance of a labyrinth. The novel contained nearly infinite alternative endings for the main character, where Pên "creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork" ("The Garden of Forking Paths" 37). In some scenarios, Pên's protagonist defeats an intruder, and in some, he gets killed. Through Pên, a fictional writer, Borges questions conventional notions of time and space, mapping reality in the context of a metaphysical labyrinth. For each action, there are endless possible outcomes, similar to how in a labyrinth, with every turn, with each "forking path," there are many more paths to take. Albert, the sinologist, notes that "[s]ometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge . . . in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend" ("The Garden of Forking Paths" 26). The Borgesian idea of different but coexisting endings is as seductive as it is intimidating. At this juncture, the reader must ask herself what story is being told, who is telling it, and in how many different ways it can end. Thus, we find ourselves lost in Borges's mind games, in his epic labyrinth, where as soon as one obtains a plausible interpretation, another fork in the philosophical path appears. Solving this labyrinth cannot be equated with finding the answer to a single question. Borges poses so many questions, both the logistical and the metaphysical, in "The Garden of Forking Paths" that all we can do, in the midst of our own disori-

entation, is move through the multiple frames within the story to understand as many ideas as possible.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” presents an intellectual labyrinth under the guise of a compelling mystery plot. The story exists in the suspenseful realm of the exciting, where secret agents, detectives, and the common enemy frolic against the backdrop of World War I. It seems to follow the formula of the modern detective story invented by Edgar Allan Poe, whose literary influence on Borges is widely documented. As noted by Steven Wenz in his review of *Borges’s Poe: The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America*, Poe “shaped Borges as a writer and thinker, while Borges’s interpretations of Poe had a lasting effect on Poe’s reputation within Spanish” (472). Within the genre of the modern detective story, it is worth noting that Poe also invented the subgenre of ‘locked-room’ mysteries. In one of his early short stories, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a mother and her daughter are murdered in a locked room, prompting a detective to investigate how such an event could be possible, given that no one could enter the crime scene. The locked room then became an iconic mark of the unsolvable mystery.

John T. Irwin explores the literary trope of the locked room in his book *The Mystery to a Solution*. Irwin defines what the symbols of locked rooms and labyrinths represent within the context of the mysteries written by Poe and Borges. The frustration of Poe’s locked-room situation arises from the fact “that the room’s appearance of being unopened is only an appearance, an outward illusion that does not represent an inner reality.” On the other hand, in Borges’s writing, “a labyrinth is always open from the outside but appears to be unopenable from within,” making it a “self-locking enclosure that uses the directionality of the human body as the bolt in the lock” (Irwin 4). Poe created the notion of the locked-room mystery and toyed with the idea of labyrinths in his work. Borges built upon Poe’s original premise and prioritized the labyrinth.

Thus, it is important to further examine the relationship between the locked room and the labyrinth in order to see Borges’s philosophical progression from Poe’s symbols to his own. In her book *The Double, The Labyrinth, and The Locked Room*, Ilana Shiloh explains the many manifestations of these three important images in

suspense texts. The locked-room scenario begs for deductive reasoning and defeats its own assumption of “the impossibility of a rational solution,” but the labyrinth is far more ambiguous (Shiloh 6). Yet, the labyrinth’s ambiguity provides a more rational approach to looking at a mystery because it acknowledges the complexity of the situation itself. The labyrinth confirms a “belief in the existence of order, causality and reason underneath the chaos of perceived phenomena” (Shiloh 6). Locked rooms and labyrinths use opposing rationales to create the same effect. With respect to Borges’s multiple frame stories and infinite endings, we find ourselves asking once again what story we believe. In this intellectual labyrinth, how do I find my way out when it is impossible to trust which story Borges is trying to tell? With so many frames, we are boxed in. We are trapped in the Poe-inspired locked room and the Borgesian labyrinth with only our sense of reasoning to guide us.

The conflict of whether or not to trust the narrator remains prominent in many stories in *Labyrinths*. In “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” Borges’s narrator Ryan writes an account of the 1824 assassination of his great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick, an Irish revolutionary. Kilpatrick was the leader of the rebellion, but prior to the revolt, he was murdered in a theater. His martyrdom was a poignant moment in the Irish memory, as his unjust death impassioned the Irish. However, the truth is that Kilpatrick was not a hero but a traitor, as he exposed the conspirators’ plans to the British. He wanted to die honorably for the movement, so Nolan, one of the conspirators, crafted the perfect political death for Kilpatrick. Borges disorients his reader by reversing the roles of whom we would traditionally consider the protagonist and the antagonist of his texts. We walk into stories with a presumption of who the hero is and who the villain is. Kilpatrick initially appears to be an obvious hero, as Borges describes him as a “secret and glorious captain” and likens him to Moses, who “glimpsed but could not reach the promised land” (“Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” 72). In comparing Kilpatrick to Moses, Borges attributes an incorruptible morality and truth to Kilpatrick. In Ryan’s account, he is the perfect hero, but in our minds, he cannot be because we know of his betrayal. This contradiction between the savior Ryan portrays him as and the renegade Kilpatrick truly was places us in yet

another Borgesian labyrinth (or perhaps Poe's locked room) where a trustworthy judgement of Kilpatrick is hard to find.

If there are perfect heroes, there are perfect villains. In the Christian New Testament, Jesus, as the Son of God, is associated with true good, whereas the traitor Judas Iscariot is associated with true evil. In Borges's "Three Versions of Judas," fictional writer Nils Runeberg questions to what extent Judas was driven by evil. He develops three theories explaining Judas' intentions and comes to the conclusion that the third version of Judas is a "reflection" of Jesus who similarly sacrifices some aspect of himself for the good of humanity ("Three Versions of Judas" 96). If Judas had not exposed Jesus to the Romans, the world would not have come to know of his divinity and of the ideas he represented. Jesus' sacrifice was only one of the flesh, while Judas' was one of the soul. He was reviled by history for inciting man's salvation. He "renounced honor, morality, peace and the kingdom of heaven, just as others, less heroically, renounce pleasure" ("Three Versions of Judas" 97). Borges, through Runeberg's voice, dares to say that Jesus was less heroic than Judas and ultimately suggests that Judas is our perfect hero as opposed to our perfect villain. Such a bold storytelling choice suggests Borges's affinity for abandoning conventional thinking.

How do we find ourselves in an intellectual labyrinth? We tend to identify traditional storytelling patterns—a good guy, a bad guy, and a simple plot—and we latch onto them. "The heroic, the beautiful, the assassinated Fergus Kilpatrick" lies in the theater ("Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" 72), appearing honorably dead. The Redeemer Jesus stays nailed atop the cross in agony. Judas hangs from a noose, ending his life in the aftermath of Jesus' death. We lose our trust in the narrator when we cannot discern who is good and who is evil, when we cannot trust our own sense of direction in a story. We do not know where we are going, nor do we know how to get out. Upon beginning one of his stories, Borges lulls his readers into a false sense of security. He creates a narrative base that is easy to understand, then leaves his readers with an entirely new and confusing idea, placing them in a mental labyrinth and forcing them to seek out their own enlightenment.

Given Borges's personal life, this pattern in his writing makes sense. In the late 1940s, Borges's sight began to deteriorate. By 1955, he was completely blind (Balderston). The 1940s and 1950s were a time when Borges published his most widely acclaimed short story collections, including a large majority of the stories published in *Labyrinths*. The extended metaphor of the labyrinth is present in almost all of these stories. At the time these stories were written, Borges was coming to the realization that his blindness was inevitable, and perhaps his fascination with the idea of getting lost in a labyrinth, completely incapable of seeing beyond the crisscrossing paths, may relate to his experience living as a man slowly growing accustomed to the dark and the feeling of being perpetually lost. His work after 1955 comprised of poems and stories offers insight to how he perceived the world. In a poem titled "On His Blindness," Borges laments his loss of sight. He writes that he is surrounded by a "luminous mist . . . that breaks things down into a single thing, colorless, formless . . . into a thought" (Borges and Mezey 71). It makes sense that Borges likens blindness to mist. Mist distorts otherwise clear images. However, in some interviews, Borges refers to that "luminous mist" from his poem, "as though it were a kind of blessing, a removal of all distraction from what was most important, most real—the life of the mind" (O'Connell). Maybe his blindness had forced him to take notice of what he normally would ignore when he still had his eyesight. Perhaps the labyrinths he had written about brought him clarity as a thinker, as did his blindness. From that mist emerged a greater sense of sight: the ability to solve the intellectual labyrinth, where the stories to be told and the conclusions to be made exist in infinite quantities.

It is this greater sense of sight that Borges likely hoped we would acquire. But what does it mean to solve the intellectual labyrinth? Once again, solving the intellectual labyrinth does not mean forcefully extracting a piece's meaning or trying to find a childlike 'moral of the story.' In fact, perhaps I have made a mistake in using the word 'solve' with respect to intellectual labyrinths. That would wrongly imply that Borges's stories are definitive, that there is a single, correct interpretation of each tale. These stories beg us to abandon the restrictive mindsets we are accustomed to and force us to develop a creative sense of logic in a narrative realm where reality is as complex as it is simple.

Borges asks us, and his characters, to find the way out of a mental maze only to lead us into another in a repeating loop. He mentions once that our hero Kilpatrick “is rescued from these circular labyrinths by a curious finding, a finding which then sinks him into other, more inextricable and heterogenous labyrinths” (“Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” 73). With that in mind, is it not possible that, in the process of getting lost in each labyrinth in succession, we achieve a greater understanding of the complexities of the world? In “Three Versions of Judas,” Runeberg proposes three different theories about Judas because after he writes one, he sees another logical route to investigate. Even Dr. Tsun of “The Garden of Forking Paths,” upon learning about the idea of infinite outcomes, questions his own motives for murdering the sinologist. We get lost over and over again in these Borgesian labyrinths. Yet, we truly do derive something meaningful from them: a new way of thinking, an insatiable urge to enter a new mental maze, and the chance to start the process all over again.

WORKS CITED

- Balderston, Daniel. “Borges, Jorge Luis.” *Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature, 1900-2003*, edited by Daniel Balderston, and Mike Gonzalez, Routledge, 1st edition, 2004.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths*, translated by James Irby. New Directions, 1962.
- . “The Garden of Forking Paths.” pp. 19-29.
- . “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero.” pp. 72-75.
- . “Three Versions of Judas.” pp. 95-100.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, and Robert Mezey. “On His Blindness.” *Poetry*, vol. 164, no. 2, 1994, pp. 71-72. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20603977.
- Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*, translated by E. C. Riley. G. Allen & Unwin, 1986.
- Irwin, John T. “A Clew to a Clue: Locked Rooms and Labyrinths in Poe and Borges.” *Raritan*, vol. 10, Spring 1991, p. 40.

- Láin Corona, Guillermo. "Borges and Cervantes: Truth and Falsehood in the Narration." *Neophilologus*, vol. 93, no. 3, 16 Dec. 2008, pp. 421–437.
- Mabbott, Thomas Ollive, et al. "Edgar Allan Poe." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Oct. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Edgar-Allan-Poe.
- O'Connell, Mark. "Two New Books About 'Borges.'" *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2017, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/two-new-books-about-borges.
- Shiloh, Ilana. *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room: Metaphors of Paradox in Crime Fiction and Film*. Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2011.
- Wenz, Steven. "Borges's Poe: The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America by Emron Esplin (review)." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 54 no. 2, 2017, pp. 472-475.

WAS EVER WOMAN IN THIS HUMOR WON?

Jules Talbot

In the annual National Shakespeare Competition, 20,000 high schoolers from across the country perform a sonnet and a monologue of twenty lines from the Bard's canon. A selection packet is released a month before the preliminary round, and choosing from it is a careful, tactical undertaking. My choices, after rereading around six hundred quatrains and thirty-seven plays, were Sonnet 129 and King Richard from *Richard III*, 5.3.189-213. *Richard III* is the conclusion of Shakespeare's Henry VI tetralogy of histories, and the monologue I rehearsed was Richard's sleepless night before the Battle of Bosworth, where he will die. "Alas," the king muses in the monologue's climactic lines, "I rather hate myself" (5.3.201-3). It's an identity crisis, a personal reckoning, a dissociative episode, psychological cannibalism. Having betrayed everyone there is to betray, his treachery turns upon the last man standing: himself. As such, my performance had to establish the man Richard was before his mental break and who he was afterward in less than two minutes. I researched Richard III's "bunch-back" (4.4.83), Shakespeare's dramatization of the historical Richard's scoliosis, to differentiate my body from his. I watched Sir Laurence Olivier's *Richard III* for the BBC from 1955, read Anthony Sher's performance diary from his 1984 production with the Royal Shakespeare Company, saw Ian McKellen's 1995 performance, and scrutinized Al Pacino's rendition from 1996.

By what felt like a series of oversights, I kept advancing in the competition, to semi-regionals, to regionals, until, of the ten finalists in Massachusetts, my fanatical devotion to Richard qualified me to represent the Boston Branch at Nationals on April 23, the day of our Bard's birth. After qualifying, a sponsor of the event approached me with a t-shirt, a commemorative bust of Shakespeare, and a question.

"You're such a lovely young woman," he said. "Why would you play a man?"

I was taken aback. So many qualities separate me from Richard—say, general levels of bloodlust—that gender hadn't really been a

consideration. In Act III, Lord Buckingham, Richard's confidant, advises him to "[p]lay the maid's part: still answer 'nay,' and take it" (3.7.52). To Buckingham, it's a misogynistic joke where "no" means "yes," but if we take it literally, what parts are there for maids to play? Lady Anne, whose sole purpose is to be wooed, won, and subsequently discarded? For actresses, *Richard III* is a five-act marathon of grief. They weep through what is more a test of endurance than a performance. Why would I choose to play a woman?

In her essay "The Mother of All Questions," author Rebecca Solnit writes about a question-and-answer period she led after a lecture on Virginia Woolf. Did her audience ask about *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*? No. Instead, "the subject that seemed to most interest a number of people was whether Woolf should have had children" (762). Throughout her career in literary circles, Solnit fielded many of these questions about women artists' reproductive, not creative, capacities, including her own. Like me, she was interviewed by a man preoccupied with her female body "instead of talking about the products of [her] mind" (762). She calls what we experienced "closed questions . . . questions that push you into the herd or nip at you for diverging from it, questions that contain their own answers" (763). Questions laden with assumptions. Questions that presuppose. What the contest sponsor said did not exactly upset me, but it stuck with me, sparking a disquieting curiosity, reminding me of the friction between how I perceive myself and how I am perceived. Really, I barely notice my womanhood until it's remarked upon. I never meant to write an essay about being a woman. I can't say I ever meant to be one, either. The judge's question hadn't occurred to me, but I had to answer.

Finals were in New York City at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in Lincoln Center. The performance order was randomized into three sections of about twenty. Between every section, the competitors had ten minutes to walk the stage and orient themselves, ten minutes of cacophonous rehearsal, all of Shakespeare's plays performed simultaneously. I spied Act III of *As You Like It*, with Act IV of *The Merchant of Venice* ensuing just upstage and Act II of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* transpiring downstage left. Monologue contests aren't anything like regular theatre. Actually, they're nonsense, surreal

pageants, plays crushed into their smallest units of coherence. Actors saunter onstage, recite with no frame of reference, and then exit. Characters are separated from plot, actors from each other. When it was my section's turn onstage, I practiced writhing in Richard's spiritual agony ("Alas, I rather hate myself . . . Alas, I rather hate myself . . ."), as I had practiced for months. All at once, the absurdity of the scene dawned on me: dozens of strangers pacing in circles, repeating themselves. That's the strangest thing about these plays, dramatic events reenacted again and again by new casts of people, long-dead kings and queens resurrected for every performance, their lives ending and unending in perpetuity. I almost felt bad for our characters, for whom there was no escaping their stories. Richard III has died and will die again at Bosworth Field forever.

Fittingly, my Richard III came in third. Maybe, to win the silver, I should've done Richard II. There was a speech about Shakespeare's continued relevance today, which, evidently, we exemplified, given that we were teenagers and that made us relevant. Contestants and judges convened for photos, and as we winners were rearranged, I heard the man whose arm I was squeezed under, an influential senior member of the English Speaking Union, say:

"Put her in front. We have to see her. The pretty girl must go in front."

And, as I was put up front, I belatedly realized he was referring to me. It couldn't be "I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass," not "I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty to strut before a wanton ambling nymph" (1.1.14-17), not I, the last Plantagenet king of England and the 2018 second runner-up of the high school National Shakespeare Competition. Suddenly, I felt that I had utterly failed. I was an imposter who fell for my own disguise, who lost myself so sincerely, so utterly, in the character, dreaming in iambic pentameter.

"Richard III," I said, "is not a pretty girl."

He laughed, but it wasn't a joke.

Weren't there more interesting questions to ask? When Antony Sher played Richard, his actor's diary had chapters upon chapters of entries on Richard's "bunch-back." Couldn't a judge have asked about mine? Solnit "should have said . . . that our interrogation of Woolf's

reproductive status was a soporific and pointless detour from the magnificent questions her work poses,” just as, in my case, the judges’ interrogation of my gender was a diversion from the magnificence of Richard (763). Or was it? Was I being unreasonable? With authors such as Woolf or Solnit, we can separate the body of work from the physical body, but what if the body is the work?

“Actor neutral” refers to the stance of an actor not performing, absent of any specific physicality or discernible character—the nearest thing to being without self. I have always been tempted by actor neutral, by the idea that our bodies can truly become the malleable, expressive instruments of our imaginations, but my inescapable physical reality shapes every character I play. I would like to be a mind unencumbered by a body, but I’m not. When I watch archival videos of the competition, on some viewings, I’m embarrassed by it. We’re teenage Shakespearean thespians, isn’t that funny? But more than that, I fear, watching those videos, that my performance is a butchery of the text, a clownish facsimile of masculinity, that I’m just a girl. Solnit tells me “just because the question can be answered doesn’t mean that I ought to answer it, or that it ought to be asked,” and that “not every question needs an answer,” but it will be asked, and every actress is expected to answer (726–727). Maybe actor neutral isn’t attainable to all of us. Maybe my best will always be a novelty, never definitive. It wasn’t supposed to be a female version of Richard, or a subversive feminist treatment where the House of Lancaster represents the patriarchy, or another treatise on Virginia Woolf’s uterus. But I’ve been at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre, and I’ve rehearsed twenty lines of blank verse hundreds upon hundreds of times in a mirror and bound my breasts under two sports bras, only to be told that I’m pretty. Maybe I’ll always be playing the maid’s part.

WORKS CITED

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*, edited by Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Folger Digital Texts, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Solnit, Rebecca. "The Mother of All Questions." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard, LePan, Ruddock, Stuart, 3rd. Ed., 2016, pp. 762-7.

CONNECTING WITH THE LONE RANGER

Grace Andreasen

I got into the town of State College around eight o'clock in the evening, but it was a dark eight o'clock, a fall evening, not like summer when the sun refuses to set. I'd taken a bus from New York to Pennsylvania to visit my older sister at school. I enjoyed five hours of pure solitude during which I'd listened to Bruce Springsteen and spread out across two seats. I waited alone in a Walmart parking lot for my sister and her friend to pick me up. It was cold and my jacket was too thin. I didn't bring my down coat because I don't like how bulky it makes me look. My mom would have told me to wait inside the Walmart because it's not safe for a woman to be alone at night. It was too lovely a night to go inside though, and I didn't want to let my being a woman get in the way of experiencing it.

An individual was standing next to me in a camo uniform and a buzz cut. At first glance I thought they were a woman because they were so small, but when they turned around I realized he was a young boy, around eleven years old. He was collecting money from passersby and putting it in the old combat boot he was holding. We locked eyes, and I became aware that I had been staring at him, something my mom often scolds me for doing. I felt like I had been caught doing something wrong. Not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable, I asked what he was collecting money for. He told me that it was for his junior cadet troop. He looked at me expectantly. I didn't know what to say after that, so I fumbled awkwardly in my pocket and gave him some money for his boot. He told me to be safe out there and I assured him I would. A girl around my age walked passed me and entered the store. She was wearing a bulky jean jacket and large boots, her hair was cropped short and she wasn't wearing any makeup. She was what you would call butch. She reminded me of a cowboy with her swaggering gait and air of independence. I watched her as she walked in and she smiled at me. I hoped she would walk back out

before my sister arrived. A few minutes later she did and I smiled back at her. She stopped and told me she thought I was cute. My heart fluttered fiercely, undeniably. I wanted to reach out and brush her bangs out of her eyes, to let my hand rest on her cheek. My face flushed red with excitement, with shame. She walked away before I could answer.

The men in Hannes Schmid's exhibition *American Myth* lounge, one in the back of a truck, some on horseback, Southwestern sunlight surrounding them like religious icons, their tan skin glistening in the blazing heat. One in particular, the subject of *Cowboy #5 (Tailgate)*, has a cigarette dangling from his sun-weathered mouth, the metal of his lighter and his oversized belt buckle glimmering. His denim-clad legs are spread wide with one knee bent and the other resting lazily off the end of the truck's tailgate. Well-worn leather chaps adorn his calves, signaling to the viewer that he is perhaps taking a break, relishing his solitude after a long day's work. In another of Schmid's paintings, *Cowboy #001 (Marlboro Man)*, a man sits proudly on a strong, sturdy horse against the backdrop of rust-colored mountains and a bright blue sky. A group of other cowboys can be seen behind him in the distance, but he is separate from them, an outlaw, entirely alone. Perhaps he is their fearless leader, or maybe he has decided to break off from the rest and find his own path. These men are paragons of the much desired 'independent male' stereotype, 'bad boys,' if you will. I find myself attracted to them, not in a lustful sense, but I find myself wanting to be them. Many pieces in Schmid's *American Myth* have at least one cowboy in them, but in not a single painting or photograph can the man's face be seen. In every piece, their wide-brimmed hats hide their faces. Their identities are their own. They have the choice to be anonymous, and that is why they are so attractive. I feel wrong for even looking at them. They are not putting on airs or wondering what people think of them, they can't be bothered with things as trivial as that. Schmid's cowboys have adventures to embark on, lives to live, all for themselves and not for the sake of anyone else. I long to be them.

John Berger writes, "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude" (54). In nude paintings, the

women's bodies and their subservience to the spectator are what make them desirable. Berger explores this concept in depth in his collection of essays *Ways of Seeing*. In Schmid's paintings, the men have the luxury of not being on display. What makes them so intriguing is their refusal to be seen, their power and independence, not their beauty or submission. These men are not acting as though they are being watched, they are simply living their lives, whereas the women in nudes are aware of their spectator. Berger explains this dichotomy: "men act and women appear" (47). The 'bad boy' trope so common in television and movies is mirrored here in Schmid's cowboys. What makes these men so desirable is the fact that they do not care.

On my solo bus ride to State College, I read *The Bell Jar*, a book I've wept over countless times but still come back to. I have a complicated relationship with Sylvia Plath. I used to hate her. I hated her before I even knew her. My opinion of her now is far from hate, but I still feel a certain amount of embarrassment when I read her works in public. I feel ashamed for this embarrassment. I was first introduced to Plath in my seventh grade English class. Her name was brought up, and my teacher, Mr. Cowan, immediately scoffed and referred to her as the patron saint of whiny teenage girls. At this point in my life I did not want to be grouped with other girls, not because I thought I was somehow better than them, but for the same reason I stopped wearing the color pink in fourth grade: internalized misogyny and the rejection of the feminine. I read *The Bell Jar* as a sophomore, and was floored by it. Never had I read something that so perfectly articulated my innermost feelings, nor had something expressed the human condition in such a way. I was reading it between classes one day and a friend inquired as to what I was reading, to which my male English teacher butted in and said, "Oh, it's the girly version of *The Catcher in the Rye*." This was, and still is, a phenomenon I experience often. Men own the human condition. Women are just there to experience things alongside them. Cowboys on horseback are independent spirits, purveyors of the desert, who hold all the angst and nuance of the world in their gaze. This reality of being is not given to women.

Hannah Gadsby, in her revelatory stand-up special *Nanette*, wonderfully articulates this concept, opining, "I believe women are just as corruptible by power as men, because you know what, fellas,

you don't have a monopoly on the human condition, you arrogant fucks." Women are just as much living, breathing human beings as men are, but men, it seems, are the only ones allowed to take part in the human condition. Men are the human standard, the biological default, making anyone who is not a man feel as though they have less of a right to live. This is why I have an undeniable love for Hannes Schmid's paintings. I want to be these men. I want to live inside their skin and know what it's like to experience the world without pressure or expectation to be a certain way, to not be on display and be overly conscious of what I look like all of the time. I want to befriend these men, to know their hopes and fears, to just be able to ride alongside them without the fear of being a girl alone with a man. But I know this can't be, for there will always be the obstacle of my gender that keeps me from being able to live as fully and lushly as I need to.

My sister, Emma, jumped out of her friend's car in the Walmart parking lot when she saw me. She threw her arms around me and laughed. I hugged her back tightly, she smelled like home. That night we went to a frat party with a high school stereotype theme. All the boys were wearing jerseys from various sports teams and all of the girls wore short, plaid schoolgirl skirts with knee socks. As problematic as I find the whole slutty Catholic schoolgirl thing, I borrowed a skirt from one of my sister's roommates. She gave me a top to go with it, but I changed into a long-sleeved shirt before we left. I stayed plastered against the wall for the entirety of the hour or so we were at the frat, frequently tugging my skirt down, trying to get it to somehow lengthen. The music was too loud and there were too many people. Everything and everyone I touched was vaguely damp and sticky. Most of the girls I'd come with had dispersed after attaching themselves to one of the many men in jerseys. There were various platforms throughout the room that the girls would stand on and dance, putting themselves on display, the boys watching from beneath.

"He is the spectator," Berger writes. "It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger—with his clothes still on" (54). The protagonist in a nude is usually not depicted. It is not the subject of the painting, the woman, that is the protagonist, but the presumed male spectator for whom the nude was created. When discussing nudity and its relation to the female identi-

ty, it is important to discuss the context in which these women were painted, as Berger so expertly explains throughout his text. Nude imagery isn't born of a woman's desire to be nude, but of a man's desire to make her so. Men have chosen to depict women in the nude because it pleases them. Inundated with such images of ideal beauty and sexual provocation through advertising and media, it is then no wonder that this imagery affects how we present ourselves, whether we like it or not. Women are often told through these images that their outward beauty is the most important thing about them, important because it is pleasing to the male spectator. However, if a woman takes pride in her appearance, she is berated for being vain and shallow. Berger writes, "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (51). This hypocrisy makes it nearly impossible for women to live without being constantly conscious of their appearance.

A guy standing next to me at the party kept grabbing at my waist from behind so I left the room and walked outside. I sat on the steps of the frat house, feeling vaguely depressed but also glad to be by myself. A guy reeking of Polo sat down next to me and struck up a conversation. He told me not to worry, he wasn't trying to fuck me because he had a girlfriend. What a relief, I said. We talked for a while. He was sitting far enough away from me that I felt relatively unthreatened. I could tell he didn't want to be at the party, but since he lived in the frat house, he had nowhere else to go. I think he could tell that I didn't want to be there either, so we made a good pair waiting out the festivities together. It was nice to just talk to someone, to feel the presence of another person beside me. I liked that he kept his distance. We had been talking for about forty-five minutes when he looked at me and told me that he thought I was pretty cool, and that he liked me because I wasn't like other girls. Wow, thanks, I told him. He shifted closer to me and I could smell the stench of cologne and beer. He stared at me expectantly. I chuckled to myself and got up. He asked me where I was going, and I told him I was going to go find my sister.

Though the men in Schmid's works have agency and possession of their identities, there is very little depth to them. Sure, they're independent and unreachable, qualities that are often found to be attractive in men, but this leads to an absence of identity and truthful human experience. The nude women that Berger discusses have very little power, and it is this lack of power that makes them desirable. Though in this sense Schmid's cowboys and classic female nudes are very different, there is a relevant and striking similarity between them: the identity of the subject is never truly revealed. The artist dehumanizes the subjects by stripping away any identifiably 'human' qualities. Instead, faceless cowboys morph together throughout the works in Schmid's exhibition to become one inhuman archetype. In classic nudes, there are no distinct women with distinct personalities, but sexual objects to be aspired to or desired. And yet, these archetypes are celebrated: the lone ranger who is tortured and independent, and the goddess-like young woman who exudes sensuality. Though these stereotypes of the ideal man and woman are glorified and widely spread, within them there is a severe lack of humanity.

Humanity is at the core of Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*. She has one of the most beautiful closing lines I've ever had the joy of experiencing. "Do you know," she muses, "why we have the *Sunflowers*? It's not because Vincent van Gogh suffered. It's because Vincent van Gogh had a brother who loved him. Through all the pain, he had a tether, a connection to the world. And that . . . is the focus of the story we need. Connection." I think about this line often, even more so after viewing Hannes Schmid's paintings. The men in his pieces, as well as geniuses like Vincent van Gogh, exemplify what it means to exist. We idolize these independent, artistic spirits and glorify their suffering. It's this suffering and hardship that gives them the right to own the human experience, right? I don't know the answer to that, but that seems to be the story that is so often told. I do know that I've always wanted to be like these men, to be independent and suffer because that's what I've always thought makes life worth experiencing. I like being by myself, but I don't want to be alone.

We got back to Emma's apartment late after the party. I could feel a cold coming on and all I wanted to do was pass out on the couch, which I promptly did. I woke up the next morning earlier than

I would have liked. The room was freezing but I had two more blankets covering me than I had started out the night with. I could see the Nittany Mountains through the window above the couch. It was a beautiful morning. It reminded me of life back home in Michigan. I noticed Emma sitting on the chair next to me, which was surprising as she rarely wakes up before me. She had made me peppermint tea with honey and had put it in the mug I had given her for Christmas last year. It was one I'd bought at our favorite restaurant in northern Michigan, The Cherry Hut. Emma and I used to steal the crayons off the table when we were younger. We still do sometimes. She asked me how I was feeling and I started to cry, perhaps from exhaustion and not taking care of my body, perhaps out of sadness, probably a combination of the two. I felt weak and vulnerable and entirely transparent. Emma began to crawl under the covers with me, but I told her that I was sick and I didn't want to infect her. She scoffed and told me to scooch over. I wouldn't meet her gaze, but she wasn't backing down. She looked at me with such tenderness that I unraveled completely. I laid my head on her chest and she wrapped her arms around me and I wept into her sweatshirt. She rocked me back and forth and told me over and over again that it was okay, and that she was there. We stayed like that for a while, not talking, just being, watching the sun rise over the mountains.

WORKS CITED

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. D.W. Thorpe, 1973.
- Gadsby, Hannah. "Nanette." 5 Oct. 2018, Sydney Opera House, Sydney, Australia.
- . "Nanette (2018)—Full Transcript." *Scraps from the Loft*, 27 July 2018, scrapsfromtheloft.com/2018/07/21/hannah-gadsby-nanette-transcript.
- Plath, Sylvia, and Karen V. Kukil. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*. Anchor Books, 2000.
- Schmid, Hannes. *Cowboy #001 (Marlboro Man)*. 2007, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York.
- . *Cowboy #5 (Tailgate)*. 2007, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York.

TO BE STILL

Grace Whitcomb

On one of my first days living in New York City, a Thursday, I went to see David Wojnarowicz's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. I had heard little about the artist other than that he was active during that idealized time in New York's art history, the eighties. During this turbulent period, portraits transformed into abstractions and the AIDS crisis forced the general public to face the LGBTQ community. In contrast to the many dangers and traumas evoked by the mention of AIDS and the artwork that comes to mind when thinking of the eighties, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat's gigantic paintings or the re-emergence of Andy Warhol's pop art, comes the stillness of David Wojnarowicz's photographs.

David Wojnarowicz used his artwork to draw attention to the AIDS crisis and to express how violence, sexuality, and industrialism affected his everyday life as a gay man. After the death of Peter Hujar, his longtime friend, lover, and mentor, from AIDS-related complications in 1987, Wojnarowicz photographed Hujar's body or, more specifically, parts of it: his feet, his delicate ankles worn down to unthinkable thinness, his face, gaunt and weak, and his half-opened eyes.

In these pictures Hujar looks transcendent, almost Christ-like. His face mirrors the depictions of Jesus after his death that, having grown up Catholic, I am very familiar with. Upon seeing these works, I was moved to tears. The photographs reflect a personal grief made public, as well as the government's repudiation of the crisis. To me, they seemed to reflect the suffering and frustration of not only one man but an entire community. How can an image filled with stillness have that much power?

Teju Cole's essay "Object Lesson: On Photography" reflects on the possibility that photographs without people most effectively depict the occurrence and aftermath of violent sociopolitical shocks. Cole finds that Glenna Gordon's photographs of clothing, shoes, and

school supplies left behind by abducted Nigerian girls compress loss and captivity into more accessible images than those of dramatic barbarity. Especially touched by a photograph of one missing girl's blouse marked with her name, Cole remarks that he too labeled his school uniform with his own name. Because the girls' "abduction could not be photographed, nor could their captivity," seeing an easily relatable relic of their lives allows one to empathize with them (Cole). Action photographs of war and suffering appear dramatic and shocking, but ultimately seem to come from a faraway world, which anesthetizes the viewer. Cole suggests another approach: object photography, representing stillness rather than action, as a way of conveying, just as lucidly, the aftershock of violence in what was worn, owned, and used. These depictions do not contain the "organized disorder of medieval battle scenes," only the debris of the conflict, crisis, trauma, the haunting humanness of touched objects (Cole).

But would Wojnarowicz's pictures of Hujar's dirty hospital dishes or IV tubes have been as affecting as seeing his physical body? In viewing these two photographs beside the ones Cole mentions, one can see a comparable stillness. Images of a person's feet and face may function similarly to Cole's "objects" insofar as what they depict cuts more deeply than what they exclude. Through the subject's literal stillness, through Hujar's death, his body parts become representative objects, no longer pictures of "real, ongoing human suffering," but rather the aftershock of it (Cole). Just as the pears lined up on a Moscow windowsill in a photograph referenced by Cole embody a kind of "private reverie in an atmosphere of Cold War paranoia," the physical body of Hujar stands for the ravages of AIDS and the grief of the LGBTQ community (Cole).

It's important to remember the political landscape at the time and the motives behind Wojnarowicz's work. On the one hand, Wojnarowicz's work conveys a need for solace. But it also responds to a need to broadcast the urgency of the issue, to push it into a public space, one that felt uncomfortable with homosexuality. The inaction of policymakers only broadened the divide between the LGBTQ community and the government. Consequently, much of Wojnarowicz's work reflects this divide and calls on those in power to respond to the crisis of AIDS. These photographs in particular func-

tion in the same way as Cole's objects, drawing you into Hujar's very being even after he died. Cole asserts that object photography is not only more successful than action photography, but also more proper, because of the "respectful distance that a photograph of objects can create between the one who looks, far from the place of trouble, and the one whose trouble those objects signify" (Cole). However, the images of Hujar's feet and face complicate this theory. They do not allow for space between the audience and the "place of trouble," but rather place the viewer right at the deathbed, close enough to feel the last breath of the subject, to see his eyes finally close. His body performs the task of representing the suffering of the LGBTQ community, but it is also undeniably human, not just an object like Cole's examples are.

The humanity of Hujar's photographed body is what moved me. The still objects in the pictures Cole describes, such as the broken mug and the bloody knife, might be thrown away, but Hujar's stillness is permanent. In this way, Wojnarowicz's photographs not only fulfill the duty of Cole's object photography by providing a moment of poignancy and solace, but they also complete the task of action photography, without the "epic and cinematic" touches Cole criticizes. They go further into the political realm, calling viewers to act, to confront the crisis of AIDS through a perspective usually unseen.

WORKS CITED

- Cole, Teju. "Object Lesson." *The New York Times*, 21 Dec. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/magazine/object-lesson.html.
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Untitled*. 1989, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

A FARAWAY HISTORY

Nathan Nguyen

Recently, two new institutions opened in Hanoi: another war museum and the city's first Starbucks. While I can recall a trip to the War Remnants Museum as part of my middle school's mission to 'better understand the history of our nation,' the only thing that has stayed with me some six years later is the memory of my own discomfort from the heat on that summer day, rather than the impact of anything on display. A new war museum may evoke in my grandparents's generation a sense of bitter reminiscence about the Vietnam War, the past they endured, and the legacy they will leave behind. To Vietnamese millennials like me, however, it inspires little interest, as dozens of war museums and exhibitions of the kind already exist. Needless to say, upon hearing about Hanoi's latest additions, I was more interested in the Starbucks.

This disinterest in images of a war that occurred years before my birth is not unique to my millennial peers and me. In his 1972 essay "Photographs of Agony," John Berger ponders what power war photographs hold over their viewers. Berger recounts visceral and shocking media representations of the Vietnam War, questioning why "it has become normal for certain mass circulation newspapers to publish war photographs which earlier would have been suppressed as being too shocking" (212). He offers two commonly cited reasons for this: the first is that the public is now fully aware of the horrors of war and demands the truth, and the second is that the public has become so accustomed to seeing these horrendous photographs that newspapers constantly have to publish even more appalling news to grasp viewers' attention. Berger refutes both arguments, claiming that they are either "too idealistic" or "too transparently cynical" (212). According to Berger, these published photographs have an effect that is entirely different from what many might believe. As Berger sees it, "Many people would argue that such photographs remind us of the reality, the lived reality, behind the distractions of political theory, casualty statistics, or news bulletings" (212). However, the real, countering effect is the

generalization of pain, suffering, and agony. These photos turn the effects of war into a personal and therefore “depoliticized” issue, causing the viewer to reflect on their own “moral inadequacy,” or their inability to meaningfully intervene (Berger 213-4).

Berger believes that war photos can only instill a sense of this “moral inadequacy” in their viewers. Susan Sontag, by extension, in her 1980 essay “Freak Show,” argues that photographs can render viewers utterly emotionless to the horrors depicted. Sontag opens her exploration of photography by considering two different works, Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibition and Diane Arbus’s 1972 Museum of Modern Art display. While Steichen’s photographs prove that humanity is “one” and that all human beings are “attractive creatures,” Arbus’s photographs portray misfit subjects, “most of them ugly; wearing grotesque or unflattering clothes; in dismal or barren surroundings” (Sontag 220).

This comparison between Steichen’s photographs and Arbus’s sets the foundation on which Sontag criticizes Arbus’s preoccupation with the “victims, the unfortunate, the dispossessed—but without the compassionate purpose that such a project is expected to serve” (221). According to Sontag, Arbus’s photographs are intrinsically flawed because they are based on distance and privilege and because of their viewers, who are, in Sontag’s words, the “protected, middle-class, who [have] been taught to see life in terms of moral response and prudence” (224). Sontag believes that rather than offering compassion or sympathy for the “freaks” being photographed, Arbus’s photos have accomplished the exact opposite: they “suppress . . . moral and sensory queasiness” and “offer an occasion to demonstrate that life’s horror can be faced without squeamishness,” meaning that the viewer is passive and thus potentially complicit (223). Rather than simply “making people less able to react in real life” (Sontag 223), Berger believes that photographs of war and similarly horrifying events have an even more destabilizing effect—to create a “discontinuity,” forcing viewers to acknowledge that they do not know the full story and highlighting their moral inadequacy. They are witnessing a single moment that is “discontinuous with normal time,” and resuming life as it was reflects an inability to change what has happened. But what exactly is this “discontinuity” and how can we interpret it?

This is one of the many questions “The Faraway Boat,” a 1983 short story by Vietnamese writer Nguyen Minh Chau, attempts to answer. “The Faraway Boat” revolves around the protagonist Phung and his journey to HaLong Bay, a city in northeast Vietnam. Phung is a photographer for a local newspaper. He is asked to take a photograph of the sea for the newspaper’s monthly calendar. Phung waits for days on end to capture the perfect shot of the morning sun on the ocean. Finally, the moment comes: as the sun rises above the skyline, the fog starts to disappear, revealing a fisherman’s boat in the distance. The scene is perfect, a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity, more magnificent than “a masterpiece of an ancient artist” (Nguyen 56). Nguyen further details the scene a few pages later: “the shapes of the people on the boat are vaguely imprinted on the morning fog and on the ocean’s surface, illuminated by the glare of morning sun” (58). Phung is satisfied, knowing that he has accomplished his task and has captured perhaps the most beautiful photograph of his career. However, it is only as the boat approaches Phung that he discovers something even more striking. On that “faraway” boat, a man is hitting his wife with his fist, yelling, “Die, will you? Just die to get out of my sight!” (64). When their son tries to protect his mother, he also gets hit and falls to the side. Phung is stunned; all of his senses tell him to take action, to jump in and protect the woman and her child against the violent husband, but his body is simply incapable of responding. Instead, he stands still with the camera in his hands, gasping in disbelief. Phung cannot believe that the violence he has witnessed is present in such picturesque scenery. Phung feels a sense of shock, sorrow, and, most notably, utter helplessness, all of the feelings that accompany viewers after witnessing a horrifying image or scene and upon re-entrance to their normal lives.

This sense of disconnect can also feel like violence. In his essay, Berger claims that war photographs have a “double violence”: in a literal sense, the violence of the crime itself, and figuratively, the internal violence or “discontinuity” that the viewer experiences after viewing the crime committed (214). This “double violence” is also present in “The Faraway Boat”: there is the violence on the boat and the internal struggle within Phung, which he experiences upon returning home and viewing the picture he had taken. The scenery in the pic-

ture is still mesmerizing, but to Phung, “[the photograph] didn’t feel the same” (Nguyen 95). The scene of domestic violence now inevitably springs to mind when Phung sees the photograph, and engulfs him with guilt and shame. He feels vulnerable looking at the photograph and believes he should have taken actions against the violence. However, rather than merely “awake concern,” Berger argues that such a photograph should invite its viewers “to confront [their] own lack of political freedom” (213-4). However, he admits that “the double violence of the photographed moment actually works against this realisation” (214). Nonetheless, this is the path Phung takes when he, nearly consumed by his own guilt, decides to appeal to the court to separate the woman and her child from the abusive father.

It has crossed my mind many times that I might also succumb to what Berger calls “a state of discontinuity” (213). On the day Starbucks officially opened its doors in Hanoi, I was one of 700 customers eagerly waiting to get their first sip. A similarly sized crowd, comprised mostly of veterans, waited outside the new war museum as it opened its doors. As a Vietnamese living in the capital city, I am no stranger to war photographs, but strolling through museums and witnessing the horrors captured in these images, I am astonished at my own indifference. For me, these exhibitions are a constant reminder not of the past itself, but of how removed I am from it. A sense of guilt engulfs me, but unlike Phung, I feel guilty for feeling nothing.

WORKS CITED

- Berger, John. “Photographs of Agony.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 211-214.
- Minh Chau, Nguyen. “Chiec thuyen ngoai xa.” *Ben Que*, edited by NXB Van Hoc, 2001, pp. 50-98.
- Sontag, Susan. “Freak Show.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 220-224.

A CRISIS OF AUTHENTICITY

Danni Lai

It's a situation most of us have experienced: friends are visiting, and we need to decide where to take them to show them what our city is really like. Faced with this question when people visited me in my hometown, Guangzhou, I always chose the vegetable market. We would arrive early so as not to miss the freshest vegetables. Customers chat freely with the vendors, talking about the weather, the quality of the vegetables that day, and much more. A short way off, a vendor shouts at a man: "Don't press the peach like that! I won't be able to sell them if you keep doing that to every peach!" Despite feeling slightly awkward about the vendor's rudeness, I tell my friend proudly: "This is the real Guangzhou!" But once, when I recounted taking visitors to the market, a local friend questioned my choice, and asked why I didn't instead take them to Canton Tower, one of the world's tallest buildings. In fact, I had come up with that idea first, discarded it, and chosen the market. But I didn't know why I'd done this.

My friend and I had very different ideas of what an authentic representation of our city might be. From my perspective, the vegetable sellers and the way people interact are particular to the city. They show what everyday life is like in Guangzhou, and thus are 'authentic.' But while I valued things related to the city's life the most, my friend sought a tourist attraction representing the city's strength. We cannot say either one is wrong, but the two distinct aspects we paid attention to suggested a discrepancy in our understandings and interpretations of the word 'authentic.' It's almost impossible to determine which one is more authentic, the tower or the market. In a recent presentation, I asked my audience to choose the more authentic one. Their answers also varied. What surfaces from my answer, my friend's answer, and my audience's answers is that all of us already had our own definition of the word 'authentic' in mind.

It's worth noting that when 'authentic' itself has more than one definition, determining whether something is authentic or not becomes even harder. This complexity in understanding authenticity

is illustrated in Sherry Turkle's "Authenticity in the Age of Digital Companions," where she uses the word to assess relationships between humans and robots. Given how much people's lives are permeated by technology and machines, humans and robots have over time grown into two inseparable concepts. This relationship has been at the cusp of worldwide discussion. Turkle starts by introducing "Joseph Weizenbaum's computer program Eliza" as an example of a "relational artifact," or an "object explicitly designed to engage a user in a relationship" (201). When spoken to, Eliza simulates an understanding of what users say and responds to them. Interestingly, Turkle writes that Weizenbaum found that interacting with Eliza evoked certain strong emotions in his students, who were "eager to chat with the program and . . . even wanted to be alone with it" (201). Turkle goes on to observe that "[s]tudents' trust in Eliza did not speak to what they thought Eliza would understand but to their lack of trust in the people who would understand" (204).

According to Turkle, the advent of computer programs like Eliza and people's willingness to talk to them put the notion of an "authentic' relationship" in crisis (204). While it's easier to analyze relationships between people, assessing a relationship becomes much more complicated when one party is a robot. Could this relationship be authentic? On one hand, Turkle mentions Weizenbaum's viewpoint that human understanding is essential to an authentic relationship. That is, when one party is a robot, the relationship cannot be authentic. However, she later points out that people tend to neglect whether their story has been understood but only pay attention to "the act of telling" (202). They are happy enough to tell their stories to Eliza, despite its inability to understand. Moreover, even if people want to "feel understood," relational artifacts can achieve this effect by pressing "Darwinian buttons," triggering behaviors such as making eye contact (Turkle 203). This calls into question whether human understanding is necessary for an authentic relationship.

Turkle's question of whether human-robot relationships are authentic can be explored through two different schools of thought: realism and constructionism. In her definition of authenticity, sociologist Athena Elafros offers an explanation for both within the context of music. According to Elafros, realists regard authenticity as "a sin-

gular and essentialist way of being.” For this reason, Weizenbaum considered it “immoral” to allow his students to confess to Eliza, since the program “could not understand the stories it was being told; it did not care about the human beings who confided in it” (Turkle 202). But if we become constructionists and focus more on “how authenticity is a product that is created,” then authenticity comes from people’s experiences and their feelings toward a relationship, that is, how people feel after they talk instead of whom they are talking to (Elafros). The stirred emotions could themselves render the relationship authentic. Taken together, the two schools help us better understand the coexisting definitions of authentic. When Turkle writes about how people are “happy to talk to a machine” and “bond emotionally with their Furby,” a robot toy that stimulates people’s want to nurture and give care, she suggests a reduced significance of human presence in an authentic relationship (202, 207). We are all becoming constructionists. What matters more now are the process and the outcome, or in the case of Eliza, the experience and the emotions.

However, while some people are sympathetic to valuing the experience more, Turkle seems to hold different attitudes. She points out that during interactions with robots, people tend to “ignore the mechanical aspects of the robots and think of them as nascent minds” (203). Consequently, she conducted a study and “tried to make it harder for a panel of thirty children to ignore machine mechanism” (203). It seems that she feels uneasy about people accepting relationships with robots. Therefore, she compelled people to face the reality that robots are “mere mechanism[s]” (203). But to me, the motivation for her study needs more explanation. Why should we care that much about mechanisms instead of the experience itself? The process of confiding and feeling understood could matter more than whether the listener is a human or a machine. Furthermore, directly revealing to children that what they invest so many emotions in is actually a “mere mechanism” can be cruel (Turkle 203). The shock to children could break their expectations for the machines, hurt their feelings, and even cast a shadow on their lives. In reality, the children in the study weren’t affected by the mechanical demonstration. They still treated Cog, a robot used in the study, as “a creature and playmate” (Turkle

203). They were being constructionists. However, what would Turkle do if the children didn't react this way?

By the end of Turkle's article, her study becomes more understandable to me. At first, I perceived her attitude toward the different definitions of authenticity as neutral, since she simply writes "it seems helpful to reformulate a notion of benchmarks that puts authenticity at center stage" without explicitly giving her own opinion. She seems to solely compile different views and analyze them. However, her true attitude is alluded to when she regards "digital companions" as "not relationally authentic" (204). It's particularly helpful to look at the last few paragraphs. Turkle's colleague Richard, a disabled person who needs nursing help, finds human understanding critical in a relationship. He would even prefer an awful experience with a "sadistic person" to receiving care from robots, because the person makes him "feel alive" (214). To him, authenticity means "dignity," and it can be only achieved during human interactions (214). Turkle implies the same thing: "What is the value of interactions that contain no understanding of us and that contribute nothing to a shared store of human meaning?" (215). Turkle, questioning her readers and herself, hints at an agreement with Richard.

Despite people's increasing attention to the "experience" mentioned by both Elafros and Turkle, another article explores a different view. If we agree that experience creates enough meaning on its own, we might disagree with the author Robert Nozick. In his essay "The Experience Machine," Nozick imagines a hypothetical machine that could "give you any experience that you desired" (71). He considers several reasons why we would not want to use such a machine, including the idea that "something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience and then realizing that we would not use it" (72). The unwillingness to plug in could be explained by people's want "to do certain things," "to be in a certain way," or for a "deeper reality" (Nozick 71-2). "Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves," writes Nozick, "in contact with reality" (72). That is, the experience generated by the machine is not "reality." Strangely, this refusal of the experience machine greatly contrasts with the "willingness to talk to computers" in Turkle's essay (202). The large dis-

crepancy in people's preferences prompts me to wonder what the backstory is. Why are they so distinct?

While Turkle wrote her essay in 2007, Nozick wrote his in 1974. What made people's opinion shift so dramatically within these decades? The evident answer is the Digital Revolution. An example is the iPod. In his essay "iPod," Michael Bull depicts the product as a representation of increased "mobility and privatization" (73). He points out that even "*culture* has shifted" more than once due to the development of technology (74). Indeed, technology has permeated and improved our lives in many aspects. However, what other effects does it have? By giving people the right to "control," the iPod created a "zone of immunity" that creates distance between individuals (Bull 75). We've seen so many people walking with their eyes on their phones, paying less attention to their surroundings; we've seen kids and parents on their phones all the time at home, talking to each other less. We've become distanced. We are submerged in technology. In addition to the "lack of trust" in our listeners mentioned by Turkle (202), is it also because of distance that we have become reluctant to talk to people but willing to confide in computers? Increasing interactions and reliance on those devices may not be the outcome of a society lacking trust; instead, it could be the cause.

Throughout her essay, Turkle explores whether human understanding is essential to an authentic relationship. Meanwhile, she hints at another aspect. When there is a lack of trust in society, people are inclined to interact with relational artifacts like Eliza and trust them. Even if Eliza doesn't understand them, people still see their relationships with it as authentic. What does this imply? Is trust a more meaningful and indispensable part of our relationships than human understanding? When we consider elements of an authentic relationship, should we include 'trust' in addition to human understanding? Or, can we even replace the latter? Can its ability to elicit trust make Eliza a benchmark? These questions are left to us. Given its many definitions, authenticity creates enough ambiguity. It has always been in crisis. However, the advent of our digital companions makes authenticity even harder to define. There could be more and more factors to take into account, and we are responsible for the never-ending conversation.

WORKS CITED

- Bull, Michael. "iPod." *The Brooklyn Reader*, edited by Nicole Callihan et al., 4th ed., Pearson Education, 2018, pp. 29-32.
- Elafros, Athena. "Authenticity." *Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia*, Bill Thompson, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2014. *Credo Reference*, search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sagemuscbeh/authenticity/0?institutionId=577.
- Nozick, Robert. "The Experience Machine." *The Brooklyn Reader*, edited by Nicole Callihan et al., 4th ed., Pearson Education, 2018, pp. 71-72.
- Turkle, Sherry. "Authenticity in the Age of the Digital Companions." *The Brooklyn Reader*, edited by Nicole Callihan et al., 4th ed., Pearson Education, 2018, pp. 201-217.

KEEPING UP WITH THE YOUNGS

Megan Feng

When the camera zooms in on the two rows of flat, standing dumplings on a chopping board and a large bowl of Chinese chives and minced pork stuffing beside it, I can't help but laugh. I am watching a Singaporean-Chinese family in a film making dumplings, speaking the south-eastern Chinese dialect of Hokkien, and bragging about how they honor their Chinese ancestral traditions. I see them using rolling pins to flatten the dumpling wrappers, and folding the thick wrappers into perfect wrinkles. As a southern Chinese girl from a traditional Chinese family, I immediately realize that the film has done something wrong. This family with a southeastern Chinese background is making northeastern *jiaozi*, but the traditional food of southern China is *won-ton*, a type of dumpling with a thinner skin not as delicious-looking as the ones they're making. This family, celebrating their harmonious reunion and claiming the importance of preserving their cultural identity through ancestral traditions like dumpling-making, is making the wrong kind of dumplings! Though I start viewing this film with scorn and disappointment, as the story unfolds, I gradually find myself actually relating to the plot. I recognize in my own life and my peers' lives the conflicts these characters encounter. Yes, the family makes the wrong dumplings, but the film does something right. It represents an authentic social problem in modern Chinese society. In the end, it's hard to decide: should the film be criticized for its problematic representation of culture, or praised for exploring a modern Chinese social issue that is rarely represented in Hollywood?

The Asian-American director Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians*, released on August 7, 2018, has received contradictory responses from his North American and mainland Chinese audiences. The film itself is a Cinderella cliché. It's about the relationship between an American-born Chinese girl, Rachel Chu, and her super-rich Singaporean-Chinese boyfriend, Nick Young, and how they eventually win the blessings of his relatives, including his mother Eleanor,

who sees Rachel as a cultural ‘outsider.’ With a simple narrative like this, no one anticipated that the film would become the biggest hit of the summer in North America. Western reviewers praised the film’s employment of Chinese cultural symbols and its mostly Asian cast and crew. It’s seen as the first major Asian breakthrough within a still largely white-dominated Hollywood since 1991’s *The Joy Luck Club* (Sims). However, the film unexpectedly failed in the Chinese film market. In China, it grossed only eight million Chinese yuan, or 1.15 million US dollars, at the box office in its opening weekend, as compared to the 26 million US dollars grossed during its opening weekend in the US. Chinese viewers did not appreciate the film’s ‘attributed orientalism’ at all, using the term “General Tso’s Chicken,” a Chinese joke about Americanized Chinese cuisine, to describe the way this film crudely incorporates Chinese culture. Though it tries to present its audience with a “traditional and true Singaporean-Chinese family” by incorporating a variety of Chinese cultural signs (the Chinese family structure, dumpling-making, etc.), the film fails in its attempts to be authentic (九只苍蝇撞墙). As a Chinese citizen myself, I find the film’s representation of China to be problematic. Sometimes the cultural symbols make sense with the plot; however, most of the time, these symbols are only on display. The film uses these symbols in two equally problematic extremes: too authentic and not authentic enough. In the end, the film is ‘oriental,’ as the director seems to want, but not in a meaningful way. It is a ‘banana film,’ a peel of Chinatown aesthetics and cobbled-together cultural symbols wrapped around a whitewashed core.

Still, the blame can’t be placed entirely on the film or the director. The misrepresentation of China on Hollywood film screens is a historical problem. A film review from the largest Chinese online discussion forum for books, films, current events, and other topics, divides the misrepresentation of China into four stages. The first one is called, “The Yellow and the White? You’d Better Say Goodbye.” The author argues that under the influence of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the US film industry hired only white people to play Chinese characters, with the sole exception being an actress named Huang Liushuang, who played only two minor parts throughout her career. Both of her ostensibly Chinese characters were dumped or killed by

their white partners by the end of the films. The inclusion of fake Chinese characters fulfilled the white audience's imagination of 'the Oriental' while their pathetic destinies promoted white superiority. This stigmatization was strengthened in the second stage, "Yellow, Red, and Dread." Chinese people were demonized through two archetypes: Fu Manchu and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With his distinctive Qing Dynasty robes and moustache, Fu Manchu became the stereotypical Asian villain in American films and the inspiration for Marvel's Mandarin, introduced in 1964 as Iron Man's number one enemy. During the Red Scare of the 1950s and '60s, the CCP took the place of Fu Manchu as the archetypal Asian menace in such films as the 1962 blockbuster *The Manchurian Candidate*.

The third stage is all about "Kung-fu." The easing of tensions between China and the US in the 1970s allowed more Chinese actors to pursue careers in Hollywood. The most famous among them, Bruce Lee, set a high bar for future kung-fu actors, including Jackie Chan and Jet Li. However, a by-product of this improved character was yet another stereotype. Suddenly, it seemed as though all Chinese people could do was kung-fu, deepening Hollywood's fixation on the exotic Chinese image. Finally, in the last stage, the Chinese people become the "*Tu-Hao*"s—the newly rich. In sci-fi films, for example, Chinese characters are always investing in fancy high-tech projects. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the Chinese characters are extravagant billionaires who fill a chapel with water to create a "natural field," throw millions of dollars into bachelor and bachelorette parties, and buy a rare Cambodian gong to strike only once at the *tan-hua* party (破词儿).

And yet, this film does not stop at stage four. Its misrepresentations of Chinese culture create an entirely new benchmark: "The Stew." After Hollywood realized that China, the second largest economy in the world, had been represented in limited ways in the last century, they began attempting to represent a multi-angled, authentic China to bait the enormous Chinese film market. As such, *Crazy Rich Asians* becomes a stew of symbols, some entirely irrelevant to the plot. Westerners with no previous knowledge of East Asian cultures are likely overwhelmed by the many Chinese elements that appear simultaneously and in almost every scene. As a result, the cleverly designed metaphors behind some of these cultural symbols go

over their heads. To East Asians, on the other hand, it seems as though the director has neglected to do a thorough study of the 'real' Asia. From East to West, no one is happy.

In addition to the factual error of showing a southern family mistaking northern dumpling-making as their ceremonial tradition, the *tan-hua* party marks another improper representation of Chinese culture. *Tan-hua*, a species of cactus, is a source of inspiration for many Chinese artists for its rare bloom that only occurs at midnight. The director gives the plant two detailed scenes in the short party sequence, beginning with Auntie Alix and Auntie Felicity's detailed introduction to the plant. This plant catches everyone's attention again shortly after the appearance of the matriarch of the Young clan, followed by an excited comment that the flower is in full bloom. In the background, we hear a very famous Chinese folk song about blooming flowers. And yet, despite all these references to the plant, it never appears in the film again after this scene, with no explanation of how it relates to the film in any way. Why such an awkward cultural reference? Perhaps the filmmakers intended to show how authentically 'oriental' the Young clan is. Perhaps the inclusion of the *tan-hua* was supposed to boost the Asianness of the film in the eyes of Westerners. Instead, it provides a forced and shallow image of who Chinese people are and how they live.

And yet, while the *tan-hua* scene and the dumpling scene are not authentic, the mahjong scene at the end of the film marks the other extreme of being perhaps too authentic for some viewers to understand. As an experienced mahjong player, I am amazed by the incredibly clever metaphors present in this game between Rachel, our independent heroine, and her vicious future mother-in-law Eleanor. The camera zooms in on the tiles four times, and every close shot represents a twist in their relationship. Shortly after they begin the game, Eleanor *pengs* Rachel, using this aggressive technique to establish her advantage. Eleanor stands on her moral high ground, and still views Rachel as separate from the Young clan. Next, Eleanor plays a tile named "East wind." In the second zoom-in, this "East wind" clashes away the tile called "West wind" on the table, symbolizing the clash between cultures throughout the film. Then Rachel takes a tile called *Jiutiao*. She hesitates over whether to put the *Jiutiao* in her pile, but

she decides to give it away. Eleanor takes this tile and wins due to Rachel's *Fangpao*, the last player offering a chance to win. Eleanor thinks she has taught a final lesson to Rachel, the arrogant American. Instead, she's shocked to learn that Rachel turned down her son's proposal the day before the game. She can't believe that this 'individualistic American,' who seems to have turned her obedient Chinese son into an American rebel willing to give up all his fortune to marry a girl that almost no one in the family likes, would sacrifice her love to make the Youngs happy. She becomes even more shocked when Rachel shows Eleanor her tiles. Long before Eleanor achieved what she thought was her ultimate victory, Rachel had assembled a winning stack.

The *Jiutiao* tile here represents Rachel and Nick's relationship throughout the film. Rachel tried to become a part of the Youngs' stack of tiles, but found herself outside of the family unit, and so she decides to leave to maintain the tiles' integrity. Nick could have become a part of Rachel's life, but she deliberately gives him up, to prevent him from betraying his family and to maintain her own integrity. Yet, soon after my amazement at this plot twist, I realized that for the audience who knows nothing about mahjong, it's just another dumb love story. As Kristen Page-Kirby of the *Washington Post* claims, "I had no idea what was going on." No explanation is given for how tiles are being taken and played. In the end, this scene loses its cultural value, as the creative metaphors fail to be seen by a western audience. The movie tries hard at being an 'Asians depicting Asia' film, but it's either stacking Asian symbols in a pile for no real purpose or providing marvelous interpretations of properly-employed symbols, but in a way that escapes a large portion of its target audience. In the end, it fails at becoming a coherent whole.

However, though the film is a sloppy representation of Asian culture, it succeeds in addressing a larger Chinese social issue. Although the dumpling scene is laughable, the conflicts behind it and the mahjong scene are significant, especially to a modernized, Westernized, urbanized China. I used the word 'integrity' twice to describe the meaning behind Rachel's mahjong tiles. The first 'integrity' has to do with Eleanor's valuing of family as a whole, and the second one refers to Rachel's personal sense of dignity. The two

different interpretations of 'integrity' reveal a deeper dialectic between Eastern collectivism and Western individualism. Within these two cultural contexts, 'individualism' is defined as having strong individual determination with a focus on self, as represented by Rachel, whereas 'collectivism' is defined as putting the group's well-being in front of individuals' with a focus on others, as represented by Eleanor. In this way, Rachel—and, by extension, Nick—represent a modernized, globalized, and Westernized China, whereas Eleanor represents a traditional one. Thus, the film raises a more sophisticated question for the new China apart from simply presenting a clash between East and West: what should Chinese people do with their inherited traditions and cultural values when they no longer suit modern society? Perhaps the value of this question offsets the film's original failures. Moreover, it models an alternative way for a new China that is struggling to establish its own cultural identity.

In the end, neither Eleanor nor Rachel win their respective games. Eleanor finally gives Nick her emerald ring to show her approval of his marriage to Rachel. Eleanor is presented at their engagement party with a rather satisfied smile, though still standing far away and not participating in the celebration. Rachel, for her part, tries to adapt to the Youngs' life. In the engagement party scene, we see her enjoying the party and meeting Nick's family and friends. She seems to give into being a better wife and daughter-in-law for the clan, thereby preventing Nick from becoming someone who has shamed the family. The cultural contexts Rachel and Eleanor belong to no longer bind their choices. Under the influence of each other, they are now making choices based on what they feel is right instead of what they're supposed to do. The film then suggests that there's no need for complete acceptance or abandonment of either individualism or collectivism. Instead, it shows how adaptation through selection, progressing by preserving the better parts of a culture and deserting the outdated ones, might be better for everyone.

WORKS CITED

- 破词儿 (Broken words). “美国人眼里的中国人什么样? (How do Chinese People Look Like in Americans' Eyes?).” *Douban Movie*, 15 December 2018, movie.douban.com/review/9802408.
- 九只苍蝇撞墙 (Nine flies knocking their heads against a wall). “唐人街审美孵出了一盘左宗棠鸡 (The Chinatown Aesthetics Lead to a Plate of General Tso's Chicken).” *Douban Movie*, 30 Aug. 2018, movie.douban.com/review/9624396.
- Page-Kirby, Kristen. “In ‘Crazy Rich Asians,’ mahjong isn't just a game.” *The Washington Post*, 16 Aug. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2018/08/16/in-crazy-rich-asians-mahjong-isnt-just-a-game/?utm_term=.abb62f9cefff.
- Sims, David. “Crazy Rich Asians is a Breath of Fresh Air.” *The Atlantic*, 15 Aug., 2018, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/crazy-rich-asians-review/566921.

OPEN LETTER TO NYU RESIDENTIAL LIFE AND HOUSING SERVICES

Yifan Zhang

Dear Mr. Tom Ellett,

My name is Yifan Zhang. As a first-year Chinese international student at NYU, I benefitted a lot from participating in events organized by RAs. For first-year students, residential life is important. How we feel about it will affect our academic performances and overall impression of our school. A few years ago, NYU barred incoming students from choosing their own roommates, and promised that nobody living in the same room would share the same ZIP Code. Your intention was, as *Washington Post* reporter Nick Anderson says in his article on whether students should be allowed to choose their roommates, to “normaliz[e] having an international roommate” and to “value differences.” For the most part, we understand and appreciate this goal, but the current policy is ineffective and even harmful for international students, especially those who are non-native English speakers.

It is true that living with an American student is very valuable in helping us to navigate the city and learn about American culture. It is also very helpful for all students to “broaden their understanding of different regions and cultures.” You “expect they will respect each other’s differences” (“Fall Freshman Assignment Process”). But you shouldn’t expect all of these things to happen automatically.

Studies show that, without external support, it’s difficult for people from different backgrounds to form healthy, long-term relationships. For her 2016 article, “Unfulfilled Expectations: Influence of Chinese International Students’ Roommate Relationships on Sense of Belonging,” Christina W. Yao conducted research at a Midwestern university with a large residential and international student population. Approximately one eighth of the students at that university identified China as their country of origin, and eighteen out of twenty-one participants in the study at first “viewed having an American roommate as an automatic path to better English skills and

to better understanding of American culture” (769). But reality soon disappointed them. Five out of six participants who were assigned an American roommate reported a lack of mutual interests, which led to an unsatisfying living environment. Derek, one of the participants, explained: “We don’t really have [a] common language and we don’t have the same topics we are both interested in” (772). Another participant, Zoey, at first thought that she and her roommate would talk about their different cultures, but later realized that the roommate “has no interest in that” (772). Eventually, “Zoey stopped trying to connect with her roommate” (771).

Domestic students don’t necessarily have strong incentives to learn about foreign cultures, while international students need to actively study domestic culture in order to get involved with it. Many NYU students are initially curious to learn about different cultures, but as time goes on, curiosity fades. After a long day, we all like to go back to what’s familiar. Thus, unless the school takes initiatives, this kind of ‘learning and teaching’ relationship becomes one-sided rather than reciprocal.

Such a relationship eventually becomes an extra burden for international students who already have a considerable amount of additional stressors as compared to domestic students. According to several articles published in the *Journal of International Students*, the major causes of depression and anxiety for international students are language barriers, cultural differences, and academic pressure. In the essay, “Chinese, Studying in America, and Struggling,” Helen Gao discusses the struggles that are both unique to and shared by Chinese international students studying in the US, and the startling rates of depression that result: “A survey released in 2013 by Yale researchers found that 45 percent of Chinese international students on campus reported symptoms of depression.” In comparison, “among the general population in American universities,” the rate is “roughly 13 percent” (Gao). When these students are struggling, it’s impractical and unfair to ask us to use English and explain our culturally specific problems to American roommates. Gao asks, “How can Chinese students convey the texture of their thoughts and moods in a foreign language when the language barrier is a cause of their stress?”

In a large room at NYU with five residents, it's possible that those students come from five different regions but only one of them is a non-native English speaker. Forcing us to speak a foreign language at 'home' and confront cultural differences without external help is not making our lives easier. We understand the importance of living in a diverse environment, but NYU's current policy is too much for us to bear, particularly in our first year. The current policy does not help us feel involved but rather isolated and marginalized. Leaving out international students is definitely not your intention, but you do need to acknowledge that the school can and should do more. Here are some of my suggestions:

1. Pairing international students with trained domestic students. A study called "The Effects of a Roommate-Pairing Program on International Student Satisfaction and Academic Success" by Steven Tolman discusses different types of roommate-pairing programs, with International Roommate Program #2 (IPR2) being rated by students the most satisfying and helpful for acclimating (532). In this program, researchers "pair upper-class domestic students with incoming first-year international students as roommates in suite/apartment-style residence halls" (528). Just as we hire and train RAs for each floor, we could train and hire a student as a mentor for each room before school begins.

2. Having required courses and events focusing on multicultural lifestyles for all students. Students in IPR2 "are required to participate in events (including an orientation), receive more communication and guidance from Residence Life staff, and are invited to attend additional optional events/programs" (528). These required events can help us open up and actually "network across geographic differences" ("Fall Freshman Assignment Process"). At the very least, these programs create mutual topics that we can discuss with our roommates from all over the world.

3. If you're unable to take the aforementioned measures, don't expect students to do these things themselves. At the very least, you can strongly encourage students to choose an international room style, listing all the benefits, and explaining how the school is going to help international and domestic students live together and get to know one

another. NYU should not require the current policy unless it feels ready to deal with and be responsible for our mental health.

No matter what you do, you can't satisfy everyone, but I believe we're looking for the best possible solution, and the current policy is far from that goal. We need to feel comfortable and supported in NYU dorms in order to open up and form healthy and progressive conversations with our roommates. And as you know, 18.6 percent of all NYU students are international students ("Facts and Figures"). We're the ones who pay full tuition, including housing fees. We should be able to decide if we want to live on campus. With all the amazing staff and experts in your department, I believe you and your team can come up with even better ideas and make a positive impact on our lives.

Sincerely,
Yifan Zhang

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Nick. "Should Colleges Let Students Choose Their First Roommate? Some Say No." *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/should-colleges-let-students-choose-their-first-roommate-some-say-no/2018/06/10/bd2a1d1a-4edf-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html?utm_term=.832289afd084.
- "Facts and Figures." New York University, www.nyu.edu/life/diversity-nyu/facts-and-figures.
- "Fall Freshmen Assignment Process." New York University, www.nyu.edu/students/student-information-and-resources/housing-and-dining/on-campus-living/application-and-assignments/fyre-assignment-process.
- Gao, Helen. "Chinese, Studying in America, and Struggling." *The New York Times*, 12 Dec. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/opinion/chinese-students-mental-health.

- Tolman, Steven. "The Effects of a Roommate-Pairing Program on International Student Satisfaction and Academic Success." *Journal of International Students*, vol. 7, issue 3, 2017, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1140257.pdf.
- Yao, Christina W. "Unfulfilled Expectations: Influence of Chinese International Students' Roommate Relationships on Sense of Belonging." *Journal of International Students*, vol. 6, issue 3, 2016, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1100341.pdf.

THE SPECTACLE OF EXPERIENCES

Colleen Dalusong

The Seventy-Eighth Whitney Biennial was highly anticipated for a number of reasons: It was the first to take place in the Whitney Museum's new location near the Hudson River, it was the first to have two younger curators who also happened to be people of color, and it promised to showcase art that focused on "racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics [and] how these realities affect our senses of self and community" (Whitney). While the Whitney definitely delivered on this promise, there were some who felt that the artists chosen to carry it out were not the right ones. On March 17, 2017, the day that the Biennial opened to the public, a small group led by the artist Parker Bright participated in a small-scale protest that involved them standing in front of and blocking a painting by Dana Schutz until closing time. A photo of Bright circulated in the media, his back turned towards the camera and the words "BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE" emblazoned on his gray shirt (Muñoz-Alonso).

Schutz's *Open Casket* depicts the mutilated face of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a black boy who was violently murdered in 1955 after a white woman falsely accused him of flirting with her. His mother, Mamie Till, insisted on leaving his casket open at his funeral. The press images of Emmett Till in his casket have since gained infamy, and his story is one of the best-known examples of horrific racism in America. The problem that people had with *Open Casket*, however, was the fact that the painter, Dana Schutz, is a white woman. Following Bright's protest at the Biennial, an artist named Hannah Black wrote an open letter to the Whitney imploring the curators to remove the painting and destroy it, and condemning Schutz for attempting to exploit the suffering of a black boy for the sake of her art. Black opines that "the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time." This searing indictment incited a heated debate.

There were those who defended Schutz, reiterating that she painted *Open Casket* because, as a mother herself, she felt an empathetic connection to Emmett Till's mother's pain, and that this connection is a legitimate and valid reason for choosing the subject that she did (Gibson). Others argue that Schutz's affinity for Mamie Till is irrelevant, for it is undeniable that what happened to Emmett Till is too intertwined with the pain of the black experience for Schutz to disregard that dimension of her subject matter (Guerra). Thus arose the question of ownership of experiences and representation that split the art world in two.

Following the sudden crush of criticism, Dana Schutz and the curators of the Whitney Biennial, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, released statements in an effort to placate the protesters and offer an explanation of their true intentions. Caitlin Gibson reports in her article for the *Washington Post* that the two curators reaffirmed that they stood by Schutz's painting, declaring, "we wanted to acknowledge the importance of this . . . consequential and solemn image in American and African American history and the history of race relations in this country. . . . [W]e believe in providing a museum platform for artists to explore these critical issues." Schutz herself explains exactly what motivated her to paint *Open Casket*: "I don't know what it is like to be black in America. But I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. I thought about the possibility of painting it only after listening to interviews with her" (qtd. in Gibson). She did not attempt to sympathize with the black experience in America. Schutz knew she could never truly claim complete understanding or ownership of the black experience. However, she did believe that she could make a meaningful connection with Mamie Till based on the shared experience of motherhood.

Art critic Klaus Speidel, in an article for *Spike Art*, argues that Hannah Black's assertion that Schutz should not be allowed to use black suffering as a subject matter is an absurdity, stating that Black is guilty of reductivism: she reduces *Open Casket* to a single topic, black suffering, and Schutz to her whiteness. He then tackles the implications of Black's suggestion that the subjects of Emmett Till and black suffering do not belong to Schutz:

The idea of ownership of certain topics, experiences or events is essential to the argument. The signers of the letter claim exclusive Black ownership of Black suffering which comes with exclusive representational rights. . . . [S]uch a claim is both politically and ethically problematic. If accepted, its consequences would be devastating. It would lead to representation monopolies where Muslim media wouldn't be allowed to cover the death of Christians, only Palestinians could speak about Israeli attacks, the Armenian Holocaust could only be treated by Armenians, etc. (Speidel)

The act of denying Schutz and every other non-black artist any legitimacy in depicting the black cultural experience could only lead to what Speidel describes as “representational segregation, where only one group’s perspective on a kind of event would be visible and all other perspectives considered ‘fake.’” He argues that Black’s demand to destroy *Open Casket* would only serve to further drive a wedge between white and black America, completely overlooking Schutz and the Whitney’s original intention to form empathetic connections between the subject matter and the audience through art.

Schutz’s attempt to defend herself and her painting still fell short for many people. Abram Guerra dismisses Schutz’s claim that she painted it due to a connection with Mamie Till, dryly mocking her as motivated by “a desire to prove her empathy bona fides as a mother (because being a mother deflects from the uncomfortable issue of race. We are all human and have mothers, we should focus on our solidarity . . . instead of on our difference).” For Guerra, Schutz’s explanation only exemplifies the extent to which Schutz is completely ignorant of how her benevolent intentions may have been disturbing or harmful to many. He elaborates on what makes *Open Casket* problematic: “This is the essence of (mis)appropriation: cherry-picking cultural matters . . . without bothering to engage with the real experiences . . . of people who have to live as part of those cultures full-time. It’s White tourism, and an extension of colonial logic” (Guerra). Schutz might be able to temporarily engage with the pain of Mamie Till, but she can then step back from it and return to her own life that is free of the fears that black mothers like Mamie Till experience on a daily basis. Schutz will never have to worry that her son might be horri-

cally murdered by racists, that he might be killed by a suspicious policeman, or any other terrifying scenario that black parents must reckon with.

For art critic Aruna D'Souza, the true heart of the controversy does not lie in whether Schutz's intentions justify her actions, but rather in the implications of the protests surrounding it. D'Souza reveals the complexity of the debate over *Open Casket*, which at first appears to be a "cut-and-dried argument over artistic freedom and free speech," but in fact reveals the hypocrisy of those who used free speech to defend Schutz. She notes that the same people who supported Schutz's artistic right to paint *Open Casket* also implored the Guggenheim to take down a video depicting fighting dogs, emphasizing the blurred line between what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable art, and the hypocrisy of those who arbitrarily defend one artist's freedom while limiting another's (D'Souza). D'Souza takes her argument one step further by reflecting on what Schutz's protesters are really asking for, claiming that "[w]hat many hear when they listen to protesters is that someone wants to take something away from them. . . . We'd do better if we could bring ourselves to hear that those protesters are largely asking to come inside." Artists like Hannah Black and Parker Bright don't necessarily want to take away anyone's "artistic freedom" (D'Souza). They just want museums and curators to prioritize their voices, especially when it comes to exhibits that attempt to represent racially charged matters like police violence, economic inequalities, or polarizing politics. The fact that curators frequently turn to artists such as Dana Schutz, who is less qualified to depict such nuanced experiences, rather than artists who have actually lived through such experiences and could thus claim ownership of them, has lasting implications in the art world as a whole.

The debate over representing the experience of marginalized groups in art extends beyond white artists depicting black subjects. In her article "An Ethics of Embodiment, Civil Engagement, and A/R/Tography," Stephanie Springgay explores the principles that govern bodies in art, specifically in the context of feminist art. These principles usually come in the form of regulations, laws, or guidelines that function as systems of oppression. Springgay examines artist Rebecca Belmore, whose work "embodies and bears witness" to First

Nations women in Canada who went missing in Vancouver's downtown east side in the 1980s (5). Springgay argues that the current model of embodiment in art relies on the premise of an artist such as Schutz imagining themselves in the place of the Other, and that this is not an ethical practice, as the artist's act of substituting themselves for the Other is an act of appropriation. Belmore, on the other hand, "does not claim to speak 'for' the missing women, nor their lives and experiences, but rather weighs heavy with the flesh of the body" (5). The artist who substitutes herself as the other is unable to realize that they and their subject cannot be judged by the same standards, and that claiming otherwise could only be seen as unethical. Springgay cites philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, who articulates the irrefutable separation between self and the other:

I am not the same as the Other: I cannot use myself as the model by which to apprehend the Other: the Other is in a fundamental sense beyond me and in this sense the other represents the limiting condition of myself. And further, this Other, who is not me, nevertheless defines me essentially by representing precisely what I cannot assimilate to myself, to what is already familiar to me.
(Butler qtd. in Springgay 5)

Springgay uses these assertions to rethink the ethics of embodiment in art that does away with the tradition of consuming the Other through misguided attempts at empathetic understandings, acknowledging that artists can never truly know the ambiguities of the Other. Artists must "be vulnerable to the consequences and effects that [their] response has on the Other" (Todd qtd. in Springgay 6). Rather than try to emulate the Other, it would be more beneficial to simply listen, which might facilitate a more ethical and productive learning environment in the art world. However, simply listening is easier said than done.

There is an insidious problem with these endeavors for increased diversity in the art world, even when curators make an effort to include artists of color in their exhibits. Arlene Davila articulates this issue in "Latino/a Art: Race and the Illusion of Equality," directing her reader's attention to the tendency of curators and art institutions

to disregard Latino/a artists whose works don't fit into the accepted mold of what they believe Latin American art should look like. Davila acknowledges that the Latino/a community is hyper-visible, but almost exclusively as "stereotypes, icons, and figments of social fears and projections [and] invisible as complex, artistic humans." She argues that such representations are the products of racism and political disenfranchisement, resulting in people of color being viewed solely through the lens of their race. In other words, even when curators and the rest of the art world believe they are listening and responding to artists of color, they are often cherry-picking artists who still adhere to a clichéd image of the Other perpetuated by the white establishment. Davila claims that "any image that circulates in a racist and hierarchical society is bound to be a contested illusion," thus demolishing any illusion of equality, multiculturalism, and post-racialism in the art world.

Davila emphasizes her point with an anecdote about having her students look up the phrase "Latino art" on the Internet: "Searches for Latino/a art reveals the dominance of bright colors and imagery of the Day of the Dead and Frida Kahlo. From the search results, one would think that Latino/a artists are all Mexican or only used passionate colors." The prevalence of clichéd representations supports Davila's assertion that "diversity, in the form of a greater breadth of visual representations, is not the same as the lack of racism." Such "diversity" is simply shallow. Even if there were a thousand Latino/a artists breaking into the mainstream art world and claiming to champion a new era of diversity and representation, they would present no threat to the status quo, so long as they were promoting the clichéd racial imagery that many white curators and audience members expect of Latino/a people. "This is the racism that continues to diminish artists of color and their work to clichés and the rubric of identity politics," Davila writes, "[and] has entitled curators and critics to talk about . . . artists of color without authoritative knowledge about the vocabularies, aesthetic traditions, backgrounds, and resources of these artists."

This emphasis on authenticity, which is often closely linked to the artist having experienced something similar to what is being represented in the art piece, is echoed by the auteur Hayao Miyazaki, who criticizes the modern day anime industry and those who run it.

Miyazaki believes that what is being produced nowadays is no longer art because it lacks a foundation built upon real life observation. Miyazaki claims, "Whether you can draw like this or not . . . depends on whether or not you can say to yourself, 'Oh, yeah, girls like this exist in real life'" (qtd. in Harms). In other words, artistic ability is not enough to create great art, because art must reveal some sort of truth that has been observed by the artist. Miyazaki reminds his audience that the true goal of art should not be achieving technical perfection, but rather being a mirror on which the audience can meaningfully reflect upon reality. This can only be done when the artist observes and truthfully captures something they have seen for themselves in real life. Returning to the concepts explored in Davila's article, it is true that there are some Latino/a artists whose pieces do reflect truth while still remaining in the stereotypical category of what most people believe Latino/a art must look like. Yet, by neglecting artists whose voices are often dismissed due to their inability to fit into an easily understandable cliché, the art world fails to explore the true depths of the experiences of artists of color, which only those artists can truly represent.

However, if the art world were to miraculously come to the consensus that all artists may only depict subject matter to which they can claim a direct relationship, then there would be another problem. A majority of art reflects not what an artist has directly seen, but what the artist feels to be a faithful depiction of how their subject matter appeared at a particular moment. Judging art based on whether or not the artist has ownership of the experience is shallow, because it is impossible for all art to depict the artist's lived experience. But for too long, the world has been depicted through an exclusively white lens. Artists of color are tired of their experiences being told through the voices of white artists who could never fully understand the nuances of what it means to be a person of color, and are yearning for their own voices to be prioritized when it comes to depicting experiences and events that are intertwined with their own lives and cultures. As Davila discusses, the ways in which white artists portray people of color are often stereotypical, which is inherently problematic and upholds outdated and largely incorrect representations of people of color.

The issue that many protesters had with *Open Casket* wasn't only that a white artist painted it. The issue was that it wasn't a black artist who did. In order for art to move forward, it must reflect the truth of the realities surrounding its creation. Art must represent its subjects in an honest and genuine manner to connect with the audience as meaningfully as possible. A white artist like Dana Schutz could never fully understand what it means to be a black mother, so no matter what she does, her depictions could never be as realistic as the ones that a black artist would produce. One could argue that not all depictions or representations need to be "realistic," but if the artist cannot completely connect to their subject or tie it back to reality, as Miyazaki advises, then their art will never truly resonate with the audience. We cannot expect Schutz or the Whitney to destroy the painting. The only meaningful apology that the art world can make is to listen to the Other rather than to attempt to emulate the Other. This means prioritizing artists whose works have been long overlooked by giving them more opportunities, integrating these artists into the conversation and creating a space for them to make art that they feel genuinely represents their experiences, reexamining traditional notions of what it means to depict an honest representation of actual human lives rather than caricatures, and becoming cognizant of the relationship between art and reality. If cultural institutions such as the Whitney showcase art that demeans or disenfranchises an entire group of people, then people may follow suit. It is only when everyone respectfully listens to each other that meaningful connections are made.

WORKS CITED

- Davila, Arlene. "Latino/a Art: Race and the Illusion of Equality." *Art21 Magazine*, 20 June 2016, magazine.art21.org/2016/06/20/latinoa-art-race-and-the-illusion-of-equality/#.XGIgts9KgWo.
- D'Souza, Aruna. "Who Speaks Freely?: Art, Race, and Protest." *The Paris Review*, 22 May 2018,

- www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/05/22/who-speaks-freely-art-race-and-protest.
- Guerra, Abram. "On Emmett Till, Black Death Spectacle, And Cultural (Mis)Appropriation." *The Huffington Post*, 28 Mar. 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/on-emmett-till-black-death-spectacle-and-cultural_us_58d7cb1be4b0f633072b3894.
- Gibson, Caitlin. "A white artist responds to the outcry over her controversial Emmett Till painting." *The Washington Post*, 23 Mar. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/03/23/dana-schutz-responds-to-outcry-over-her-controversial-emmett-till-painting/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f21882f58f99.
- Harms, Evan. "Hayao Miyazaki: Corruption of The Anime Industry." *Medium*, 17 Mar. 2015, medium.com/communication-new-media/hayao-miyazaki-corruption-of-the-anime-industry-cf91d9ad09a2.
- Muñoz-Alonso, Lorena. "Dana Schutz's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Sparks Protest." *Art World*, 21 Mar. 2017, news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929.
- Speidel, Klaus. "Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*: A Controversy around a Painting as a Symptom of an Art World Malady." *Spike Art Magazine*, 25 Mar. 2017, www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady.
- Springgay, Stephanie. "An Ethics Of Embodiment, Civic Engagement and A/R/Tography: Ways Of Becoming Nomadic In Art, Research And Teaching." *Educational Insights*, vol. 12, no. 2, Dec. 2008, pp. 1-11.
- "Whitney Biennial 2017." Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017, whitney.org/exhibitions/2017-biennial.

BRIDGING THE EMPATHY GAP

Helen Wadja

On September 16, 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward as the author of an anonymous letter urging the Senate Judiciary Committee not to confirm Brett Kavanaugh as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court because he sexually assaulted her at a party in high school. As Kavanaugh denied the allegation and the Committee scheduled a public hearing where both he and Ford would testify, many asserted that the thirty-six-year gap between the alleged assault and Ford's anonymous letter indicated that Ford's claim was a falsehood stemming from a personal, or even political, agenda against the adamantly right-wing Kavanaugh. During the public hearing, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham commented that Ford only came forward in order to "destroy [Kavanaugh's] life [and] hold [the Associate Justice] seat open" (qtd. in Watkins and Foran). Addressing Kavanaugh directly during the same hearing, Graham declared that he "could not imagine" what Kavanaugh was going through, and that the Supreme Court is "exactly where [Kavanaugh] should be" (Watkins and Foran).

Less than a day after Ford admitted authorship of the letter, the Time's Up Movement, an organization founded to help combat sexual assault and workplace harassment through legal action, responded to the widespread attacks on Ford's credibility by captioning a picture of a pin emblazoned with the words "I believe Christine Blasey Ford" with the hashtag "#BelieveWomen" (Langone, @TimesUpNow). Within twenty-four hours, the hashtag had become a rallying cry for the #MeToo Movement. Thousands took to social media to share their stories of sexual assault as well as why, in many cases, they did not officially report them. Time's Up organized a national #BelieveWomen walkout to show solidarity with Ford. The thousands of activists who descended upon Washington, DC to protest Kavanaugh's nomination adorned posters and pins with the hashtag and chanted, "We believe survivors" (Campbell).

With the rise of the hashtag also came an outpouring of concern about the impact that believing the claims of women and survivors could have on the established legal principle that a defendant is “innocent until proven guilty,” a bedrock of the American criminal justice system (“Presumption”). Commenting on the Kavanaugh hearings in a *CNN Newsroom* broadcast, conservative pundit Matt Lewis declared that we cannot both uphold the presumption of innocence and endorse #BelieveWomen because they are “competing values” that cannot be logically reconciled (*CNN Newsroom* 00:01:28-35). In essence, because the presumption of innocence has long been taken to mean that the accuser needs to provide evidence to back up their claim, by its current definition, it cannot coexist with a phrase that advocates for the accuser to simply be believed.

In his dichotomous declaration, Lewis touches upon precisely what many opponents of the hashtag express apprehension over: the unquestioning belief in the claims of *all* women that a literal reading of the phrase implies. *New York Times* columnist Bari Weiss elaborates on this fear in a controversial op-ed, arguing that #BelieveWomen is an absolute phrase that “lumps . . . highly diverse experiences together based on gender” and promotes “mob rule” over due process (Weiss). Because the hashtag states only that we should believe women, and not that we should “trust but verify” or believe women after making sure that they have sufficient evidence to support their stories, it perpetuates a dangerous generalization that all women are “above reproach . . . [and] truth personified” (Weiss). Put simply, the problem with the hashtag is not that it calls for us to take sexual assault claims seriously. It’s that it seems to leave little room for women to make human errors or to be anything less than wholly veracious. If we grant all women our blind belief, Weiss argues, then instead of moving toward equality in the justice system, we are simply flipping the tables of inequality so that men are “discredit[ed]” and vilified without being questioned (Weiss).

But do we really need to choose between the presumption of innocence and respecting women’s testimonies? While Lewis’s characterization of the controversy as a black-and-white debate that pits the two principles against each other has been widely taken up by the general public, others believe that the two can be seen as complemen-

tary if we re-examine how we understand the presumption of innocence. In a recent article on #BelieveWomen, political journalist Lori Fradkin contends that, although the presumption of innocence has traditionally been thought to apply only to the accused, if we are to truly uphold the principle that no one should be treated as guilty in the absence of damning evidence, then we need to extend this definition to include the accuser as well (Fradkin). We should hold that the accused's account is reliable until we are given reasons to believe otherwise, Fradkin asserts, but instead of approaching the accuser from a "starting point of skepticism," we should assume that they, too, are innocent, acting honestly and with full credibility, until it is proven that they are not (Fradkin).

While this interpretation seems logical and compelling, it appears that the phrase has not actually been widely applied this way. In response to the assertion that all #BelieveWomen demands is respect and equality, *Atlantic* journalist Emily Yoffe notes that many, including Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who declared that she did not need to hear Kavanaugh's testimony because she "already believed Dr. Blasey Ford," do apply the hashtag in the way Weiss fears, using it as an excuse to believe women without question and to deprive the accused of the right to "meaningfully defend themselves" (Yoffe). In numerous recent college sexual assault cases, the accusers have been believed and the accused condemned without substantial evidence, or, in some cases, without questioning even taking place (Yoffe). Furthermore, in late 2017, Democratic Senator Al Franken gave up his Senate seat following calls for his resignation from fellow senators after sexual assault allegations against him came to light. Yoffe notes that Franken "welcomed the Senate Ethics Committee inquiry that was underway," but multiple senators, including Gillibrand, called for his removal on the basis of "their belief in women" and deemed him guilty before all of the facts came out (Yoffe). Regardless of the hashtag's intended purpose, past application indicates that we cannot so easily assert that it does not conflict with the presumption of innocence.

Despite Yoffe's valid points about the hashtag's application, her focus on the effects that #BelieveWomen could have on the (usually male) accused in sexual assault cases overlooks and even seems to dis-

miss the pattern of disbelieving and dismissing women that has persisted for centuries in this country. In a recent report investigating the FBI's handling of rape cases, media critic Soraya Chemaly writes that, although rates of false rape allegations have consistently been estimated to fall between 2-8%, recent studies found that college students and, alarmingly, police officers, reported believing that close to 50% of rape allegations are false, a number that was found to extend up to a startling 80% when the allegations were brought forward by a female. And, Emily Crockett notes in *Vox*, for most of American history, women had to prove their "chastity" in order to even have a chance at winning a rape case, and until relatively recently, in order for rape reports to be investigated or even taken seriously by many US police departments, the victim's claims needed to be corroborated by physical proof or eyewitness testimonies (Crockett). This distrust of women extends beyond the legal system and into the very roots of our culture: a 2013 study found that managers in the US overwhelmingly think that women lie about needing flexible hours (Wilkie). Numerous wildly popular television shows, including *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*, portray women as conniving and vindictive. In 1991, when Anita Hill came forward with allegations of sexual assault against then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, she was labeled as "nutty and slutty," and the (all-male) committee that questioned her suggested that she was a "scorned woman" who was fabricating allegations out of anger and "erotomania" (Marcotte). The word hysteria itself stems from the Greek word for "uterus," and as historian Bonnie Evans points out, for centuries it was believed that the uterus could "travel around the body" and cause women to act erratic and emotional (371). This idea that being female means being biologically prone to instability and over-exaggeration was endorsed by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980, when hysterical neurosis, a disorder characterized by emotional outbursts and delusion in females, was finally removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (McVean).

Not only have women been consistently painted as histrionic and deceitful, but sexual violence has long been used as a tool of sexist oppression. In her radical 1971 essay "Rape: The All-American Crime," philosopher Susan Griffin emphasizes that sexual violence is

“a form of mass terrorism” that incites fear and intimidation in women (35). Sexual violence is not just an ominous, ever-present threat that significantly impacts women’s emotions, Griffin explains. It shapes women’s actions and restrains them from breaking away from the societal roles prescribed to them, keeping them tucked away and under male jurisdiction, and, perhaps most frighteningly, it ensures that men are given a free pass to act “aggressive and domineering” (Griffin 30). Put simply, because sexual assault is a form of calculated social intimidation as well as a traumatic, dehumanizing experience, when we fixate on how our responses to sexual assault affect males, we allow women to continue to be silenced by the staggering fear and intimidation that the lurking threat of sexual violence thrusts upon them. In light of this long, painful history of women being dismissed and abused, the hashtag can be seen not as a push for women to be blindly believed, as Yoffe and Weiss suggest, but as a pushback on this persistent pattern of female derision, disbelief, and oppression through sexual violence, and as a demand that women be awarded the same level of basic respect and trust that men enjoy.

But if we take up this perspective, then why does the hashtag continue to be framed as a “puritan witch hunt” that erodes, instead of advances, equality (Pradier)? The claim that we should treat criminal allegations with respect and trust regardless of the accuser’s gender seems like a reasonable proposal that falls in line with the principles of equality on which America was supposedly founded. Does the widespread bipartisan outrage over the phrase stem from people simply reading the phrase too literally?

According to philosopher Kate Manne, this complex question can be at least partially explained by the historical context that has given rise to #BelieveWomen: the pattern of directing “disproportionate sympathy” toward males and “relentlessly cast[ing] suspicion upon . . . female[s]” that has been the cultural norm for years. Because we have lived in a male-centric culture for so long, Manne explains, we have been conditioned to reflexively sympathize with their point of view, especially in sexual assault or domestic abuse cases. This tendency has been on full display recently. In light of Ford’s accusations, many said that Kavanaugh was just doing “what boy[s] do . . . in high school” (Manne). President Trump announced that the #MeToo

Movement makes this a “very scary time for . . . men in America,” while his son, Donald Trump Jr., declared that, although this is a “scary time for all,” he is “more scared for [his] sons” than his daughters (qtd. in Diamond; qtd. in Bach). Some of the backlash against the hashtag seems to stem from men seeing it as a threat to the presumption of truth-telling and cultural empathy that they have long enjoyed, something that could strip them of the sympathy they are accustomed to receiving and cause them, instead, to be met with reflexive skepticism and distrust.

This problem extends beyond the fear of losing privilege that dismantling this male-centric system may stir. #BelieveWomen, in advocating that we take women seriously, also requires us to confront the fact that we are still living in a culture where the idea that women are intrinsically unreliable and excessively dramatic lurks just beneath the surface. As author Rebecca Solnit details in a recent essay, we live in a culture where women have been ignored when issuing warnings about Al Qaeda in the wake of 9/11 and presumed ignorant even after making research-backed contributions to academic conversations (Solnit). In a recent interview on the frequent dismissal of sexual assault allegations, psychologist Catherine Albiston explains that we often gravitate toward believing things that are “comfortable” and that allow us to avoid anxiety, even if it means ignoring facts or twisting the conversation to focus on other factors (qtd. in Asimov). Some of the backlash might also stem from us trying to avoid the discomfort and moral inventory that the phrase calls for us to take part in. We might be choosing to focus on the presumption of innocence—and even to paint the hashtag as a threat—in order to avoid confronting the reality that, despite the strides toward equality we have made, sexist biases still permeate our culture.

It is understandable to want to avoid discomfort, and it is not hard to see why we might choose to focus on other aspects of the debate instead of coming to terms with our cultural depravity. But if we do not shatter our idealism, then we will continue to live in a fantasy while females are silenced and mistreated. Continuing to focus the conversation on the presumption of innocence without addressing the conceptions of male superiority and female hysteria that influence

whom it applies to will only lead us further away from the principle being genuinely enacted.

Of course, reading the hashtag this way still leaves us to grapple with how exactly to handle sexual assault allegations. After all, recent research by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center has shown that in the majority of sexual assault cases, offenders make sure that there are no witnesses to the assault, and a 2016 Justice Department analysis found that nearly 80% of sexual assault and rape cases went either completely unreported or were reported after a significant amount of time had elapsed since the crime took place (Yan; Kimble). In some rape cases, DNA tests and rape kits can help to provide concrete evidence. But how can juries or the general public draw fair conclusions when the cases so often boil down, as the Kavanaugh case did, to the accused denying the crime and the accuser insisting that it took place? As pessimistic as it sounds, perhaps the answer is that there is no solution other than to accept the impossibility of a perfect justice system. Maybe, in addition to realizing that sexism still runs rampant, we need to come to terms with the fact that, as a human construct, the judicial system will never be able to ensure that no one slips through the cracks. The best we can do might be to simply try to assess the facts in the most unbiased way possible.

Even if we realize the futility of pursuing an impeccable justice system, this does not mean that we cannot still make progress. We can strive to cast aside the idea that women are untrustworthy or prone to exaggerating. Since #MeToo rose to prominence in late 2017, numerous companies have made changes to address sexual harassment, and sexual assault has become widely discussed (North). Though we still have a long way to go, these changes show that working to undo our biases and to make shifts in our cultural mindset can cause genuine social transformation. Ultimately, we are left with a choice: to work toward truly listening to women and taking them seriously or to let the impossibility of a perfect justice system and our discomfort with change keep us in the same loop of oppression and inaction. There may be no clear answer for how we should handle sexual assault cases, but by listening to women the same way we listen to men, by assuming that they are credible and honest unless evidence is given to prove otherwise, we can at least ensure that women are not

tasked with fighting to simply be heard in addition to trying to prove their claims.

WORKS CITED

- Asimov, Nanette. “#MeToo movement spurs #HimToo backlash: ‘People don’t want to believe.’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 Oct. 2018, www.sfchronicle.com/nation/article/MeToo-movement-spurs-HimToo-backlash-People-13304270.php.
- Bach, Natasha. “Donald Trump Jr. Fears More for His Sons Than His Daughters in the #MeToo Era.” *Fortune*, 1 Oct. 2018, www.fortune.com/2018/10/01/donald-trump-jr-kavanaugh-hearing.
- Campbell, Alexia Fernández. “Hundreds of people showed up to thank Ford for testifying.” *Vox*, 28 Sept. 2018, www.vox.com/2018/9/27/17910326/blasey-ford-kavanaugh-protests.
- Chemaly, Soraya. “How Did the FBI Miss Over 1 Million Rapes?” *The Nation*, 29 June 2015, www.thenation.com/article/how-did-fbi-miss-over-1-million-rapes.
- CNN Newsroom with Brooke Baldwin*. *CNN*, 3 Oct. 2018, www.mediamatters.org/video/2018/10/03/cnns-matt-lewis-either-you-believe-women-or-you-believe-presumption-innocence-you-really-cant-do/221557.
- Crockett, Emily. “Rape and sexual assault are common. So why don’t we believe victims?” *Vox*, 17 Oct. 2016, www.vox.com/2016/5/1/11538748/believe-rape-victims.
- Diamond, Jeremy. “Trump says it’s ‘a very scary time for young men in America.’” *CNN*, 2 Oct. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/10/02/politics/trump-scary-time-for-young-men-metoo/index.html.
- Evans, Bonnie. “Behind the Hashtags and the ‘Hysteria.’” *IPPR Progressive Review*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2018, pp. 369-379.
- Fradkin, Lori. “It’s Not About Whether You #BelieveWomen. It’s About Whether You Take Them Seriously.” *Cosmopolitan*, 24

- Sept. 2018, www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a23406703/brett-kavanaugh-christine-blasey-ford-believe-survivors-walkout.
- Griffin, Susan. "Rape: The All-American Crime." *Ramparts Magazine*, vol. 10, Sept. 1971, pp. 26-35.
- Kimble, Cameron. "Sexual Assault Remains Dramatically Underreported." Brennan Center for Justice, 4 Oct. 2018, www.brennancenter.org/blog/sexual-assault-remains-dramatically-underreported.
- Langone, Alix. "#MeToo and Time's Up Founders Explain the Difference Between the 2 Movements—And How They're Alike." *Time*, 8 Mar. 2018, www.time.com/5189945/whats-the-difference-between-the-metoo-and-times-up-movements.
- Manne, Kate. "Brett Kavanaugh and America's 'Himpathy' Reckoning." *The New York Times*, 26 Sept. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/opinion/brett-kavanaugh-hearing-himpathy.html.
- Marcotte, Amanda. "Party like it's 1991: Conservatives reboot the Anita Hill 'nutty and slutty' counterattack." *Salon*, 25 Sept. 2018, www.salon.com/2018/09/24/party-like-its-1991-conservatives-reboot-the-anita-hill-nutty-and-slutty-counterattack.
- McVean, Ada. "The History of Hysteria." McGill University Office for Science and Society, 31 July 2017, www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-quackery/history-hysteria.
- North, Anna. "The #MeToo movement and its evolution, explained." *Vox*, 11 Oct. 2018, www.vox.com/identities/2018/10/9/17933746/me-too-movement-metoo-brett-kavanaugh-weinstein.
- Pradier, Paul. "Catherine Deneuve: #MeToo movement is a 'witch hunt' that has 'punished' men." *ABC News*, 9 Jan. 2018, www.abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/catherine-deneuve-slams-metoo-movement-witch-hunt-punished/story?id=52243767.
- "Presumption Of Innocence." Legal Information Institute, www.law.cornell.edu/wex/presumption_of_innocence.
- Solnit, Rebecca. "The Problem With Men Explaining Things." *Mother Jones*, 20 Aug. 2012, www.motherjones.com/media/2012/08/problem-men-explaining-things-rebecca-solnit.

- @TimesUpNow. "We believe Christine Blasey Ford. We still believe Anita Hill. #BelieveWomen." *Twitter*, 17 Sept. 2018, 4:14 p.m., twitter.com/timesupnow/status/1041827788339081216?lang=en.
- Watkins, Eli, and Clare Foran. "Lindsey Graham angrily accuses Democrats of aiming to 'destroy' Kavanaugh's life." *CNN*, 28 Sept. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/09/27/politics/lindsey-graham-ford-kavanaugh/index.html.
- Weiss, Bari. "The Limits of 'Believe All Women'." *The New York Times*, 28 Nov. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/opinion/metoo-sexual-harassment-believe-women.html.
- Wilkie, Dana. "Managers Distrust Women Who Ask for Flextime More Than Men." *SHRM*, 22 Aug. 2013, www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/Pages/Managers-Distrust-Women-Flextime.aspx.
- Yan, Holly. "Trump says it's a 'scary time' for men. Here are the stats on false sexual assault claims." *CNN*, 3 Oct. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/10/03/health/sexual-assault-false-reports/index.html.
- Yoffe, Emily. "The Problem With #BelieveSurvivors." *The Atlantic*, 3 Oct. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/brett-kavanaugh-and-problem-believesurvivors/572083.

BEYOND HUMAN

Lisa Ye

A blindingly bright screen shines in the middle of a dark theater. The white light emitting from the screen only lights up the theater a little, leaving the rest in shadow. On the balconies stand four statues looking toward the screen. Down in the orchestra, not one seat is filled. This is a black and white photograph called *Akron Civic Theatre* by Hiroshi Sugimoto. The contrast of the white screen and dark surroundings in the photograph draws my attention to the white screen, and I feel as if something will pop out at any second. The theater looks eerie. But isn't it normal for a theater to be dark and a screen to be bright? What is it about this theater that makes it seem abnormal? Perhaps it is the absence of people. When I look at the picture, the only presence I feel is me. The feeling of isolation scares me.

Joan Didion finds beauty in isolation in her essay "At the Dam." After she visits the Hoover Dam, she "wonder[s] what is happening at the dam this instant, at this precise intersection of time and space" (27). She questions why she is so attached to the dam. After exploring a few possible reasons, she concludes that "there was something beyond all that, beyond energy, beyond history" (28). At last she realizes that the dam is "a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is" (28). Didion uses the words "finally" and "at last" to suggest the difficulty of achieving "absolute isolation," which she describes as "splendid" (28). Both the Hoover Dam and the movie theater are human-made structures in isolation. And yet, the isolation depicted in the movie theater somehow gives off an unsettling atmosphere. Perhaps Didion would find the movie theater in the photograph beautiful. Perhaps it is possible to find beauty in something that is human-made but not involving any human. Her perception of the Hoover Dam is almost otherworldly, as if it exists in another time and space, operating in "a world where no one is." The Sugimoto photograph also feels like it exists in another time and space to me. The

movie theater depicted in the photograph does not seem to belong in this world. My perception of a 'normal' movie theater is full of people, elegant red curtains, and a screen presenting an actual scene. Nevertheless, the screen in the photograph attracts my attention. It is the first thing I look to. It attracts the eye more than a 'normal' screen. Do I find beauty in the white screen like Didion did in the dam? Why does a screen that shows nothing have that kind of power?

The photograph is one in Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theaters* series, where he attempts to fit a whole movie into a single frame. During the shoot, Sugimoto only uses the light that is emitted from the screen. He sets up the camera at the back of the theater and lets it do its work. The many thousands of frames in a movie are compressed into a single one, and the result is the mysterious yet fascinating white screen. The compression of frames by the camera is akin to the Hoover Dam "transmitting power" (Didion 28). Both actions are done by a human-made technology, and the results of both are breathtaking. To Didion, what makes the dam "splendid" is something that is "free of man" and in "absolute isolation" (28). The Hoover Dam is almost its own entity; the "cranes moved . . . as if under their own volition," becoming a natural force (Didion 28). Sugimoto, however, feels a more religious rather than natural connection after looking at a photograph: "the light created by an excess of 170,000 exposures would be the embodiment or manifestation of something awe-inspiring and divine" (qtd. in Dunne). Both nature and religion are non-human, and these non-human forces are what evoke the otherworldly feelings both Didion and Sugimoto are trying to convey in their works.

Perhaps that is exactly why I cannot take my eyes off the screen. The bright white screen is like "a portal to another dimension" (Dunne). It is 170,000 frames in one, displaying nothing but in reality containing everything. To Sugimoto, photographs can "shut away the ghosts resurrected by the excess of photographic afterimages" (qtd. in Dunne). Sugimoto grapples with the concept of "dead reality" that a photograph displays, and how viewing a series of photographs makes the reality "come back to life," which is what a movie does (qtd. in Dunne). Through this photograph of a theater, Sugimoto wants to show the relationship between photography and cinematography and

the idea of life, death, and resurrection. I can somehow connect the unsettling feelings I experienced to Sugimoto's ideas. My attraction to the movie screen is in no way random. Perhaps, subconsciously, I look at the screen for something "beyond all that," something "divine," something non-human and otherworldly (Didion 28).

A blindingly bright screen shines in the middle of a dark theater. A strange, inexplicable feeling arises within me. Maybe it is a feeling of fear, uneasiness, or confusion. But, like Didion and Sugimoto feel, perhaps what is beneath those feelings is admiration. Perhaps it is an admiration toward a human-made object that does not involve any human, and somehow evokes a feeling, an idea, or a thought that is beyond human.

WORKS CITED

- Didion, Joan. "At the Dam." *The Brooklyn Reader*, edited by Nicole Callihan et al., 4th ed., Pearson Education, 2016, pp. 27-28.
- Dunne, Carey. "Hiroshi Sugimoto's Otherworldly Photographs of Movie Theaters." *Hyperallergic*, 4 Oct. 2016, hyperallergic.com/323313/hiroshi-sugimotos-otherworldly-photographs-of-movie-theaters.
- Sugimoto, Hiroshi. *Akron Civic Theatre*. 1980, Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio.

DISPLACED: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Athena Gerasoulis

Hiroshi Sugimoto walks down a beach in New Zealand. It has no people, no boats in sight, but he does not mind, because of the rusted pieces of metal strewn along the sand that the ocean waves have salted and spit out. Following the trail, Sugimoto carefully documents the rusted scraps, photographs that will later make up his *On the Beach* series, black and white stills that almost dance in a duality of simplicity and complexity, stillness and movement, shadow and light. Sugimoto eventually discovers that the junk pieces once made up a car, likely one of the many that were scrapped in the sea roughly thirty years before. Once highly valued and an important symbol of someone's fortunate financial status, the remains now lay before Sugimoto, dissolved into rust by the persistent ocean waves ("On the Beach").

Most of the scraps are indistinguishable in the photos, just conglomerations of shapes that one has to piece together slowly and carefully in order to register the full visual. I often return to one particular photo, *On the Beach 007 (1990/2012)*. It is a slice of a rusted car's door. The small silver half-handle on a thin scrap of metal vaguely resembles the shape of New Jersey, my home state. Roughly where Trenton would be, a tiny matching silver bolt locks the piece together. Despite the sharpness of the piece's edges, in the photo they appear almost soft, melting seamlessly into the shadows of wet sand below. Like the other pieces in the beach series, Sugimoto has shot *007* in extremely low exposure, so shadows dominate, contrast softens, and objects appear to almost transition into the backdrop. Another one, *On the Beach 018 (1990/2012)*, features a metal object that appears to be just a small dark blob, nearly imperceptible against cloudy salt-and-pepper sand. Though this abstraction may be something that frustrates the viewer, the power for Sugimoto lies in this dissolve of physical boundaries, essentially representing "the junked cars in New

Zealand [turning] into iron sand and [returning] to the sea” (“On the Beach”). He captures the pieces on the brink of death and reincarnation into fresh sand, sitting next to an ocean that dates back three billion years. Here, scraps of life coexist with ancient history, blending with one another. No matter what Sugimoto photographs, be it abandoned theaters from different eras, historical wax figures, or electric discharges on photographic dry plates, he breaks the rigid linearity of time and bends it into one that is circular, interwoven, suspended in a manner of togetherness, not chronology.

In approaching Sugimoto’s work, both newcomer and professional art critics feel a sense of disorientation. Looking at the span of his work over the course of roughly forty years, as well as the thinking behind his creative processes, I have slowly pieced together the patterns and defining qualities of his artistry, which has recently gone beyond just photography, delving into the world of architectural structures and mixed-media curio set-ups. Still, no matter the medium, Sugimoto’s work is universally difficult to approach. In an article titled “Hirosi Sugimoto and the photography of theatre,” Kevin Riordan describes this difficulty as “the work seem[ing] to gesture outside of its frame,” making the process of judgment through a more “traditional rubric” nearly impossible for art critics, forcing them to take metaphysical, unexplored, and intimidating routes (104). The intimacy of his *On the Beach* series presents an artist who has deconstructed chronological order and existence. Sugimoto calls on his audience “to trace patterns and identify disruptions, and to keep moving through and across the work” (Riordan 105).

After searching through an array of his work, I kept wandering back to Sugimoto’s *Seascapes* series. Every photo in this series is a shot of the sea meeting partway up the image to the sky. The individual photos only contain these two earthly elements. Though varied in exposure, greyscale, and contrast, they all evoke what scholar Joshua Petitto would call a “horizon of transcendence that punctures the condition of linear time and the law of perspective,” an aesthetic Sugimoto manages to keep consistent despite the images being taken on wholly different continents and in different climates (Petitto 107). In *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica, 1980*, the dark, almost metallic sea is rich in a texture of small waves and ripples that seem to repeat onward and

onward, until they meet the cloudless, white-grey sky in a distinct, separative line. In *Ligurian Sea, Saviore, 1982*, the entire photo appears misty and soft. The nearly black waters, the little waves, extend into the pale fog, an almost ghostly horizon that eventually melts into a darker, slate-colored sky. *Baltic Sea, Rügen, 1996*, keeps the same sea-air composition as the previous two, with an extremely low exposure, so that I can't pick out any textures or variations. Here, a monochromatic black sea meets a dark bruise purple-grey sky in a distinctly separated line, though the similarity in color softens the divide compared to the one of the Caribbean Sea.

The presence of the two elements, sea and sky, that make up each photo of the series is important; however, their shared lack of obvious subjects, a starting or ending point, or any living creatures allows for the viewer to explore the images in an unanchored state, drifting into horizons and skies that extend expansively and infinitely. The distillation of the images into two limitless and basic elements creates a sea that is not loyal to any specific time or society, but rather one that was possibly "gazed upon by our human ancestors at the dawn of time" or will be "after human life has vanished from the earth altogether" (Petitto 107). The series itself, like other Sugimoto series, is a continuously growing one that has been compiled over several decades, from different continents and cultures, yet the photographs could have easily been taken with just a few hours in between (Riordan 105).

And so we have a never-ending sea and sky. We have the past, present, future. We have time that is ambiguous and flexible and circular, where ancestors coexist with our current selves and with our future offspring, looking into the same horizon, even though the horizon can be anywhere in the world. We have Sugimoto's first memory, which he claims is the sea, the "amniotic fluid" from which we were all born, and to which he returns when he submerges himself alone in a hot spring in Japan, floating back to a time *before* he was born ("On the Beach"). We have a photo series that is still growing over thirty years, with no beginning or middle or end, no order, seemingly as infinite as the subject of the photos themselves (Riordan 105). We have Sugimoto, who plays with time and existence, shattering boundaries that separate yesterday from today, living from dead, viewer from art. We have all of these once divided things now coalescing, inter-

twined, or floating in some amniotic fluid, anything but a forced, chronological linearity.

Because the subject matter is so intimate to Sugimoto, the *Seascape* series lays the foundation for all his other works, in a perspective appropriately deemed his “oceanic vision” (Petitto 108). *Lightning Fields* is an ode to Franklin and Faraday’s scientific advancements in electricity. Sugimoto recreated their past experiments and documented the electrical discharges in his personal, present-day darkroom (“Lightning Fields”). *Diorama* gives almost a living, breathing warmth to the stuffed, ancient primates in the displays of the American Museum of Natural History, adding a multi-dimensional contour to their flattened backdrop prints (“Diorama”). In *Theaters*, he visits a variety of movie theaters, from Radio City Music Hall to Union City Drive-In to the abandoned Everett Square Theater. Like *Seascapes*, it is an ongoing compilation that keeps the same large-scale composition of the entire empty theatre throughout, the photographic center-focus of which is the bright white screen of an empty theater, a result of keeping the aperture of the camera open during an entire movie (Dunne). Each screen holds the movement of an entire film in a singular still image, evoking something alive in the ghostly vacant halls, “empty spaces through which the living and the dead both seem to pass” (Riordan 105).

Some critics, as discussed by Petitto, are unsettled by Sugimoto’s displays. Norman Bryson asserts that *Seascapes* actually conveys none of its intended spirituality, but instead a “high degree of aggressiveness or destructiveness” (Petitto 121). Michael Fried argues that none of the photos of the sea have any connection to their physical geographical location, adding that Sugimoto’s relationship to the ocean is purely “language soaked in the rhetoric of the mythical and the religious” (Petitto 128). Ralph Rugoff remarks that he is almost, but not entirely, convinced by the series (Petitto 128). Even Petitto, who is an overall fan of Sugimoto’s work, states that he is forced to sit through the “uncomfortable violence” of not having any defining features of depth and distance be clear and visible, barring any ability to identify the ocean, or to measure any motion (Petitto 129).

In response to the discomfort, some art critics “veer into vague abstractions or too often into dated refrains of Zen or ‘blending East

and West” in order to avoid the time it takes to deconstruct their views on time or create a new rubric for evaluating Sugimoto’s challenging concepts (Riordan 102). Struggling with the work is to be expected, but this is not the issue—the struggle is, in fact, largely encouraged when encountering Sugimoto’s art. But a refusal to even attempt to understand his views, intentions, and ideas by filtering them into an explanatory cultural box does a disservice to the complexity of his work. Riordan notes a number of critics who simply attribute Sugimoto’s most unique qualities to his “Japanese or Asian sensibilities,” and in a 2016 interview, *Huffington Post* art correspondent Elena Cué echoes this stereotype when commenting on the *Seascapes* series, asking, “Is Eastern spirituality implicit in your work?” Sugimoto responds, “I don’t care whether it’s Eastern spirituality or Western spirituality. . . . There is a spirituality” (Cué).

Instead of seeing the cultural marker as a dead end, viewers, especially those who feel personally violated or scattered, should follow it like a trail marker. Sugimoto was born and schooled in Japan, and drew artistic inspiration from nineteenth century Japanese writers such as Yanagi Soetsu and Orikuchi Shinobu, both of whom also blurred separations between life and death, past and present, modern and ancestral existence (Petitto 119). Their writings then dismantle the dormant placement of death at the end of a linear lifespan by imbuing the concept with tangibility, palpability, and ironically, vitality; thus, one could attribute this ephemeral quality to their traditional Japanese backgrounds.

However, I am struck with *déjà-vu* when I encounter Sugimoto’s new visualization of time, because I realize that it is not the first time I have encountered it, as uniquely complex as it may seem. Suddenly, I am brought back to André Aciman, an exile who in his essay “Shadow Cities” grapples with the demolition of a neighborhood park in Manhattan that to him is not just a park: “the remanence of Alexandria, infusing [the park] itself now, reminding me of something that is not just elsewhere but that is perhaps more in me, . . . that it is, after all, perhaps just me” (Aciman). The small park becomes a sacred “figment of space” that transcends a set time and geographical location, in which Aciman’s past, present, and future melt and move in a coexistence and dimensionality that parallel

Sugimoto's work (Aciman). Despite the striking conceptual similarities, Sugimoto and Aciman do not share the same ethnic background, dismantling the ethno-cultural explanation to why so many art critics are startled by Sugimoto's photographs. Here, what links the two is the idea of displacement.

In a singular lifetime, Aciman was a false French citizen, an exile from Alexandria, a refugee in Rome, and now an inhabitant of New York City. He is a criminal, a valued Ivy League faculty member, white-passing, French-speaking, ethnically Turkish and Italian, Sephardic Jewish, British-educated American, the father of an intact family, the son of a broken one (Aciman). To visualize his memories in a clean line would connote permanence and wholeness, something that would be inauthentic to Aciman. According to him, those borne into a "mobile, scattered, nomadic, dislodged" life will "always have the sense that their time warp is not perfectly aligned" to their surroundings (Aciman). They must therefore piece together memories, ancestry, and existence in a manner that blurs conventionally set boundaries. What other choice do you have when all you know are unanswered questions, loose ends, and misfit puzzle pieces?

Throughout his photographs, Sugimoto expresses this sense of living displacement, in which memories can only be preserved in some circular, coexisting, nonlinear manner. Sugimoto was never exiled like Aciman, but he left Japan at a young age, first traveling through communist countries in Europe, then driving through the US in a Volkswagen van with no finalized destination (La Force). Sugimoto reveals very little about his personal background, giving only bits and fragments. Despite the decision to omit personal details, he expresses feelings of self-loss, disconnect, deficits of definitive memory. Perhaps his sense of displacement comes from navigating an artistic world alone. Perhaps it comes from his divorce (La Force). Perhaps it comes from grappling with the cultural ambiguity of a nomadic lifestyle. Like Aciman, Sugimoto chooses to express his feelings of displacement, which have resulted in the fragmentation of memory, but unlike Aciman, he keeps the reasoning private.

Some, unlike Aciman and Sugimoto, have been fortunate enough to live in one space and time, with grounded roots, clear identities, and permanent homes. Some people have never felt the sheer exhaus-

tion of living in complete ambiguity. These people, who have never felt a sense of displacement, may react negatively and/or reductively out of discomfort when looking at Sugimoto's works. They may try to colonize Sugimoto's "warped" timeline with their own privileged views, because even through a photograph, the feeling of discomfort is too much to take (Aciman).

Sugimoto, however, is unbothered. No matter what, his work is much too slippery to be tied down. I circle back to him during his *On the Beach* series in New Zealand: glasses pushed back, white hair resting against a speckled forehead, he walks along rust, sand, and water, pausing to lean forward and inspect what could have been a door handle, what now appears to be nothing more than a rotting piece of rusty metal. But he sees something more. On this beach, he becomes a deity of some sort, softening the harsh realities of time. With a click of the camera, he tenderly breathes life back into the door handle and moves onward.

WORKS CITED

- Aciman, André. "Shadow Cities." *The New York Review of Books*, 18 Dec. 1997, www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/12/18/shadow-cities.
- Cué, Elena. "Interview With Hiroshi Sugimoto." *The Huffington Post*, 7 Dec. 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/elena-cue/interview-with-hiroshi-su_b_8924692.html.
- Dunne, Carey. "Hiroshi Sugimoto's Otherworldly Photographs of Movie Theaters." *Hyperallergic*, 4 Oct. 2016, hyperallergic.com/323313/hiroshi-sugimotos-otherworldly-photographs-of-movie-theaters.
- La Force, Thessaly. "Seeing Like A Camera: Hiroshi Sugimoto." *Apollo Magazine*, 14 Feb. 2015, www.apollo-magazine.com/seeing-like-camera-hiroshi-sugimoto.
- Petitto, Joshua. "The Oceanic Vision of Sugimoto Hiroshi." *History of Photography*, 2016, pp. 107-128.

- Riordan, Kevin. "Hiroshi Sugimoto and the photography of theatre." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 2015, pp. 102-111.
- Sugimoto, Hiroshi. "Diorama." *Hiroshi Sugimoto*, www.sugimoto-hiroshi.com.
- . "Lightning Fields."
- . "On the Beach."
- . *On the Beach*. 1960. Photography Prints.
— . *On the Beach 007 (1990/2012)*
— . *On the Beach 018 (1990/2012)*
- . *Seascapes*. 1980. Photography Prints.
— . *Baltic Sea, Rügen, 1996*
— . *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica, 1980*
— . *Ligurian Sea, Savio, 1982*

THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

Haley Gustafson

On May 23, 2014, a young man named Elliot Rodger walked onto the campus of a UC Santa Barbara sorority and shot three women, killing two. He then got into his car and drove away, shooting pedestrians and striking several others with his vehicle. By the time police arrived at the scene, Rodger had killed six people and then himself (Posten). Prior to the attack, he uploaded a video to YouTube titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution,” in which he detailed his motivation for the crime: women did not want to have sex with him.

Rodger was a self-described “incel,” or involuntary celibate, a term that’s gotten a lot of media attention in the last few years due to the fact that the group identifying with this term has been “churning out mass murderers faster than Marvel can make Avengers movies” (“Incels” 00:02:24–26). Incels share a worldview they call the blackpill, which is essentially the belief that humans fall into a biologically pre-determined hierarchy. Within the blackpill ideology, women are “shallow, cruel creatures who will choose only the most attractive men [dubbed Chads] if given the choice” (Beauchamp). It would seem impossible to ever empathize with such an ideology. What would be the point? In her video on the topic, Natalie Wynn, known on YouTube as ContraPoints, states upfront that she has no desire to empathize with incels. Rather, she wanted to “keep digging until [she] had a theory about how someone might start out in a decent place and end up in such a fucked-up place” (Marantz). She wanted to understand them, a common theme throughout her work.

Many of her videos are framed as Socratic dialogues, wherein Wynn plays multiple characters and argues both sides of a given argument. In her livestreams, Wynn often reads letters from young men thanking her for pulling them out of the far right, and I think she would agree that it’s not the academic rigor of her presentation that persuades these men. It’s her tone, her ability to mix the high- and low-brow, and her in-depth knowledge of online meme culture. Her

work is eccentric. It's not uncommon for a ContraPoints video to include offensive, oftentimes grotesque, interludes: Wynn in full Nazi uniform ("Debating the Alt-Right"), Wynn drowning a baby doll ("Violence"), Wynn in a bathtub pouring a glass of milk over herself while a cardboard cutout of right-wing psychologist Jordan Peterson looks on ("Jordan Peterson"). Given Wynn's former status as a philosophy PhD candidate at Northwestern, this absurdity works as a subtle bit of commentary; bathing oneself in milk is no more absurd than the constructs of racism, fascism, or sexism. On another level, it functions as a subversion of the stereotypical 'snowflake' leftist that the alt-right expects Wynn, who is also a trans woman, to be. She meets these men on their own turf, communicates to them using their own language and social code, and, in doing so, makes them reexamine the abstract idea of 'the enemy' they have of her in their minds. She forces them, in some ways, to empathize with her.

I discovered Wynn's work during the winter of my gap year. When I mention that I took a gap year, people usually respond with something along the lines of, "How cool! What did you do?" the implication being that I traveled or worked, or did something otherwise worthwhile. I know that these people mean well, but taking a year off was not a choice I made because I wanted to have an *Eat, Pray, Love* moment. It was the result of my not getting into any of the colleges to which I had applied. I spent the majority of that year in my pajamas, shuffling between my current bedroom and the now empty bedrooms of my older siblings. I ate ice cream for breakfast a lot.

Isolation does strange things to a person. I often felt alienated from my body during those months spent at home. When I try to picture it today, it feels very much like I'm recalling a movie I saw years ago. The memories do not feel like my own. About three months into the year I developed something called 'hypnophobia,' a fear of sleep. Not night terrors or sleep paralysis, but the literal fear of falling or being asleep. I would have a panic attack every night before going to bed. I think it was probably because I had the least amount of control over my body while I was sleeping, which makes a lot of sense when you consider that I'm also anorexic.

As I write this, I'm eating a vanilla yogurt and trying not to think about how it's 110 calories. Last year, I probably would have ignored

my hunger cues, and would have instead sought solace on some pro-ana board. For the blessedly ignorant, pro-ana is shorthand for pro-anorexia. Pro-ana individuals insist that having an eating disorder is not an illness, but a lifestyle choice, like veganism or being gluten-free. Members gather on boards to commiserate about life, school, and work. Mostly, though, they talk about their bodies. Collar bones, rib bones, wrist bones. Lots of bones (De Peña).

At one point in her incel video, Wynn half-jokingly proposes a sociological theory she calls “Foppington’s Law: Once bigotry or self-loathing permeate a given community, it is only a matter of time before deep metaphysical significance is assigned to the shape of human skulls” (“Incels” 00:05:59-6:11). One popular meme shows a side-by-side comparison of the same man: on one side he appears as he looks in real life, with a strong brow and jawline. On the other, incels have photoshopped his jawline to be weaker and his brow more sloped. Underneath is the caption: “the difference between Chads and incels is literally a few millimeters of bone” (00:05:50-56). It all feels eerily similar to the pro-ana boards I used to spend so much time on. For incels, the shape of the skull determines your value in the sexual marketplace. For pro-anas, it’s the thigh gap, a physical trait dependent upon the shape of your hip bones. It’s the inches between your bones and the fat that hides them. At one point in the video, Wynn admits that she has to pause production to go to a consultation for facial feminization surgery that would “shave off a few millimeters of bone” because, as a trans woman, she is “just as obsessed with bone structure as the goddamn incels” (00:22:07).

There are other similarities, too. Wynn discusses incel “selfie threads,” in which an incel submits a photo of himself to a message board for comments. While the majority of these selfies are of perfectly normal looking men, the feedback they get is that “their chins are weak, their hair is thin, their skin is garbage, and there’s no hope whatsoever no woman will ever love them” (“Incels” 00:23:25-32). Similarly, pro-anas, most of whom are young women, post images called ‘body checks,’ photos of their most hated body parts, usually the thighs or stomach. There’s also ‘thinspiration,’ photos of gorgeous, impossibly thin, usually white women whom pro-anas use as motivation, and its textual counterparts, ‘nicespo’ and ‘meanspo,’

which either coddle or abuse readers into starving themselves. Some of the meanspo I've read use language as vicious and demeaning as incel "sui-fuel," posts that encourage incels to kill themselves ("Incels" 00:14:11). Both groups demonize family members and friends who suggest that they should see a doctor, or in any way insinuate that they have a problem or should seek help. One of the cruelest tricks of incelism is that these forums and message boards give the illusion of connection to these lonely men, while in actuality, they only further isolate them from any genuine, real-life connection.

Wynn creates a parallel between these selfie threads and her own experience on Reddit's r/LGBT board. Originally a space for the "twenty-five gay men who actually like Milo Yiannopoulos," the board is now mostly transgender individuals considering transitioning ("Incels" 00:23:25-24:00). During the early stages of her transition, Wynn would seek out extremely critical threads about herself on the board, ones that focused on her strong brow or her nose. She calls this impulse to willingly seek out abuse "masochistic epistemology": whatever hurts is true" (00:30:09). Incels feel as if something or someone has lied to them, so they attempt to make sense of a world they don't know how to navigate. The blackpill offers an easy explanation: you hate yourself because you're ugly, and because you're ugly, no woman will ever love you. Anorexia taught me that my body was ugly, therefore I must be unlovable, but this is where the similarities to pro-ana communities and r/LGBT stop. Incels take it a step further, to "no woman will ever love you, and so you should kill them all." I have hated myself very, very deeply, and I have wanted to rip the skin off of my bones and set it on fire, but anorexics don't have a reputation for going on murderous rampages.

As the journalistic coverage of white nationalists as 'just regular folks' following the 2016 election has shown, it can be dangerous to empathize with hateful ideologies. I'm far from the first to point this out. There are dozens of think pieces and op-eds about why we shouldn't give hate groups platforms, and probably more arguing that we shouldn't even write about not writing about it. In fact, I went through a bit of a moral crisis deciding whether or not to name Elliot Rodger because I've read some articles arguing that journalists shouldn't name the perpetrators of mass murders, and others arguing

they should (Should I have named the victims? In writing about the movement, am I normalizing its worldview?). I'm not even the first person to do a piece on empathy as it relates to incels. Hanna Rosin, journalist and host of the podcast *Invisibilia*, already did one. And then, interestingly, she did it over.

Rosin's original interview with Jack Peterson, a former incel, followed the basic *Invisibilia* format. It was a sort of character study, a glimpse into the mind of a once hateful, now reformed incel. As Rosin says, "[t]he *Invisibilia* way is the empathic way" (00:03:12-15). The interview was then given to a new producer, Lina Misitzis, as a test run for her job. Essentially, Rosin wanted to see what Misitzis would do with the interview in order to determine if she was a good fit for the podcast. What Rosin expected to get and, to a certain extent, what Misitzis expected to make, was a piece that followed that same empathetic impulse. What Misitzis turned in, however, was not an empathetic character study of a reformed bigot. Rather, her piece was a scathing critique of the ways in which society uses empathy to excuse the actions of dangerous men. This unsettled Rosin. As Misitzis poked holes in Rosin's characterization of Jack—pointing out how he'd crossed state lines to force his ex-girlfriend to speak to him, how he had shared nude photos of her without her consent, how, in all of the press he did, his focus was always on himself and never on the women that he harmed—Rosin began to wonder how her original interview had gotten it so wrong.

According to Rosin, the idea that empathy is intrinsically good didn't arise until the 1960s and 1970s. Scientists and psychologists began to worry that we were "either headed for World War III or empathy," and so they began to push empathy into the culture (Rosin 00:31:40-45). The idea was that, "had the Germans had more empathy in the 1930s, Hitler would not have happened" and so, in the '70s, you start to see a massive push toward empathy as a creed or an ideology, which lasted until about twenty years ago (Rosin 00:31:53-58). Around the year 2000, the percentage of people who said they feel empathy is always a good thing began to dramatically dip by about forty percent (Rosin 00:33:20-34:07). Instead of viewing empathy as a "big, warm sun lighting the path to peace for us all," my generation, Generation Z, views it as "a torch," which you shine "on your friends"

and with which you “burn your enemies” (Rosin 00:38:14-25). Rosin asserts that our understanding of empathy has become something closer to tribalism, and it has a cost.

When we empathize with bad people, we feel that we are transgressing some societal expectation which states that good people should damn the bad. We equate it to the grieving mother who forgives the murderer of her child. What are the limits of forgiveness, of empathy? There is nothing transgressive about empathizing with bad people, specifically bad people who are white men. Rosin names philosopher Kate Manne’s theory of “himpathy,” which is society’s tendency to “empathize with men in power over vulnerable women,” and it is depressingly easy to find examples to support this (00:35:23-30). Recently, I could point to Harvey Weinstein. Historically, there’s the entire institution of the patriarchy.

Empathizing with incels is not some act of Christian charity or saint-like benevolence, but the same act of exoneration that allows men to get away with rape and murder in the courtroom, and harassment in the office and on the street. Rather than challenging it, expressing empathy for men who hate women is an extension of the status quo. The funny thing is, when I talk to people about this, in particular to those of the so-called empathy generation that Rosin discusses, there’s an initial gut reaction that seems to tell them not to empathize with these men. It takes a moment for the empathy impulse to override this initial response. It goes something like, “well, of course they’re terrible, of course what they did was bad . . . but.” I’m not proposing that these people do this with the intention of upholding the status quo. I don’t think it’s a conscious decision. But the fact that the impulse to excuse white men is so deeply ingrained as to be subconscious for many people is almost scarier than doing so with malicious intent.

In her interview with *The New Yorker*, Wynn says that, in creating her work, she will “sometimes imagine a hypothetical nineteen-year-old boy looking for answers. . . . He knows that life in this late-capitalist wasteland feels off, that something in his life is missing” (Wynn qtd. in Marantz). When you strip away the artifice of the capitalist utopia, you realize that capitalism is boring and lonely and unfulfilling. When you lack the structure of school or work with

which to distract yourself, that loneliness confronts you head-on. Capitalism must explain this unhappiness, and so it tells you that you are biologically predetermined to be unhappy due to the structure of something as immutable as your bones: your slanted skull, your narrow hips. You can either explain the world or escape from it, but, like your bones, you cannot change it.

Incels ideology is not a kink in that system. It is the logical conclusion to a misogynistic, patriarchal culture that tries to explain away the discontent that young men feel when they don't get the things that capitalism and patriarchy promised them. Rather than an indication that something in society is broken, incels are a sign that the system is working. Incels feel as if something has cheated them, and in a way, they're not wrong. The problem is that they misidentify the culprit. Unlike pro-ana boards or r/LGBT, incels move beyond self-hatred into a violent hatred toward women. Women are not the problem. It is the society which tells young men that they can do anything and be anything they want, that women will give them sex and love, and that, furthermore, access to these things is their right as men. Anything they do in pursuit of sex and love—harassment, abuse, or murder—is within those rights. These are not legal rights, which are amendable, but birthrights given to them as a reward for being born into a male body. That damage is a lot more difficult to undo.

Giving up on the universal ideal of empathy is antithetical to the liberal belief that we should see everything from everybody's side, that we should compromise. Rosin pits the two versions of empathy she created against each other, writing that “the sun version of empathy was a delusion, some idealistic '60s nonsense that fundamentally misunderstood how the force actually works. And the torch version leads to the death of everything” (00:39:15-27). I see this as a bit of a false equivalency. Maybe the torch version does lead to the death of everything, but maybe that's not a bad thing. Maybe a society which appoints an accused sexual predator to the Supreme Court is one we should feel comfortable letting die.

What do I think the solution is? Maybe it's genuine human connection, but maybe it's not that simple. We should probably abolish capitalism, but revolution would require people to connect in a substantial way, and I don't know how we do that. Nor do I think we

should stop empathizing with bad people because I don't think that's really an option. Humans, barring those who suffer from antisocial personality disorders, are empathetic creatures. Everyone has gone through some shit, and our reaction to seeing someone else's struggle is usually to identify with it, to say "I, too, have suffered." I think that impulse is a generally positive thing, and a force for good in this world. But this world is also unavoidably one which encourages us to empathize with certain groups over others, and which values the empathy of certain groups over others. When you empathize with someone, you are, on some level, aligning yourself with them, and against someone else.

Part of me wishes I could look at a sad boy and feel bad, and have empathy rule the world and have that be the end of it. Unfortunately, some sad boys murder women. I'm tired of people asking me to empathize with men who don't deserve it. I don't see myself in them, and I don't want to. My impulse to empathize is overridden by a much stronger human impulse: to protect myself. It is the same impulse that tells me to keep walking when someone harasses me on the street; the same impulse that always knows where the exit signs are in a building; the same impulse that allows me to communicate with women whom I've never met using a glance and a whisper: "Are you okay? Is he bothering you?" It's not so much a matter of whether or not we should empathize, but a question of whom we are empathizing with, and why. I understand how isolation and loneliness might push someone into the incel movement, but I do not share their feelings. I don't want to. I'm okay drawing that line.

WORKS CITED

- Beauchamp, Zack. "Our incel problem." *Vox*, 23 Apr. 2019, www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/16/18287446/incel-definition-reddit.
- De Peña, Aurora Stewart. "Pro-Eating Disorder Communities Thrive on Instagram." *VICE*, 23 Feb. 2018, tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/437qab/pro-eating-disorder-communities-thrive-on-instagram.

- Garvey, Megan. "Transcript of the disturbing video 'Elliot Rodger's Retribution'." *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 2014, www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-transcript-ucsb-shootings-video-20140524-story.html.
- "Elliot Rodger's Retribution." *YouTube*, uploaded by KRON 4, 24 May 2014.
- Marantz, Andrew. "The Stylish Socialist Who Is Trying to Save YouTube from Alt-Right Domination." *The New Yorker*, 19 Nov. 2018, www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-stylish-socialist-who-is-trying-to-save-youtube-from-alt-right-domination.
- Rosin, Hanna. "The End of Empathy." *NPR*, 12 Apr. 2019, www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=712276022.
- Wynn, Natalie. "Debating the Alt-Right." *YouTube*, 18 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPa1wikTd5c.
- . "Incels." *Youtube*, 17 Aug. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD2briZ6fB0.
- . "Jordan Peterson." *YouTube*, 2 May 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LqZdkkBDas.
- . "Violence." *YouTube*, 24 Nov. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmsoVFCUN3Q.

THE EMPATHY MACHINE

Sarah Peng

Infrared markers are strapped around your wrist and stuck along your spine. On goes the nylon pinnie fitted with tracking devices, then the clunky virtual reality headset. Once on all fours, you find yourself in a pasture of low-resolution grass, face to face with a cartoonish cow. A voice booms overhead: “Welcome to the Stanford University cow pasture. You are a shorthorn breed of cattle. You are a dual-purpose breed, suitable for both dairy and beef production.” Yes, you. Now, you too can be made into steak. You dutifully trot over to the feed cart and dip your head down to chew hay as the voice lists a few stats: you must gain three pounds a day to bulk up to 600 pounds by the time you are ready to be sent off to the slaughterhouse. You then turn to a water trough, from which you are to drink thirty gallons of water a day. Every so often, a virtual cattle prod comes toward you as a real wooden dowel simultaneously jabs you in the side. Only a few minutes into the experience, the voice informs you that 200 days have passed. It is time to go to the slaughterhouse. You and the other cows meander over to a fence to await the slaughterhouse truck, the ground beneath you trembling with the grind of approaching tires.

The simulation ends there, but its effect on the user persists. Jeremy Bailenson, director of Stanford’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL), collaborated with one of his students, Joshua Bostick, to create the Stanford University cow pasture. They hoped that the experience of embodying a cow raised for slaughter would reduce participants’ desire for beef and ultimately mitigate the environmental consequences of a high demand for meat. Indeed, in their study of the experience, researchers noted that participants who were put into a cow avatar “gained more empathy for the plight of cattle” compared to those in the control group who simply watched the events of the simulator unfold (Bailenson 105). In his book, *Experience on Demand*, Bailenson quotes one subject who remarked that it “made the horrible and sad lives of livestock animals seem more real and less theoretical than when I read about it” (105).

With the rising popularity of VR and promising results such as these, Bailenson and many others have come to see the technology as an “empathy machine,” touting its greater capacity for instilling empathy in users as compared to other mediums. It works through the evocation of presence, creating the feeling of being here with the characters in a particular environment, or making the users feel as if they are occupying a different body, like a cow’s. Filmmakers, journalists, researchers, and game developers alike have turned to the immersive arts, drawn to the promise that VR “has the potential to actually change the world” (Milk “Virtual Reality” 00:09:40-52). Companies like Facebook and Google and institutions like the United Nations have thrown their weight behind VR as well, investing millions of dollars into programs such as UNVR and Oculus’s “VR for Good.” Chris Milk, director of immersive documentaries in countries like Syria and Liberia, sums up the hopes for the new medium in his TED Talk, “How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine”: “So, it’s a machine, but through this machine we become more compassionate . . . more empathic, and . . . more connected. And ultimately, we become more human” (00:09:58-10:07). For some, VR can go even further. Columbia professor Courtney Cogburn believes that the medium has the potential to make viewers “not just feel bad or empathize but to act and think differently” (00:13:13-21). The technology, science, creators, and audience responses seem to be uniform in their claims: VR creates empathy.

And yet, this mission statement sounds rather familiar in its seductive vagueness and simplicity, its reductive framing of the problems afflicting the less fortunate and ‘third world’ countries, and its fixation on the shiny new cure-all that came out of the similarly shiny symbol of industrialized wealth that is Silicon Valley. It all seems to trace back to American hubris, the broken record idea that ‘you can change the world.’ “If you Google enough, there will be someone with a child . . . looking at you and telling you, ‘Click here and send a dollar.’ So you pay some guilt money,” says Kenyan writer and critic Binyavanga Wainaina in an interview. He continues, “next year you’ll need something more horrific to notice, because you get more and more numb the more and more horror you witness.” When the same

images pop up on people's computer screens every year, many stop believing they have the ability to make a difference.

VR is a powerful tool, but researchers and creators are in danger of funneling old images and ideas through the lenses of these new, head-mounted displays. *Clouds over Sidra*, an immersive documentary made by Chris Milk and Gabo Arora for the UN, follows a young Syrian refugee named Sidra living in a camp in Jordan. Milk highlights the empathic potential of the film, pointing to the scene that takes place in Sidra's bedroom: "When you look down, you're sitting on the same ground that she's sitting on. And because of that, you feel her humanity in a deeper way. You empathize with her in a deeper way" (Milk "Virtual Reality" 00:07:41-08:01). You watch Sidra wipe away tears before she tells you, "My teacher says the clouds moving over us also came here from Syria. Someday, the clouds and me are going to turn around and go back home" (Milk *Clouds* 00:07:07-20). Kathryn Hamilton observes in her essay "Voyeur Reality" that "*Sidra* and other 360 VR videos we watch on YouTube predominantly feature children—as if a young man, an angry woman, or anyone challenging the positioning of the watcher/user, would knock a hole in the fragile attempts to provoke empathy." In the final moments of the film, smiling children crowd around the camera as the viewer stands in the center, towering above them all, their potential savior if the viewer would only visit vrse.com/sidra. A hazy kind of guilt wells up, the kind that we feel toward nameless, pitiable faces suffering in an indistinct setting that entice us to pay 'guilt money.' And it worked: a UNICEF fundraising program found that "one in six people pledged donations after watching the video, twice the normal rate" (Robertson "UN"). *Clouds over Sidra*, Milk's most notable piece of empathic VR, is a money-making machine, an expensive and high tech version of armchair humanitarianism.

This type of humanitarianism attempts to effect empathy, to simulate a walk in the shoes of someone else whose experience varies drastically from one's own. Some VR technologies even allow users to experience walking in someone else's shoes. VR researchers have discovered effective means of inducing something called the "body ownership illusion" through use of a virtual mirror in which a user can observe their digital avatar (Maselli). As you watch the digital reflec-

tion follow your movements, the body in the virtual mirror begins to feel like your body. The principle at work is based on the classic rubber hand experiment, in which test subjects are fooled into believing that a rubber hand is theirs when their real, hidden hand and the visible rubber hand are touched simultaneously (Ip). *YouTube* iterations of this test feature the moment when the experimenter brings a hammer or a wrench or a knife down on the rubber hand and the subject's reaction as they yelp and recoil. So, how far can the body ownership illusion stretch our perception of our own appearance? In one VR study that involved placing white-skinned subjects in dark-skinned virtual bodies, subjects showed "sustained reduction in implicit racial bias," even without any racially-charged scenarios. Just the knowledge of having a different appearance was sufficient (Banakou). The brain seemed to accept its new skin, rearranging its biases and attitudes accordingly.

Created in a collaboration between Cogburn and Bailenson's lab, *1000 Cut Journey* builds on these race-centric research developments on body ownership illusion and the resulting cognitive changes. The project is a patchwork of real-life stories garnered from media and personal accounts that attempt to simulate the experience of growing up as a black man in America. You are placed in the body of a fictional character, Michael Sterling, from childhood to adulthood. The virtual mirror appears at the beginning of each stage of Sterling's life to remind you of your appearance, that the basis for your treatment is the color of your skin. Your elementary school teacher puts you in timeout for 'being dangerous,' as your classmates giggle and call you scary. As a teenager, police officers accost you for jaywalking, ordering you to get down on your hands and knees. At age thirty, you're getting ready to interview for an elite corporate job. When the interviewer enters the room, he immediately approaches the white candidate waiting with you and greets him, assuming he is the candidate from Yale. But he's not; you are. You don't get the job (Cogburn). "It's not about blatant racial epithets but subtle, socially conditioned beliefs," *Engadget* editor Chris Ip observes. He continues: "Virtual reality seems uniquely suited to revealing the hidden texture of implicit bias," the kinds of small incidents that seem easy to dismiss when viewed in third person, but "when experienced first-hand . . . have a visceral impact" (Ip). VR

does not need to leverage specific moments of conflict or drama. Rather, the medium lends itself to quiet, coded moments to communicate how these kinds of microaggressions shape one's worldview and sense of justice over time. These are the "1000 cuts" to which *1000 Cut Journey* refers. And even if you cannot articulate how or what about the experience affects you, your virtual existence as Sterling means that you feel his unspoken pain in yourself and understand it intuitively. "What I really want is for people to come out saying, 'I thought I understood this but I don't.' [For] whites, in particular, I would like for that to be the reaction," explains Cogburn at the Tribeca screening of her piece. "And for blacks and perhaps other people of color who go through the experience to come out saying, 'That's it exactly'" (qtd. in Ip).

Users remove their headsets, haunted by the image and experiences of their digital bodies—but for how long? The study that claimed to produce sustained reduction in racial bias measured its effects only a week after the experiment. One week might be considered "sustained" in comparison to similar non-VR experiments with effects that only lasted for hours or days, but not in the grand scheme of things. Under the *Steam* reviews section of "Becoming Homeless," another VR experience that came out of the VHIL, one user leaves a satirical review titled, "One of the most important experiences in human history," coyly claiming that the "great thing about this art piece is that I genuinely feel hopeless but then I remember I can simply take off the VR headset and enjoy the basic necessities I take for granted. . . . This only required spending thousands of dollars on a capable PC and VR accessories." Unlike actual homeless people, those who experience homelessness through VR have a roof over their head, access to a VR-ready PC and VR kit, and then some. Comments like this suggest that, in reality, an experience like this does not have much of a lasting effect on any of its viewers. The hardships of a marginalized group are boiled down to a handful of scripted minutes, a blip in the lives of viewers. After walking in the hooves of a virtual cow, participants in the Stanford VR cow experiment were asked to document what they ate for the following week. Bostick and Bailenson used the reports to assess attitudes and intentions to reduce meat consumption, only to come away disappointed: "Data from these variables were not

significant,” reads a note in their 2016 publication (qtd. in Ahn et al. 16). It seems that no matter how long you plodded around on all fours, once you remove the headset, the suffering of livestock animals eventually became abstract and distant once again.

We assume that empathy is the key to connecting with and understanding the emotions of others. The question is not whether the technology works in this prescribed way, but whether empathy itself works. Bailenson suggests that through a combination of improved communication and increased empathy, we have “broadened our innately tribal outlooks and contributed to an ‘expanding circle’ of moral concern,” pointing to statistics showing declines in war and violence throughout the world (79). While empathy has been used toward manipulative ends, the general consensus is that there is nothing inherently bad about empathy.

That consensus is fracturing, however. In what she titles her “Empathy Manifesto,” Jade Davis, blogger and director of digital project management at Columbia University Libraries, rails against the very concept of empathy, describing it as “the path of self-actualizing at the cost of temporary self-annihilation coupled [with] cannibalization.” In other words, empathy plays into the power imbalance between the privileged and the disenfranchised, as the latter is “expected to perform their pain and discomfort for those who know only comfort” (Davis). Those who sit in a position of power then consume the secondhand experience and earn themselves a moral trophy. Psychologist Paul Bloom, author of *Against Empathy*, acknowledges in an interview with Sean Illing that empathy is still a significant part of the human experience: “It’s a wonderful source of pleasure, for instance. The joy of fiction would disappear if we couldn’t, on some level, empathize with the characters. A lot of our intimacy would fade.” Bloom’s main argument, however, is that “in the moral domain . . . empathy leads us astray.” While empathy has positive ramifications in certain circumstances, *moral* empathy has become compassion distorted, co-opting the experiences of the other and turning them into skins to temporarily inhabit but never confront.

For artists who have worked with VR, myself included, the word ‘empathy’ has taken on a stale and shallow flavor, be it with immersive films like *Clouds Over Sidra* or body transfer experiences like *1000*

Cut Journey and Stanford's cow experiment. The thing about the head-mounted display is that every time you put it on with the intention of stepping into another's shoes, you become more conscious of your own feet. The illusions of the virtual cannot replace the tangible. They only exacerbate the absence of real people and real places that manifest real empathy. At best, Sidra, Michael Sterling, and the cow only seem real. That is not to say that all the feelings we experience in VR are illusory or that VR enthusiasts like Milk and Bailenson are completely wrong when they extol the power of the medium. The problem lies in the fact that they have devoted so many resources to market the "empathy machine" without considering the ethical complexities that underlie the concept. This is evident in their oversimplified rhetoric, which game designer Robert Yang parodies in a tirade against the term: "Empathy is good, and VR facilitates empathy, so therefore VR is good—no questions please." But what are we left with if we detach ourselves from this idea that has infiltrated the core of VR's identity?

Perhaps an alternative had already begun to take shape when, as mentioned earlier, Cogburn claimed that VR can make users "not just feel bad or to empathize but to act and think differently." While her work falls under the label of empathic VR, her suggestion also seems to nudge us away from that genre toward pieces that instead prompt users to reimagine their place in the world and how they interact with it. Some creators have achieved this by tapping into the "unreality" of VR, giving rise to works like *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*, which imagines a utopian future for marginalized people rather than trapping them in a dark present, and *Aquaphobia*, which depicts the familiar experience of a break-up through surreal and unfamiliar anthropocenic environments. At present, the empathy machine, along with the preconceived notions about VR that fuel it, is still going strong. Less than twenty-four hours before I wrote this, *Dazed* magazine published an article titled "Marina Abramović on using VR and empathy to help save the world." As creators experiment and delve deeper into the realm of the unreal and the subversive, they inch ever closer to discovering new possibilities for art, technology, and society itself. For now, our understanding of and expectations for VR confine it to an "empathy machine"—but not for long.

WORKS CITED

- Ahn, Sun Joo et al. "Experiencing Nature: Embodying Animals in Immersive Virtual Environments Increases Inclusion of Nature in Self and Involvement With Nature." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2016, vhil.stanford.edu/mm/2016/08/ahn-jcmc-experiencing-nature.pdf.
- Aroro, Gabo and Chris Milk, directors. *Clouds Over Sidra*. Within, 2015, www.with.in/watch/clouds-over-sidra.
- Bailenson, Jeremy. *Experience on Demand: What Virtual Reality Is, How It Works, and What It Can Do*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018.
- Banakou, Domna et al. "Virtual Embodiment of White People in a Black Virtual Body Leads to a Sustained Reduction in Their Implicit Racial Bias." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5126081.
- Cogburn, Courtney D. "Experiencing Racism in VR." *YouTube*, uploaded by TEDx Talks, 3 Oct. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7T_u4hpiSE&t=500s.
- Davis, Jade E. "Draft of Empathy Manifesto #1: Emerging Technologies (VR) or Technically Feeling." *Virtually Jade*, 17 June 2018.
- Hamilton, Kathryn. "Voyeur Reality." *The New Inquiry*, 23 Feb. 2017, thenewinquiry.com/voyeur-reality.
- Bloom, Paul. "The case against empathy." Interview by Sean Illing. *Vox*, 16 Jan. 2019, www.vox.com/conversations/2017/1/19/14266230/empathy-morality-ethics-psychology-compassion-paul-bloom.
- Ip, Chris. "Changing Your Race in Virtual Reality." *Engadget*, 28 Sept. 2017, www.engadget.com/2017/09/28/changing-your-race-in-virtual-reality.
- Maghook. "Becoming Homeless: A Human Experience—General Discussions." *Steam*, 30 Jan. 2018, steamcommunity.com/app/738100/discussions/0/1692659769964675574.

- Maselli, A and Slater, M. "The building blocks of the full body ownership illusion." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 21 Mar. 2013, www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00083/full.
- Milk, Chris. "How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine." *TED*, Mar. 2015, www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine/transcript?language=en.
- Robertson, Adi. "The UN wants to see how far VR empathy will go." *The Verge*, 19 Sept. 2016, www.theverge.com/2016/9/19/12933874/unvr-clouds-over-sidra-film-app-launch.
- Wainaina, Binyavanga. "The Ethics of Aid: One Kenyan's Perspective." Interview by Krista Tippett. *The On Being Project*, 4 Dec. 2008, onbeing.org/programs/binyavanga-wainaina-the-ethics-of-aid-one-kenyans-perspective.
- Yang, Robert. "If you walk in someone else's shoes, then you've taken their shoes: empathy machines as appropriation machines." *Radiator Design Blog*, 5 April 2017, www.blog.radiator.deacle.us/2017/04/if-you-walk-in-someone-elses-shoes-then.html.

TO WATCH THE DESTRUCTION OF WORLDS

Belle Lu

In 1995, Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* premiered to an audience of sixty-five at the Royal Court Theatre (Braid). It was met with a barrage of criticism, much of which centered on how *Blasted* was merely a "gratuitous welter of carnage" (Stephens). The play "appears to know no bounds of decency yet has no message to convey by way of excuse," wrote Jack Tinker, a critic for *The Daily Mail* (qtd. in Stephens). Another critic, Michael Billington for *The Guardian*, wrote, "the reason that the play falls apart is that there is no sense of external reality—who exactly is meant to be fighting whom out on the streets?" (qtd. in Stephens). These critics are right in one sense. When watching *Blasted*, audiences definitely feel shock and horror, especially when a bomb is introduced midway through the play and the world of the first act is completely shattered. However, critics claimed that this choice of Kane's was so unfounded and cheap that it simply reduced audiences to indifference. Kane's choice of bombing the stage is an example of the destruction of theatrical worlds, a tactic that Kane and other playwrights employ in order to question the need for a "sense of external reality" in the first place. Kane's destruction of the world of *Blasted* asks audiences to consider the nature and consequences of war, as well as their own roles in it.

Blasted opens with a seemingly ordinary set: "A very expensive hotel room in Leeds—the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world" (Kane 3). From the very first stage direction, Kane establishes the anonymity and interchangeability of the world of *Blasted*. Further stage directions indicate a typical hotel room, with "a large double bed. A mini-bar and champagne on ice. A telephone. A large bouquet of flowers" (3). No feature of the room feels unusual or unnatural to the audience. There is no reason for the audience to be suspicious of the world of *Blasted* that we are first introduced to, except for the sterile and detached aesthetic of the room.

The theatrical world in *Blasted* disintegrates slowly. Although the first act is grounded in a realistic, familiar setting, hints of darker

themes are presented to the audience. Ian, a tabloid journalist, invites Cate, a young, ostensibly naive woman, to his hotel room. Once there, Ian is continually verbally abusive toward Cate, and uses racial slurs. Ian eventually masturbates with Cate's hand on him, forces Cate to perform oral sex on him, and then rapes her at gunpoint, all within the confines of the hotel room. It's not a world that is comfortable for audiences, but it is also not totally foreign—that is, until near the end of Act One, Scene Two.

The entrance of the Soldier at that point is a key sign of the destruction that is about to ensue. The Soldier's authoritative, intimidating presence permeates the room as he enters wielding a sniper rifle that makes Ian's revolver seem like a child's toy. "Our town now," the Soldier declares as he "urinates over the pillows" (Kane 37). With his entrance, the war is no longer external. The Soldier has brought the conflict into a space that the audience had previously seen as separate from the war outside. This is a violation of the audience's sense of security. If they felt uneasy before this scene, they now feel raw fear. At this point, they are exposed to the violence of war, and realize, like the victims of the war, that they are about to be personally hurt.

At the very end of Scene Two, the theatrical world is demolished in one swift action: "There is a blinding light, then a huge explosion" (Kane 37). When Scene Three opens, the script reads, "the hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb. There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling" (37). In the most literal sense, Kane blows up the set. Ken Urban, a playwright and theatre scholar, analyzes the effects of this moment in his 2001 essay "An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane." As Urban points out, "in that moment, the audience leaves the space of realism" (Urban 45). Within the span of one blackout, the stage transforms from a familiar and intact hotel room to ground zero of a catastrophe. If the Soldier brings the war into our familiar space, the explosion then demolishes any concept of 'inside' versus 'outside.' There is no more familiar space. The entire stage, but also the world, is now a warzone. As Urban tells us, "*Blasted's* audience now becomes witnesses to the atrocities of war. The lighting lends a more abstract hue to the landscape of the broken hotel room, and [the director] makes

it clear that we can no longer respond to the action as literal, but allegorical" (45).

This shift from a familiar, realistic world to a surreal wasteland feels inspired by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and theatre theorist who devised the concept of epic theatre. In his essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," Brecht examines the difference between "dramatic theatre," which is "for pleasure," and his ideal "epic theatre," which "instructs" (71). According to Brecht, audiences of dramatic theater see pain as unfortunate but inevitable: "the sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable." Audiences of epic theater, on the other hand, must face the unimaginable: "The sufferings of man appall me, because they are unnecessary" (71). *Blasted's* destruction of the space of realism shifts the play's theatrical world from something audiences could envision themselves into something foreign and surreal which they can only observe, turning them into witnesses of the atrocities of war.

Martin Sherman's *Bent*, a 1979 play about the persecution of gay men in Nazi Germany, similarly destroys its own theatrical world to encourage audiences to contemplate the effects of war. However, instead of Kane's explosion, Sherman presents a more gradual decay of worlds. *Bent* follows protagonist Max through his journey from bickering with his lover, Rudy, over getting drunk and bringing men home from a nightclub, to the revelation that Wolf, the man Max had slept with the previous night, is a high-level Nazi now being targeted by the SS. After SS officers break into the apartment and kill Wolf, Max and Rudy flee Nazi arrest before ultimately being captured in a forest and imprisoned in a concentration camp. Arguably, the audience is even more coddled at the opening of *Bent* than that of *Blasted*. While the audience begins *Blasted* feeling uneasy in a place that feels less like home, the audience of *Bent* begins at a place that is as homey as it gets: "The living room of an apartment. Small. Sparse furniture. A table with plants" (Sherman 7). Max seems to know the space like the back of his hand, navigating easily from one everyday object to another. Max and Rudy feel truly at home, both with each other and in the space of their apartment.

The world of *Bent* only unravels from that point onward. After Wolf's death, the scenes begin to change from one location to another.

er, each one progressively worse. The play follows Max from a dance club to a park in Cologne to a forest before he is caught by the Nazis and thrown onto a prisoner transport train to the concentration camp at Dachau, where the final act of the play takes place. Unlike the destruction of the stage world in *Blasted*, there is no bomb in *Bent* to drastically blast the world apart. The audience isn't immediately aware of the effects of this change. Instead of the sudden destruction of a previously familiar world, the worlds the characters are shipped through are increasingly more dangerous and cruel. As we get physically farther and farther away from the apartment where we began, Max's ordinary, reasonable life is forcefully taken away, piece by piece, by Nazi persecution. This is also visually represented by the physical set of the stage. Beginning in the naturalistic set of Max and Rudy's apartment, the set becomes barer. The park in Cologne features only a bench; the forest strips Max and Rudy of all belongings but a tent and rucksack. Max's final destination, the Nazi concentration camp where the entire second act of the play is set, is as barren as it gets: "A large fence extends across the stage. On front of the fence, on one side, lies a pile of rocks. On the other side—far over—a deep pit" (Sherman 43). This wide and barren set where Max's journey ends directly contrasts with the small and intimate one of the opening scene.

While *Blasted* instills a sense of fear and dread in the audience by beginning the play in an already unsettling world and then blasting it apart, *Bent* provokes more conflicting emotions. In *Bent*, the slow, gradual destruction of world, coupled with the comfort and familiarity of the opening scene, offers the audience an emotion that we don't quite feel in *Blasted*: hope. We readily accept that the opening scene is the world in which we will witness the story unfold, and as this relatable world is slowly ripped apart, we still remember the happiness, familiarity, and intimacy of Max's life in the first scene and we can't help but keep some semblance of hope alive. Somehow, we hope, Max will escape the increasingly horrific scenes that unfold and can return back to his ordinary life. Not only does this hope emphasize the pain of Max's ultimate death in the concentration camp, it also forces the audience to confront the idea that this brutal descent could as easily happen for them as it did for Max. In *Blasted*, the

world began as an uncomfortable though theatrically realistic one until both set and form were blown apart, but in *Bent*, despite the gradual disintegration, we remain within a realistic world, even as we watch Max and his new lover Horst make love through nothing but dialogue, as they are forbidden to touch each other.

The forms of destruction both plays employ highlight the different aspects of war that each playwright chooses to focus on. Each form of destruction replicates unique experiences of victims of war. In *Blasted*, the mortar bomb destroying the hotel room replicates the shelling of cities and towns, whereas in *Bent*, the victims of Nazi persecution are forced out of their homes to hide from one location to the other. Each playwright highlights a different aspect of war: Kane, the sudden destruction of previously-familiar spaces and the devastating nature of bombs; Sherman, the constant dread of persecution, and the emotional torture of the victims before the ultimate physical torture.

Through destroying or manipulating theatrical space, both playwrights urge audiences to contemplate the broader concepts of performance, and to consider how these theatrical worlds instruct us about the physical world we live in. In a 1997 speech titled “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space,” writer and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o expands on the concept of performance space:

The performance space, in its entirety of internal and external factors, may be seen in relationship to time; in terms, that is, of what has gone before—history—and what could follow—the future. What memories does the space carry, and what longings might it generate? It is clear from this that the performance space is never empty. Bare, yes, open, yes, but never empty. It is always the site of physical, social, and psychic forces in society. (13)

Both *Blasted* and *Bent* adhere to this more abstract understanding of performance space, as is evident in the last scenes of both plays. In *Blasted*, Ian is sitting in a hole, his eyes gouged out, while Cate feeds him gin, all while the set is “raining” (Kane 61). The scene ends in a blackout. In *Bent*, Max is in the pit, holding his dead lover Horst, and running to the fence before being electrocuted: “*The fence lights up.*”

It grows brighter and brighter, until the light consumes the stage. And blinds the audience" (Sherman 76). The final scenes of both plays feel surreal. They play with physical space: Ian's position in a hole and the constant rain of the set disrupts the audience's sense of spatial realism, and the blinding, consuming light of *Bent's* ending defies any physical world. It's through these specific staging choices that Kane and Sherman invite audiences to contemplate the contexts of their plays. The history in its "physical, social and psychic forces" is presented to the audience throughout the play, but the future is uncertain and abstract (Ngũgĩ). Even *Blasted*, which seemingly ends in a despairing world ravaged by war, finishes on a note that can be interpreted as hopeful, given Ian's final line, "Thank you" (Kane 61).

Social philosopher Simone Weil examines specific notions of these "physical, social and psychic forces" in her 1966 essay "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force." In the essay, Weil posits that "force" is the most prominent actor behind the violence, war, and death portrayed in the Greek epic the *Iliad*, which in turn illustrates the important role that "force" plays in the violence, war, and cruelty of our world. According to Weil, a key feature of force is that it changes hands. One who subjects another to force will inevitably become the victim of that force: "the truth is, nobody really possesses it," Weil writes (11).

In *Blasted*, Kane urges the audience to contemplate the cyclical nature of force. She explains the meaning of the brutality experienced by Cate and Ian in *Blasted*: "The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia. And the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war" (Kane qtd. in Bayley). Although never explicitly stated, *Blasted* is a play about the Bosnian war. As Ken Urban explains, "*Blasted* is not a dramatization of the horrors of Bosnia or elsewhere. It does not seek to represent incidents, but reference them. The play and the production dramatize the abstract logic that allows such events to occur in the first place" (Urban 45). In bombing the set halfway through the play, Kane decimates the perceived limits of war, cruelty, and brutality. But it's in Ian that we feel the full weight of Weil's "force" of violence and cruelty as the Soldier rapes him in the rubble of what was once the hotel room, and the audience is forced to

recall Ian's rape of Cate in the first half of the play. Kane guides the audience through this first level of revelation, the realization that the same attitude that produces Ian's rape of Cate in a Leeds hotel room can produce the Soldier's rape of Ian in a warzone, but the audience reaches the next level of extension by themselves: that the same logic that leads to this isolated rape of Ian by the Soldier is what enables mass rape. From there, we zoom out further. The same forces that create the acts of violence and cruelty in *Blasted*, from the Soldier and Ian both raping someone at gunpoint to Ian's eyes being gouged out, are also the ones that trivialize war and enable it to be justified. As Weil writes, "violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch. It comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim" (17). In destroying the theatrical worlds of *Blasted* and *Bent*, Sarah Kane and Martin Sherman force their audiences to contemplate the nature of war and cruelty, and to confront our own roles in enabling that cruelty.

WORKS CITED

- Bayley, Clare. "A very angry young woman." *The Independent*, 23 Jan. 1995, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/a-very-angry-young-woman-1569281.html
- Braid, Mary. "Young playwright blasted for 'brutalist' debut work." *The Independent*, 20 Jan. 1995, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/young-playwright-blasted-for-brutalist-debut-work-1568794.html.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*, 1st ed., Methuen and Co., 1964.
- Kane, Sarah. *Blasted*. Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1995.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. "Enactments Of Power: The Politics Of Performance Space." *TDR* (1988-), vol 41, no. 3, 1997, pp. 11-30.
- Sherman, Martin. *Bent*. Avon Books, 1979.
- Stephens, Simon. "Sarah Kane's debut play *Blasted* returns." *The Guardian*, 24 Oct. 2010, www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/oct/24/sarah-kane-blasted.

- Urban, Ken. "An Ethics Of Catastrophe: The Theatre Of Sarah Kane." *PAJ: A Journal Of Performance And Art*, vol 23, no. 3, 2001, pp. 36-46.
- Weil, Simone, and Mary McCarthy. "The Iliad, Or The Poem Of Force." *Chicago Review*, vol 18, no. 2, 1965, pp. 5-30.

MERCER STREET

CONTRIBUTORS

Grace Andreasen, '22, studies Acting at the Tisch School of the Arts. She is an avid writer who finds joy in writing challenging essays as well as keeping a folder in the Notes app of her phone for jokes she thinks of for her standup comedy. She grew up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan and finds inspiration for her writing in her hometown. She considers herself to be an observer of life, and her essay reflects this, deconstructing the “brooding male” trope from a female perspective and reflecting on the human desire for solitude and our fundamental need for human connection.

Elizabeth Crawford, '22, majors in Cinema Studies in the College of Arts and Science. She's Tisch-adjacent, which means she's got all the striped socks but none of the connections. She is a staff writer at *Washington Square News* and a contributor to *The Plague* magazine. Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Elizabeth is artlessly urban. She is interested in comedic writing, film writing, and film preservation.

Colleen Dalusong, '22, studies Communicative Sciences and Disorders at Steinhardt, and hopes to become a speech pathologist. She has lived in the Philippines, Canada, and California. Colleen has loved art since childhood, and began to learn oil painting when she was eleven years old. Almost nine years later, she can depict landscapes, flora and fauna, still life, and human portraitures. She is fascinated by the ways people find solace and catharsis within art, which is

the driving force behind the questions of representation and empathy that she explores in her essay.

Megan Feng, '22, studies Media, Culture, and Communication at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. She hails from a traditional (read: conservative) family from Shanghai. Studying abroad as an MCC student, she developed an interest in how culture is deployed in different media settings and joined NYU.LIVE, a Chinese media platform run by NYU students. She hopes to change people's stereotypes towards her homeland and plans to actively engage in China's media industry after graduation. Her essay was inspired by the meaningful but inaccurate representation of China in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Athena Gerasoulis, '22, is a Film and Television major in the Tisch School of the Arts, with a passion for screenwriting and camerawork. Entering film school as a complete novice has led her to learn something new every single day, and she hopes to work in creative media. Growing up in a Greek-Chinese, first-generation household in New Jersey, Athena has spent most of her life surrounded by rich cultural experiences. This has fueled her passion for exploring personal identity. Her essay analyzes a well-known Japanese artist as a template for the naturally complicated emotions that follow personal identity and self-discovery.

Haley Gustafson, '22, is a drama student at the Tisch School of the Arts. Before attending NYU, Haley spent a gap year in her hometown of Cary, Illinois. Her essay is the result of the isolation she felt during that year, and the strange corners of the Internet that isolation led her to explore. Reflecting on the experience, she wrestles with the human impulse towards empathy: who do we empathize with, and why? What are the limitations of empathy? And what do you do when you find yourself empathizing with the enemy?

Seamus Hogan, '22, is pursuing a joint major in Spanish and Linguistics at the College of Arts and Science, along with a minor in Philosophy. He hails from the small city of Geneva in upstate New

York where, this summer, he plans to work construction, play some live music, and finally finish Marx's "Capital." His essay is largely a reflection on the passing of his grandfather, from whom he inherited a love of old books, music, and history. The latter is, likewise, a focus of his essay: namely, the duty of the living to carry on the legacy of those passed on.

Danni Lai, '22, studies Mathematics with a minor in Computer Science at the College of Arts and Science, formerly at the Tandon School of Engineering. Born and raised in Guangzhou, China, she grew up with technology and cultivated an interest in robotics. She is inspired by how much possibility we can create and how humans and robots are getting closer through our own coding. However, in this digital age, when human-robot interactions are increasing and former boundaries are starting to blur, she notices a need to assess this newly emerging human-robot relationship and a subsequent crisis of authenticity.

Keighton Li, '20, is a double major in Journalism and Media, Culture, and Communication at Steinhardt. He hopes to eventually work as a video journalist or communication consultant with the LGBTQ+ community in their fight for equal rights. Born and raised in Hong Kong, he has traveled around the world to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and promote sexual health, including to places such as Poland and Hungary where the LGBTQ+ community is much less visible. His essay, inspired by his own dating experience in the city, explores the relationship between American mainstream media and the community of gay Asian men.

Nicole Li, '22, studies Marketing at the Stern School of Business, with a double minor in Psychology and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Studies. Born and raised in Hong Kong, she was heavily influenced by her hometown's unique mix of Chinese and Western cultures. Educated at an international school, Nicole is fluent in Cantonese and English and has a distinctive multicultural perspective that reflects Hong Kong's Chinese roots and its British colonial influence. Her essay explores Asian American representation in main-

stream Hollywood films, and examines the bias and idealization in the presentation of racial groups. Given her academic interest in marketing and psychology, her essay takes a step further to evaluate the psychological motivations behind Western treatments of other cultures.

Belle Lu, '22, hails from Taipei, Taiwan and Queens, New York. She studies Journalism and Politics at the College of Arts and Science. Her essay, "To Watch the Destruction of Worlds," is inspired by her love of theater, especially for its ability to grip audiences and convey intricate yet crucial messages. In this essay, she explores the intersections of war and theater, and examines what war does for theater and what theater can do for war. As an American child of non-Americans, she is shaped by the complex relationship her family has with the different countries they have lived in. "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old" examines a poet's account of facing persecution in both the countries he calls home and the relationship between poetry, storytelling, and resistance.

Elizabeth Makris, '22, originally came to NYU to study Songwriting at Steinhardt, but after much exploration during her first year has decided to widen her studies to explore Storytelling and Literature at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, and attended a Quaker school where she learned to value community, equality, and integrity. Because of her experiences with Quakerism, silence and reflection now play an important role in her life. She is constantly striving to understand how her actions are connected to and affect other people. In her essay, she explores how our impulse to empathize may sometimes do more harm than good, especially when interacting with people who come from different backgrounds.

Jamal Abdinasir Mohamed, '22, studies Cinema and Journalism at the College of Arts and Science and aspires to create a medium to voice the experiences that often remain ignored. Born in Minneapolis to a Somali refugee family and raised in an almost completely immigrant neighborhood, he was split between two worlds and is determined to create a bridge between the two. In his essay, he explores the

dangerous effects of intentionally turning a blind eye to suffering, as well as the importance of recognition and empathy in the fight for true social equality.

Nathan Nguyen, '22, from Hanoi, Vietnam, hopes to study Economics and Mathematics at the College of Arts and Science. Though he spends a great deal of time crunching numbers and memorizing formulas, Nathan also draws inspiration from observing the daily life around him. Growing up in a city of rapid socioeconomic changes, he is as intrigued by the directed growth of Vietnamese society as he is by its ongoing grappling with war memories, cultural identity, and human relations. His essay aims to understand the Vietnamese struggle between Westernization and remembrance, and is perhaps his own attempt to identify himself as an international student in a globalized world.

Sarah Peng, '22, studies Interactive Media Arts, a major that no one really understands, at the Tisch School of the Arts. She plans to minor in Game Design as well, just to make things even more complicated. She grew up in the small town of Brookline, Massachusetts. During her first-year spring semester, she had her first encounter with VR and the concept of “the empathy machine” through the IMA class Immersive Experiences. She explores the controversy surrounding the empathy machine in its namesake essay, attempting to navigate the labyrinth of connections between tech, psychology, art, and community that underlie VR.

Siri Ranganath, '22, from Potomac Maryland, studies Finance at the Stern School of Business and Creative Writing at the College of Arts and Science. She hopes to develop creative, socially minded business approaches to humanitarian crises. Her essay “Intellectual Labyrinths” reflects her profound curiosity and affinity for problem solving. Passionate about Spanish literature, Siri drew inspiration for her essay from the labyrinthine stories of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. She believes reading authors from around the world is important in an increasingly globalized society. Her favorite writers are Gabriel García Márquez and Jhumpa Lahiri. When she is not reading, she is writing

fiction, furthering her connection to all parts of humanity by sharing common experiences.

Jules Talbot, '22, is from Medford, Massachusetts and a sophomore at Gallatin. In 2018, Jules placed third in the National Shakespeare Competition and her essay is a reflection on her experience in the contest as well as the greater problems of gender identity and presentation, particularly in classical theatre. At Gallatin, her concentration "Shakespeare in Text and Performance" approaches English Renaissance plays as both literary pieces and theatrical events. She's especially passionate about placing new work in conversation with the old, writing and illustrating a graphic novel modernization of Hamlet called *I Am Dead, Horatio* and volunteering as a reader for the American Shakespeare Center's New Contemporaries playwriting series.

Helen Wajda, '22, is double majoring in Childhood Special Education at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and English at the College of Arts and Science. Raised in Schenectady, New York, she has always had a desire to use writing to enact change, and in the wake of the Kavanaugh hearings, she was inspired by conversations she had with several strong females in her life to discuss the #BelieveWomen and #MeToo movements. By examining multiple perspectives and unpacking widespread cultural preconceptions about women, she hopes to shed light on the nuances of the phrase #BelieveWomen, and to inspire a demand for changes in how we listen to women both within and outside of the courtroom.

Grace Whitcomb, '22, currently studies Photography and Imaging as well as Philosophy in hopes of pursuing a career as a photojournalist. Born in Stone Mountain, Georgia, she came of age immersed in an intensity unique to a devout Catholic family. Grace remains deeply affected by this upbringing, particularly the South's still-tangible history of segregation, and committed to her penchant for observation. Her work ruminates on both the familiar and the uncanny in the worlds that people inhabit. This essay delves into the ethics of captur-

ing times of turmoil, including that of the AIDS crisis, and posits that documentary photography, both of objects and of people, retains the immutable power to move.

Lisa Ye, '22, studies Computer Science at the Tandon School of Engineering. She was born and raised in New York City and spent part of her childhood in China. Equipped with the culture from both her Asian and American sides, she steps into NYU with love for the city and ambition to innovate technology. Inquisitive and reflective, Lisa investigates the unease when looking at a photograph of a white screen. Her essay explores the emotional relationship between humans and technology and how that gives birth to something beyond human.

Yifan Zhang, '22, takes classes in Creative Writing, Computer Science, and Sociology at the College of Art and Science, and hopes to become a bilingual writer in the future. She was born and raised in Shenzhen, a young, migrant city in Southern China. During her first year in New York, she and other international students found themselves in a diverse and complicated environment. She joined a social media platform for Chinese international students as editor, and her hall council as director of events, actively participating in and retelling the stories of identity. In her essay, she explores problems unique to international students in residential life and offers practical solutions.

MERCER STREET

NOTEWORTHY ESSAYS

The Need for Intersectionality Within Veganism
Yagmur Akyurek

Ursula the She Witch
Zein Karam

Rude Awakening: How We Cope with Mortality
Max Li

One Flew Over the Surveillance Net
George Luo

A Poverty of Language
Adam Moritz

Im(media)te Morality: On the Social Code and Moral Relativism
Sean Nordquist

This Is Retarded
Forrest Shearer

The White Coat: To Wear or Not to Wear?
Devarshi Vasa

Self-Analysis and Transcendent Thinking:
Sweat and the Importance of Contextualization
Helen Wajda

What Forgiveness Means in the Age of #MeToo
Rachel Yaffe-Bellany

INDEX BY ESSAY TOPIC

1. Authenticity

- a. Colleen Dalusong, "The Spectacle of Experiences"
- b. Meghan Feng, "Keeping Up With the Youngs"
- c. Danni Lai, "A Crisis of Authenticity"
- d. Sarah Peng, "The Empathy Machine"

2. Empathy

- a. Haley Gustafson, "The Limits of Empathy"
- b. Colleen Dalusong, "The Spectacle of Experiences"
- c. Elizabeth Makris, "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit"
- d. Sarah Peng, "The Empathy Machine"
- e. Helen Wajda, "Bridging the Empathy Gap"

3. Gender and Sexuality

- a. Grace Andreasen, "Connecting With the Lone Ranger"
- b. Haley Gustafson, "The Limits of Empathy"
- c. Keighton Li, "Gay Asian Men"
- d. Belle Lu, "To Watch the Destruction of Worlds"
- e. Jules Talbot, "Was Ever Woman in this Humor Won?"
- f. Helen Wajda, "Bridging the Empathy Gap"
- g. Grace Whitcomb, "To Be Still"

4. Immigration

- a. Elizabeth Crawford, "A Transaction of Trauma"
- b. Belle Lu, "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old"

5. Mental and Physical Health

- a. Elizabeth Crawford, "A Transaction of Trauma"

- b. Haley Gustafson, “The Limits of Empathy”

6. Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

- a. Elizabeth Crawford, “A Transaction of Trauma”
- b. Colleen Dalusong, “The Spectacle of Experiences”
- c. Meghan Feng, “Keeping Up With the Youngs”
- d. Athena Gerasoulis, “Displaced: An Exploration of the Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto”
- e. Danni Lai, “A Crisis of Authenticity”
- f. Nicole Li, “Broad Brushstrokes”
- g. Keighton Li, “Gay Asian Men”
- h. Belle Lu, “Not the Only Nine-Year-Old”
- i. Jamal Mohamed, “A Conversation About Recognition”
- j. Nathan Nguyen, “A Faraway History”
- k. Sarah Peng, “The Empathy Machine”
- l. Yifan Zhang, “Open Letter to NYU Residential Life and Housing Services”

7. Technology and Science

- a. Haley Gustafson, “The Limits of Empathy”
- b. Danni Lai, “A Crisis of Authenticity”
- c. Sarah Peng, “The Empathy Machine”
- d. Lisa Ye, “Beyond Human”

8. Violence, War, and Peace

- a. Colleen Dalusong, “The Spectacle of Experiences”
- b. Seamus Hogan, “Voices of the Dead”
- c. Belle Lu, “Not the Only Nine-Year-Old”
- d. Belle Lu, “To Watch the Destruction of Worlds”
- e. Jamal Mohamed, “A Conversation About Recognition”
- f. Nathan Nguyen, “A Faraway History”
- g. Grace Whitcomb, “To Be Still”

9. Visual and Literary Arts

- a. Grace Andreasen, "Connecting With the Lone Ranger"
- b. Colleen Dalusong, "The Spectacle of Experiences"
- c. Athena Gerasoulis, "Displaced: An Exploration of the Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto"
- d. Seamus Hogan, "Voices of the Dead"
- e. Keighton Li, "Gay Asian Men"
- f. Belle Lu, "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old"
- g. Belle Lu, "To Watch the Destruction of Worlds"
- h. Nathan Nguyen, "A Faraway History"
- i. Siri Ranganath, "Mazes of the Mind"
- j. Jules Talbot, "Was Ever Woman in this Humor Won?"
- k. Lisa Ye, "Beyond Human"
- l. Grace Whitcomb, "To Be Still"

INDEX BY RHETORICAL CATEGORY

1. Texts in Conversation: Deepening / Lens Analysis

- a. Seamus Hogan, "Voices of the Dead"
- b. Danni Lai, "A Crisis of Authenticity"
- c. Nicole Li, "Broad Brushstrokes"
- d. Nathan Nguyen, "A Faraway History"
- e. Jules Talbot, "Was Ever Woman in this Humor Won?"
- f. Lisa Ye, "Beyond Human"

2. Texts in Conversation: Reckoning / "Yes, but . . ."

- a. Grace Andreasen, "Connecting With the Lone Ranger"
- b. Elizabeth Crawford, "A Transaction of Trauma"
- c. Elizabeth Makris, "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit"
- d. Grace Whitcomb, "To Be Still"

3. Familiar / Personal Essay

- a. Grace Andreasen, "Connecting With the Lone Ranger"
- b. Haley Gustafson, "The Limits of Empathy"
- c. Elizabeth Makris, "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit"
- d. Nathan Nguyen, "A Faraway History"
- e. Jules Talbot, "Was Ever Woman in this Humor Won?"

4. Film Review / Reviewing in Contexts

- a. Megan Feng, "Keeping Up With the Youngs"
- b. Seamus Hogan, "Voices of the Dead"
- c. Keighton Li, "Gay Asian Men"
- d. Nicole Li, "Broad Brushstrokes"
- e. Belle Lu, "To Watch the Destruction of Worlds"

5. Cultural Controversy / Transcending Argument

- a. Colleen Dalusong, "The Spectacle of Experiences"
- b. Haley Gustafson, "The Limits of Empathy"
- c. Nicole Li, "Broad Brushstrokes"
- d. Keighton Li, "Gay Asian Men"
- e. Sarah Peng, "The Empathy Machine"
- f. Helen Wajda, "Bridging the Empathy Gap"

6. Artist / Text in Contexts

- a. Athena Gerasoulis, "Displaced: An Exploration of the Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto"
- b. Belle Lu, "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old"
- c. Belle Lu, "To Watch the Destruction of Worlds"
- d. Siri Ranganath, "Mazes of the Mind"
- e. Grace Whitcomb, "To Be Still"

7. Innovation in Contexts

- a. Danni Lai, "A Crisis of Authenticity"
- b. Sarah Peng, "The Empathy Machine"

8. Open Letter

- a. Yifan Zhang, "Open Letter to NYU Residential Life and Housing Services"

INDEX BY RHETORICAL STRATEGY

1. Problem / Motive

a. *Meghan Feng, "Keeping Up With the Youngs"*

"I recognize in my own life and my peers' lives the conflicts these characters encounter. Yes, the family makes the wrong dumplings, but the film does something right. It represents an authentic social problem in modern Chinese society. In the end, it's hard to decide: should the film be criticized for its problematic representation of culture, or praised for exploring a modern Chinese social issue that is rarely represented in Hollywood?"

b. *Keighton Li, "Gay Asian Men"*

"Santos's role adds more diversity to the already historic cast, yet his presence calls attention to more absence. While Hollywood is grappling with cinematic representation of both the Asian and the homosexual communities, characters like Oliver, Asian and gay, are hardly ever seen."

c. *Helen Wajda, "Bridging the Empathy Gap"*

"But do we really need to choose between the presumption of innocence and respecting women's testimonies? While Lewis's characterization of the controversy as a black-and-white debate that pits the two principles against each other has been widely taken up by the general public, others believe that the two can be seen as complementary if we re-examine how we understand the presumption of innocence."

d. *Grace Whitcomb, "To Be Still"*

"The photographs reflect a personal grief made public, as well as the government's repudiation of the crisis. To me, they seemed to reflect the suffering and frustration of not only one man but an entire community. How can an image filled with stillness have that much power?"

2. Transitioning Between Paragraphs / Sources

a. *Elizabeth Crawford, "A Transaction of Trauma"*

"But, in addition to scrappy wages and shallow accolades, their spectacle invites an ethnographic gaze. Is it an even exchange? Is the opportunity worth the possible trauma? Is it worth being treated as a specimen in one's own country? / In her essay 'The Parent Who Stays,' Mexican-American author Reyna Grande examines the relationship between opportunity and trauma through an intimate account of her childhood immigration . . ."

b. *Nicole Li, "Broad Brushstrokes"*

"Much like the problematic overgeneralization of Africa, the assumption of Asian-American identity as the model minority breeds ignorance and misunderstanding."

3. Representing a Source to an Outside Audience

a. *Nicole Li, "Broad Brushstrokes"*

"Binyavanga Wainaina's essay 'How to Write about Africa' explores the generalized portrayal of Africa in Western culture as uni-dimensional and stereotypically helpless . . ."

b. *Elizabeth Makris, "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit"*

"Jacob Brogan discusses our tendency to understand others by relating their experiences to our own in his essay 'Don't Anthropomorphize Inky the Octopus.' . . . Just because we do not explore the world with our arms does not mean we cannot try to understand something that does. We do not have to fully relate and we do not have to perform our distorted reverse empathy to attempt to understand."

c. *Siri Ranganath, "Mazes of the Mind"*

"A notable example of this influence are the many frame stories in *Labyrinths* . . . Borges poses so many questions, both the logistical and the metaphysical, in 'The Garden of Forking Paths' that all we can do, in the midst of our own disorientation, is move through the

multiple frames within the story to understand as many ideas as possible.”

d. *Grace Whitcomb, “To Be Still”*

“Teju Cole’s essay ‘Object Lesson: On Photography’ reflects on the possibility that photographs without people most effectively depict the occurrence and aftermath of violent sociopolitical shocks . . .”

4. Working with Quotes: Contextualization, Incorporation, Analysis, Citation

a. *Nicole Li, “Broad Brushstrokes”*

“In a sharply critical sentence, Wainaina reflects the attitudes of the dominant culture by satirically instructing the reader to neglect the variety of Africa’s landscape, coyly arguing that the ‘continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn’t care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular’ (543). Rather than choosing to understand the nuances of the African landscape, there is a distortion of truth in favor of an artificial image that is more ‘romantic and evocative and unparticular’ (543).”

b. *Belle Lu, “Not the Only Nine-Year-Old”*

“In presenting this childlike perspective, Zamora accomplishes two things: first, he replicates the experience for the readers exactly as he remembers it, allowing the readers to experience his anecdotes organically and authentically; second, by presenting these events with the jumpy thought process of a child, Zamora constantly reminds his readers that these traumatic experiences and memories were imposed on a child. He juxtaposes these sights against the innocence of childhood, amplifying their horror and violence. This juxtaposition can be seen in the poem ‘Dancing in Buses.’ The poem begins like a child’s song, saying, “Pretend a boom box / blasts over your shoulder. Raise / your hands in the air. Twist them as if picking limes” (1-4). The short lines and the playful comparison of “picking limes” to dancing

creates a light mood, one that reminds readers of the innocence of childhood . . .”

c. *Elizabeth Makris, “If the Shoe Doesn’t Fit”*

“The world reacted to Inky’s escape by thinking about it in human terms. Brogan cites a few of the most anthropomorphizing responses, including one from a journalist on social media: “Today, we are all this octopus, who looked around at his life situation and said, “F**k this” (980). This type of reaction, according to Brogan, is an example of ‘humans turning the most unusual creatures into simple metaphors for our own plights’ (980). We do not attempt to understand Inky’s escape from his point of view, as we are incapable of seeing the world in the way that an octopus does. They experience the world in a fundamentally different way than we do, as ‘[t]hey explore and interrogate their world with their arms, which in the case of the octopus, means with their brains—a profoundly alien sensory apparatus’ (981). The octopus’s way of life is so exotic to us that it makes it nearly impossible for us to imagine ourselves in Inky’s situation; therefore, we put Inky into our situation. We use our reverse empathy, looking at ourselves as a way to understand Inky’s adventurous flight.”

d. *Jules Talbot, “Was Ever Woman in this Humor Won?”*

“In her essay ‘The Mother of All Questions,’ author Rebecca Solnit writes about a question-and-answer period she led after a lecture on Virginia Woolf. Did her audience ask about *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*? . . .” (763).

5. Analysis / Close Reading / Reflection

a. *Grace Andreasen, “Connecting with the Lone Ranger”*

“The men in Hannes Schmid’s exhibition *American Myth* lounge, one in the back of a truck, some on horseback, Southwestern sunlight surrounding them like religious icons, their tan skin glistening in the blazing heat. One in particular, the subject of *Cowboy #5 (Tailgate)*, has a cigarette dangling from his sunweathered mouth, the metal of his lighter and his oversized belt buckle glimmering . . .”

b. *Meghan Feng, "Keeping Up With the Youngs"*

"And yet, while the *tan-hua* scene and the dumpling scene are not authentic, the mahjong scene at the end of the film marks the other extreme of being perhaps too authentic for some viewers to understand . . . The movie tries hard at being an 'Asians depicting Asia' film, but it's either stacking Asian symbols in a pile for no real purpose or providing marvelous interpretations of properly-employed symbols, but in a way that escapes a large portion of its target audience. In the end, it fails at becoming a coherent whole."

c. *Athena Gerasoulis, "Displaced: An Exploration of the Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto"*

"After searching through an array of his work, I kept wandering back to Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series. Every photo in this series is a shot of the sea meeting partway up the image to the sky. The individual photos only contain these two earthly elements . . . We have all of these once divided things now coalescing, intertwined, or floating in some amniotic fluid, anything but a forced, chronological linearity."

d. *Belle Lu, "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old"*

"Through his stylistic choices of fragmented sentences and omission of punctuation, Zamora establishes the narrative perspective of a child. In the poems . . ."

6. Putting Texts in Conversation: Deepening or using one text to extend the reach of another

a. *Grace Andreasen, "Connecting With the Lone Ranger"*

"John Berger writes, 'To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude' (54). In nude paintings, the women's bodies and their subservience to the spectator are what make them desirable. Berger explores this concept in depth in his collection of essays *Ways of Seeing*. In Schmid's paintings . . ."

b. *Nathan Nguyen, "A Faraway History"*

“This is one of the many questions ‘The Faraway Boat,’ a 1983 short story by Vietnamese writer Nguyen Minh Chau, attempts to answer . . . Nonetheless, this is the path Phung takes when he, nearly consumed by his own guilt, decides to appeal to the court to separate the woman and her child from the abusive father.”

c. *Lisa Ye, “Beyond Human”*

“Joan Didion finds beauty in isolation in her essay ‘At the Dam.’ After she visits the Hoover Dam, she ‘wonder[s] what is happening at the dam this instant . . .’”

7. Putting Texts in Conversation: Reckoning or using one text to complicate the meaning of another

a. *Belle Lu, “To Watch the Destruction of Worlds”*

“While *Blasted* instills a sense of fear and dread in the audience by beginning the play in an already unsettling world and then blasting it apart, *Bent* provokes more conflicting emotions . . . In *Blasted*, the mortar bomb destroying the hotel room replicates the shelling of cities and towns, whereas in *Bent*, the victims of Nazi persecution are forced out of their homes to hide from one location to the other. Each playwright highlights a different aspect of war: Kane, the sudden destruction of previously-familiar spaces and the devastating nature of bombs; Sherman, the constant dread of persecution, and the emotional torture of the victims before the ultimate physical torture.”

b. *Elizabeth Makris, “If the Shoe Doesn’t Fit”*

“To Glissant, ‘understanding’ or empathizing can have negative effects, as implied in his use of the term ‘reduce.’ . . . It is defined by Merriam-Webster as ‘unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community interests, objectives, and standards,’ but this definition only leads me to another question: what is our common interest?”

c. *Sarah Peng, “The Empathy Machine”*

“VR is a powerful tool, but researchers and creators are in danger of funneling old images and ideas through the lenses of these new, head-mounted displays . . .”

d. *Grace Whitcomb, “To Be Still”*

“It’s important to remember the political landscape at the time and the motives behind Wojnarowicz’s work. On the one hand . . .”

8. The Act of Contextualization via Research

a. *Meghan Feng, “Keeping Up With the Youngs”*

“Still, the blame can’t be placed entirely on the film or the director. The misrepresentation of China on Hollywood film screens is a historical problem . . . To East Asians, on the other hand, it seems as though the director has neglected to do a thorough study of the ‘real’ Asia. From East to West, no one is happy.”

b. *Haley Gustafson, “The Limits of Empathy”*

“According to Rosin, the idea that empathy is intrinsically good didn’t arise until the 1960s and 1970s . . . Recently, I could point to Harvey Weinstein. Historically, there’s the entire institution of the patriarchy.”

c. *Belle Lu, “To Watch the Destruction of Worlds”*

“This shift from a familiar, realistic world to a surreal wasteland feels inspired by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and theatre theorist who devised the concept of epic theatre. In his essay ‘Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,’ Brecht examines the difference between ‘dramatic theatre,’ which is ‘for pleasure,’ and his ideal ‘epic theatre,’ which ‘instructs’ (71).”

d. *Siri Ranganath, “Mazes of the Mind”*

“‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ presents an intellectual labyrinth under the guise of a compelling mystery plot . . . We are trapped in the Poe-inspired locked room and the Borgesian labyrinth with only our sense of reasoning to guide us.”

e. *Helen Wajda, "Bridging the Empathy Gap"*

"Despite Yoffe's valid points about the hashtag's application, her focus on the effects that #BelieveWomen could have on the (usually male) accused in sexual assault cases overlooks and even seems to dismiss the pattern of disbelieving and dismissing women that has persisted for centuries in this country. . . . In light of this long, painful history of women being dismissed and abused, the hashtag can be seen not as a push for women to be blindly believed, as Yoffe and Weiss suggest, but as a pushback on this persistent pattern of female derision, disbelief, and oppression through sexual violence, and as a demand that women be awarded the same level of basic respect and trust that men enjoy."

f. *Yifan Zhang, "Open Letter to NYU Residential Life and Housing Services"*

"Studies show that, without external support, it's difficult for people from different backgrounds to form healthy, long-term relationships. . . . Gao asks, 'How can Chinese students convey the texture of their thoughts and moods in a foreign language when the language barrier is a cause of their stress?'"

9. Ending / Conclusion: Moving beyond summary to arrive at a larger significance

a. *Athena Gerasoulis, "Displaced: An Exploration of the Photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto"*

"Some, unlike Aciman and Sugimoto, have been fortunate enough to live in one space and time, with grounded roots, clear identities, and permanent homes . . . On this beach, he becomes a deity of some sort, softening the harsh realities of time. With a click of the camera, he tenderly breathes life back into the door handle and moves onward."

b. *Belle Lu, "Not the Only Nine-Year-Old"*

"We relive Zamora's experiences from the perspective of him as a child, but . . ."

c. *Elizabeth Makris, "If the Shoe Doesn't Fit"*

"Compassion as an active alternative to our passive empathy is abundantly present in the documentary *4.1 Miles*, which follows a Greek Coast Guard captain who helps Syrian refugees travel the 4.1 miles between the coast of Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos . . . Working within the metaphor of 'putting yourself in someone else's shoes,' we can see that trying on another person's painful shoes will not make that person's feet hurt any less."

d. *Siri Ranganath, "Mazes of the Mind"*

"It is this greater sense of sight that Borges likely hoped we would acquire. But what does . . ."